

GANDHI AND MARX: IDEAS ON MAN AND SOCIETY

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GANDHIAN THOUGHT AND PHILOSOPHY OR HIS METHOD OF ACTION HAVE been a frequent subject for books and articles, but a new impetus has been given to this by the ushering in of the Gandhi year. The relation between man and society was central to Gandhi's thought and this aspect of his philosophy has attracted special attention particularly among Indian Marxists who are themselves interested in this relationship. Recently Gandhi's role as a revolutionary has also been emphasized and there is a tendency to compare his methods with those of Marx or Mao. An Indian Marxist, Mohit Sen, has tried to look at Gandhi's approach to the training of participants in political actions from this point of view, and he equates Gandhi's Satyagrahis with the revolutionary "vanguard." In this context, Sen points out that: "There was no division, in his view, between the public and private selves of those who had pledged themselves to his movement He was an interventionist at every level of living."¹ Sen finds it easy to base this idea on the premise that: "Satyagraha involved the transformation of the personality of he who would embrace it. It involved the strictest possible discipline, even to the point of the extinction of the individual. Self-control, brahmacharya, vegetarianism, shunning of sophisticated civilisation, the embracing of poverty so as to achieve non-attachment . . . this was what being a Satyagrahi meant. It was this kind of training that Gandhiji visualized for the leadership he wished to create, the vanguard he wished to be able to head to realize the awakening of India."² How are statements like these to be reconciled with the fact that Gandhi appealed to individual conviction aimed at self-reform rather than "extinction of the individual?" In contrast to a snowball system of inciting all-out violence which may have been much easier to implement, Gandhi's strategy and style of action demanded self-control, and considering one's life as a *yajna* (an offering to God) on the part of the participant in Satyagraha. Satyagraha is not only based on *Satya* (truth) and *Ahimsa* (non-violence) but also on the means of holding on to it such as the purificatory vows of *Brahmacharya* (celibacy) and fasting which demand self-control. Thus non-violence, voluntary discipline and restraint become the prerequisites of Satyagraha. This resorting to various restraints was aimed at self-purification and not "self-extinction". Gandhi undertook fasting whenever he felt the need for such self-purification,

¹ Sen, Mohit, "Power, Satyagraha and Communism," *Mainstream*, November 30, 1968, p. 30.

² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

for example his fasts for the untouchables were meant to purge the hearts of all higher castes of the evil of untouchability. He had "faith that it must lead to the purification of (him) self and others and that workers (his co-operators) would know that the true Harijan (untouchable) service was impossible without inward purity."³ In view of this inner purity and voluntary restraint Gandhi stressed the fact that a Satyagraha campaign can also become a mass movement only to the extent to which every participant is willing to comply with the pre-requisites of Satyagraha.

The idea of self-reform in terms of the individual effort for perfection is explained in a characteristic style by another Indian Marxist, H. Mukherjee, who says: "The value of individual self-reform is a constantly recurring theme in Gandhi's thought, and it is necessary to stress that no social theory worth the name can or does belittle its importance . . . He often described himself as a better socialist or communist than those who wore that label, and basically, he would say, he shared their aims. But he was not primarily interested in any delineable social order that could be called socialist, his prime concern was purification of the means of social transformation in conformity with what he understood by the spirit of love and of human unity . . . Social institutions based on exploitation continue because, in Gandhi's thought, the exploiters and the exploited both cooperate in their maintenance, and if only the exploiters individually could be persuaded to shed their selfishness and the exploited no longer feared the grip on them of the exploiters, everything would be lovely in the garden."⁴ Hence Mukherjee suggests that according to Gandhi a supremely moral way of revolution will, in Gandhi's scheme of things, bring about through God's grace and of course in God's good time, a condition of happiness, equality and human dignity on earth. The process may take long, but it is really short because it is sure.⁵ Gandhi points out, however, that the moral revolution through individual self-purification as a cure for the ills of the society hinges upon the principle of "developing the will" and "minimizing a habit." He says: "While admitting that man actually lives by habit, I hold that it is better for him to live by the exercise of his will. I also believe that men are capable of developing their will to an extent that will reduce exploitation to a minimum."⁶

This could be achieved through the inner strength acquired by observing certain outward disciplines. This belief has been misconstrued by Mohit Sen, who asserts that Gandhi was an "interventionist at every level of living to the point of liquidating individuality".⁷ On the contrary, it may be said

³ M. K. Gandhi, *Hindu Dharma* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1950), p. 109.

⁴ H. Mukherjee, *Gandhiji: A Study* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1960), pp. 205-207.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

⁶ M. K. Gandhi, *Young India*, p. 304.

⁷ Mohit Sen, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

that Gandhi's method of Satyagraha presupposes the building up of the fundamental essence in man and letting all the faculties of the soul rise to the highest level. Satyagraha is to him a theory of knowledge. He who uses violence cannot know the truth because he stands in his own way of self-emancipation and gets into bondage.

Satyagraha is an emancipatory process which does not lend itself to the romantic approach of simply hoping for good results emanating from an ideal common action of all men. Gandhi relies on the individual and rather trains a few Satyagrahis instead of trying to wait for a change of the consciousness of all. In doing this Gandhi knew that there would be millions of people in India who would be potentially ready to participate in actions leading to the national emancipation. Keeping in view the importance of individual participation Gandhi tried to do his utmost for the perfection of his strategy and style of action before he let the masses participate in his campaigns.

Individual emancipation was basic to social or national emancipation, and to participate in the latter required discipline of the participants and a clear delineation of the scope of action. Gandhi realized that action can best be controlled the fewer participants there are and the scope of action is the clearest if it is directed towards a definite point. Therefore, Gandhi developed his style of symbolic action ranging from the national campaign for the general issue of national emancipation to an individual Satyagraha for a definite point wherein the symbol of action was the clearest and therefore easily grasped by all. Of course, individual satyagraha, for example, the fast for the untouchables, was a good symbolic action as long as the man offering it commanded nationwide respect, and the definite point stood for greater issues such as awakening the consciousness of the higher castes to the injustice done to the untouchables. If Gandhi had not been known because of his leadership in national campaigns and if he would have been lacking in the charisma of his personality his individual satyagraha may not have been effective. Being conscious of the exemplary nature of such actions Gandhi undertook the training of satyagrahis himself. This emphasis on individual training has been interpreted by Mohit Sen in a peculiar way: ". . . whenever the question of mass action came on the agenda of the Congress, Gandhiji not only assumed control but publicly proclaimed himself 'general' with the power to appoint local 'dictators' as representatives responsible to him and these are the people he wanted to mould in his own image who would function as the vanguard of mass action as well as the mass organization . . . It needs emphasizing that just as his concept of power and of the means to that power were total so was his approach to the individual. To Gandhiji the masses were always the dumb millions whose representative he sought to be and from whose every eye he wished

to wipe every tear. They were not visualized by him to be capable of revolutionary initiative, much less self-emancipation.”⁸

In this train Sen goes on asserting that Gandhi could not appreciate the Marxist concern for the emancipation of workers to be accomplished by workers themselves and that Gandhi would insist on leading the masses himself to their goal and that he was an advocate of the trusteeship theory in general . . . towards the masses.⁹ Sen seems to contradict himself in saying on the one hand that Gandhi tried to create a vanguard of “genuine satyagrahis” from among the masses and on the other hand accusing Gandhi of insisting on leading the masses himself without enlightening them. Further, Sen suggests that “this was natural for a leader who wanted not advance but resurrection”.¹⁰ According to Sen, Marx’s way was the true way for self-emancipation because Marx emphasized that “the emancipation of the workers would be accomplished by the workers or it would not be accomplished.”¹¹ In this evaluation Sen has overlooked the fact that for the emancipation of the workers Lenin had to invent the revolutionary-trained vanguard as Gandhi had to train his satyagrahis for voluntaristic action. For Gandhi man must voluntarily act as an individual in accordance with his inner fundamental essence and outwardly through non-cooperation with the society if it acts in contradiction to its swa-dharma (own dharma)¹² which is a totality of the fundamental essence of the individual members of the society. A good deal of preparation on the part of the individual is required in order to reach this goal. Sen rightly draws attention to the strict discipline of Gandhi’s Ashram’ but he misinterprets it when he equates the ethical preparation for satyagraha with a Maoist type of training of cadres: “If one searches for an analogy the only fitting one will be Mao and the training of cadres at Yen’an in the 1940’s, indeed, one can say that the two original and unique leaders so far produced by the Asian resurgence are Gandhi and Mao—with obvious differences in outlook, methodology, objective and circumstances. Both grasped the peasant as the central fact of their civilizations, both wished to achieve total power and complete awakening, both sought to create and recreate their vanguard organization.”¹³ As a matter of fact the only similarity between the concepts of Gandhi and Mao that may be thought of is that both aimed at grass-root revolution, emancipation of the individual to precede political emancipation. But the methods of selection for this purpose were different

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹² Rothermund, Indira, *The Philosophy of Restraint*. (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1963), pp. 46-48. (The term Dharma is explained in several ways by different writers. It may be described as “cosmic law,” duty, etc., also as that which gives coherence and direction to the different activities of life.)

¹³ Sen, Mohit, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

and the emphasis was on different levels. Gandhi stressed conscious self-control and inner purification while Mao relied on outward emancipation and violent action. For Gandhi, who believed in the concept of "dharma", there was an inherent equilibrium in the relationship between man and society. Man transcending his own separate will and the common moral entity were interdependent. Gandhi thought of a dual process whereby society responds to the act of faith of its constituent members by following its own dharma as a whole. Thus according to Gandhi the development of the society is only possible by means of the improvement of its individual members and he looks for the laws that govern society in the inner economy of the individual rather than relying on the outward social constraints.

In commenting on India's social problems Gandhi was, of course, not free from impressions created on his mind by the work of earlier thinkers as original as he might have been in his political actions. In many instances he fell back on the traditionalist thought of earlier Indian nationalists. The nineteenth century nationalists had tried to filter out certain strands of Indian tradition which were compatible with their views of India's national solidarity.¹⁴ They established a universe of discourse beyond which Gandhi could not go while trying to communicate his ideas to his countrymen. Thus he used the concepts of karmayoga as advocated by Aurobindo and Tilak.¹⁵ He also inherited the ambivalent attitude to the caste system from his nationalist predecessors. He sometimes even defended the original Hindu idea of "varnashramadharma" according to which each caste (varna) would have to follow its prescriptive norm (dharma) at every stage of life (ashrama). On the other hand Gandhi attacked the iniquitous inequalities of the caste system according to which the untouchables become the most down-trodden strata of the Indian society. Therefore, he started his campaign to awaken the higher castes to this grave injustice done to the untouchables. This he did by calling the untouchables "Harijans" and by fasting for them. The term Harijan, meaning man of God, at once reminded the people of the Indian idea of the identity of all life expressed by the Upanishadic concept of "Tat tvam asi" (that thou art), which expresses the identity of God (the Brahman) and the individual soul.¹⁶

The fasting undertaken by the charismatic personality of Gandhi and the use of the typical symbolic term Harijan electrified the higher castes into letting open the temple doors in an unprecedented manner. This symbolic action of Gandhi leading to social reform left its mark on the Indian constitution which forbids the practising of untouchability.

¹⁴ Rothermund, Dietmar, *Die Politische Willensbildung in Indien*. (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1965), p. 36ff.

¹⁵ Tilak, G. *Gita-Rahasya*. Vol. 1 & 2. (Poona, 1935.) also Rothermund, I., *op. cit.*, pp. 47-56.

¹⁶ Rothermund, I., *op. cit.*, p. 45-49.

However, Gandhi's belief in the immanent unity of all human beings was often put to test when he had to face the problem of conflicts arising in the course of events and disturbing the inherent equilibrium of individual action and social order. He still put his faith on the conviction that the spiritual unity did provide a sound foundation for his thought and action and that Satyagraha was the only means of dealing with such problems. Marx also faced the problem of reconciling the idea of man as an individual with the notion of a society. He argued that the society should not be treated as an abstraction which would then appear as a separate entity to be confronted with man as an individual. According to Marx man is a social being and all his activities are a manifestation and confirmation of social life. Man as an individual and man as a species are not distinct, man is not individual man but species-man. The human species and society seem to be coterminous. Being social thus becomes an inherent quality of man—his generic character. The quality of a social being which man has in actuality acquired as a member of the society is treated by Marx as his generic nature. This makes it difficult to account for differences among various societies. As the quality of being social is inherent in every man he just projects it by thinking of himself as a member of the society and thereby reconfirms his social being. This unity of man as a species and society is shaken by death which singles out man as an individual. Marx tries to explain this by asserting that it is only the particular individual, a definite part of the species which is mortal.¹⁷ His reference to death as a harsh victory of the species over the individual shows his uneasiness about explaining this relationship, as he cannot deny that the individual is a distinct part of the species and of society, meeting its singular fate.

This problem does not arise in Gandhian thought since the individual has already transcended the discreteness of individuation as his soul is a part of the transcendent and immanent Brahman. Death is Moksha-salvation, which means according to Indian thought the transfiguration of the whole man into the Supreme Being. Gandhi bases his ideas on the spiritual conviction that those who are striving for the good of others, even after salvation from the worldly life, go on doing good to the world in conjunction with the Divine universal spirit.

Gandhi explained how individual-salvation and social-emancipation can be simultaneous. He says: "Willing submission to social restraint for the sake of the well-being of the whole society, enriches both the individual and the society of which he is a member . . . if one man gains spiritually, the whole world gains with him, and if one man fails, the whole world fails to that extent."¹⁸ This emphasis on the interdependence of man, transcending his own separate will, and the common moral entity may be com-

¹⁷ E. Fromm, *Das Menschenbild bei Marx* (Frankfurt, 1963), pp. 116-117.

¹⁸ M. K. Gandhi, *My Religion* (Navajivan, 1955), p. 124.

pared with the Marxian idea of man's spiritual development and self-emancipation being inseparable from the development of society. According to Marx the individual is caught up on the material relations of production and he can become a "fully human being" by freeing himself from the bondage of alienation, "by changing and humanizing the existing socio-economic realities through revolutionary action".¹⁹ Marx claims that the alienation of man is rooted in the work process and division of labour which pave the way for private ownership, and that "total man really grows when, in the classless society, the life of the individual and the life of society are no longer in opposition to each."²⁰ Man's self-realization is possible only when he frees himself from all kinds of alienation. Marx deals with the question of alienation thus: ". . . as long as a cleavage exists between the particular and the common interest, as long therefore as activity is not voluntarily but naturally divided, man's own act becomes an alien power opposed to him, which enslaves him instead of being controlled by him."²¹

With Marx alienation is not a spiritual phenomenon as in the case of Gandhian philosophy, but has its roots in the concrete conditions of social life; it is the social fate of man. Gandhi holds that man alienates himself from the fundamental essence by losing sight of it due to greed and avarice and because he does not practise self-purification and does not strive for self-reform. Man does not progress by outward emancipation but by inward sublimation. Gandhi, therefore, looks for the source of alienation of man not in the material conditions of life but in man's ignorance about the identity of all life the consciousness about which he can gain through Sarvodaya,²² and renunciation. This he expressed in the following words: "All that we see in this great universe is pervaded by God. Renounce it and enjoy it or enjoy whatever He gives you, do not covet anybody's wealth or possessions."²³ According to Gandhi the act of renunciation which is stressed here is not a merely physical act but, "represents a second or new birth. It is a deliberate act—not done in ignorance. It is, therefore, a regeneration Do not covet anybody's possessions. The moment you carry out these precepts you become a wise citizen of the world living at peace with all that lives."²⁴

In contrast to this, Marx's man overcomes alienation by changing social life and as pointed out by an Indian Marxist, S. Sarkar, "the alienation of the individual which most concerned Marx was the economic alienation, and his most distinctive thinking refers to this. His famous formulation

¹⁹ Damodaran, K. "Marxism and Alienation," *Mainstream*, May 4, 1968, p. 12.

²⁰ Garaudy, R. *Karl Marx—the evolution of his thought* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1964), p. 75.

²¹ Sarkar, S. "Marx and Man," *Mainstream*, March 29, 1968, p. 20.

²² Rothermund, I., *op. cit.*, p. 25, (Sarvodaya means the good of all or the "rise of all.")

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

²⁴ Gandhi, M. K. *Hindu Dharma, op. cit.*, pp. 41-42.

is about alienation or estranged labour which political economy describes without understanding, and which has to be ended to liberate individual man.”²⁵ Man is thus alienated from the product of his labour and, therefore, Marx suggests: “Man in his work ceases to be a man, i.e., a human being who determines his own ends, and becomes a means, a moment in the objective process of production, a means for producing commodities and surplus value.”²⁶ Man is not only estranged from the product of his labour but also from his generic essence which consists of free, conscious and purposeful activity, and this alienation takes place in all fields of life. The primitive man, according to Marx, was free from any “cleavages” and was not alienated.²⁷ Thus in primitive society, when man was a part of the herd, without the existence of private property, there was no alienation, man was free and “as much at home as a fish in water”. This golden period, one may perhaps compare to the Indian concept of the legendary Satya-yuga when all lived in consciousness of their essential nature, “freely according to the truth of their enlightened self and God-inhabited being and therefore spontaneously according to their divine dharma.”²⁸ In this respect there may be some similarity between the thought of Gandhi and Marx. The difference lies in the way they try to bring man back to his essential nature. Gandhi bases it on man’s inward effort at self-purification and on his conviction of the identity of all life, while Marx relies on outward violent revolution. Thus for Marx, “alienation is not only self-alienation but that of social reality, of the reality of classes and their antagonism. Hence, the problem of freedom is not only individual but historic and social—a class problem—closely related to the revolutionary tasks of the proletariat.”²⁹

Consequently Marxists cannot assess the merits of an individual on its own terms but must assume that every man is moulded by the interests of his class. Individual convictions and spiritual experience are epiphenomena whereas class interest is the prime mover of everybody’s actions. For these reasons Indian Marxists have to apply the tools of class analysis to Gandhi’s life and mission. They describe him as a bourgeois leader but they find it difficult to explain all his actions in this way. A sensitive Indian Marxist, E. M. S. Namboodiripad, for instance, is at a loss when he has to deal with the frequent incidents in which Gandhi stuck to his individual opinions, and even more so when he has to explain Gandhi’s loneliness after independence and partition of India. Namboodiripad can only account for this loneliness of Gandhi by portraying him as a discarded instrument of the bourgeoisie. The spiritual individualism of a man who tries to follow the truth according

²⁵ S. Sarkar, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

²⁶ R. Garaudy, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

²⁷ K. Damodaran, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

²⁸ I. Rothermund, *op. cit.*, p. 47-48.

²⁹ R. Garaudy, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

to his own light whether others are with him or not is inconceivable in Marxist thought. If the "lone voice" can be admitted at all it must be described as a feature of class behaviour even if that appears to be a contradiction in terms. But this is what Namboodiripad says about Gandhi: ". . . Gandhiji's role in history as the foremost leader of the bourgeoisie should not be taken to mean that he was always and on every issue, at one with the bourgeoisie. On the other hand, it is characteristic of him and the class of which he was the friend, philosopher and guide, that, on several occasions and on several issues, his was a minority voice, if not a lone voice."³⁰

This ability to raise a "lone voice" is certainly not characteristic of a class but is the test of spiritual individualism. The emphasis on individual salvation led Gandhi to occupy a minority position voluntarily in as much as he failed to carry the majority with him, though he never gave up his efforts to instruct the masses and to broaden their convictions. He always stressed that he was not a visionary, he said: "I am not a visionary. I claim to be a practical idealist. The religion of non-violence is not merely for the rishis and saints. It is for the common people as well. Non-violence is the law of our species, as violence is the law of the brute."³¹ He made a great impact on some, but eventually he was left alone, yet he braved the storm of communal riots and faced the reality of isolation. This has been described very vividly by one of his biographers: "His higher and main objective was to make his countrymen accept non-violence as the law of life in all their activities and to lay the foundations in India of a non-violent state of village republics . . . In this way he may be said to have failed completely, as his countrymen did not rise to the occasion and carry out his teaching . . . For a time violence stalked the land naked and unashamed, and at last carried off the great Apostle of Non-violence himself. This showed how grievously the Mahatma had miscalculated the forces of evil arrayed against him and how greatly he had exaggerated to himself the capacities of his countrymen. The fact is that Mahatma Gandhi was centuries ahead of common humanity in his moral evolution and was bound to fail in carrying them along with him."³²

³⁰ Namboodiripad, *The Mahatma and the Ism* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1959), p. 115.

³¹ M. K. Gandhi, in Lewis, M. D. (Ed.) *Gandhi: The Maker of Modern India* (New York: Heath & Co., 1965), p. 14.

³² D. S. Sarma, *The Father of the Nation* (Madras, 1956). In Lewis (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 14.