

CONSENSUS AND CONFLICT : SOME CONSIDERATION

I. Introduction

For this paper, I am going to assume that history is not merely a chronicle of events (and it is doubtful if even a chronicle of events can be merely a chronicle of events), and that it involves an understanding of what has happened. Any such understanding of events presupposes an understanding of the nature of man and society—either implicitly or explicitly. Differences in the understanding of the nature of man and society produce different accounts of the events of the same time and place. (I am not referring to the differences in personal background and temperament which might produce such differences given the same understanding of the nature of man and society; nor am I concerned with the fact that the differences in background and temperament affect the choice of a particular understanding of the nature of man and society.) I want to concern myself with a particular kind of difference in two understanding of history. In the light of this, I consider the role of consensus and conflict in a society.

This could have been done by undertaking a detailed examination of a case which illustrates the kind of difference in understanding that I am going to consider. For various reasons, I have not been able to do this. I have tried to overcome this shortcoming by beginning with a reference to a case-study which might clarify some of the points I make in the paper in an abstract manner. The case-study considers the differences in understanding and reactions of Gandhiji and Ambedkar to the problem of untouchability. Some of the main points are presented in the next section.

After this I briefly present two models of man and society and their bearing on our understanding of history. One model views man and society in terms of the mutual interaction and determination of several factors—the dominance of any factor is not a matter of principle, but only a temporary empirical phenomenon. The other model views man and society in terms of the dominance of one factor or another which mainly determines other factors and makes man and society what they are. In the next section I consider some problems of the use of these models. On

the basis of these considerations, I suggest that the more fundamental conflict is between the comprehensive and partial models rather than between consensus and conflict as methods of dealing with problems and point out the relation of the two models to the theme of consensus and conflict.

II

The case-study : Untouchability and the different presuppositions of Gandhi and Ambedkar.

In a paper I wrote some time ago (Dissent, protest and Reform : Some conceptual considerations—in *Dissent, Protest and Reform in Indian Civilization*, 1977, Indian Institute of Advanced study, Simla) I have studied the presuppositions of Gandhi and Ambedkar in their understanding and tackling of the problem of untouchability. I have argued there that Gandhiji was not concerned with only the economic, political and social position of the untouchables; he was also concerned with their moral and spiritual life. Further, Gandhi was not concerned only with all the aspects of the life of the Harijans, he was also concerned with all the aspects of life of the Caste Hindus and the non-Hindus. As against this Ambedkar was concerned with the economic, political and social life of the Harijans and not with the moral and religious aspects of their lives; and he was concerned with the life of the Harijans and not with that of the Caste Hindus. In the reactions, Ambedkar was vehement, but Gandhi was firm; so far as fight is concerned Gandhi was also ready to fight. However, Ambedkar was impatient to see the lot of the Harijan improved, whereas Gandhi was keen on dealing with problems such that further problems, equally or more difficult, were not created.

It would be worthwhile to go into the details of how this affected their understanding, the consequences of their actions and their vision of the future.

III

Two Models of Understanding of Man and Society :

In this section I briefly sketch two models of understanding of Man and Society. They are importantly different but related. I present these models in the framework of *puruṣārthas*—the goals of man : *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* and *mokṣa*. I do this for many

reasons. Among them are : this understanding of man represents the traditional understanding of man which is not absent from our present-day life. However, what is more important, it is a comprehensive understanding of man capable of systematic use in the understanding of man and society.

The understanding of man in terms of *puruṣārthas* raises many questions such as : What is the nature of these goals? Are these the only possible goals? etc. However, for our purposes it is not necessary to go into these questions. But we must note a few points :

- (a) The *puruṣārthas* are a group of interacting factors in a matrix; and the goal is to attain not only *mokṣa* but all the goals together in an integrated manner.
- (b) It is important to note some relationships between the attainment of different goals. For this purpose, let us order the goals in an increasing order of importance—*artha*, *kāma*, *dharma* and *mokṣa*. It is possible, though not necessary, that an individual may pursue any goal of lesser importance—say *artha* and neglect a goal of higher importance. But a person who pursues a goal of higher importance, say *mokṣa*, must include the attainment of all the other lower goals—say *artha*, *kāma* and *dharma*. The pattern of integration of the goals varies from person to person combining the goals in many ways.
- (c) Given these goals of the individual, we can consider the goals of the society. (This is an unsatisfactory way of putting things, because the goals of the individual presuppose the goals of the society and vice-versa.) A broad description of the goals of the society would be that it seeks to facilitate the realisation of the individual's goals. It need not be emphasised that facilitation does not mean attainment of the goals.
- (d) The facilitation of the attainment of the goals does not mean the same thing in respect of the different goals. In respect of *artha*, *kāma* and *dharma* (in the attainment of *artha* and *kāma* and one aspect of *dharma*) the role of the society is direct; that is, the role of the society is direct in the integration of the pursuit of these goals by the members of the community. In respect of *dharma*

(in so far as it is related to the attainment of *mokṣa*) and *mokṣa*, the role of the society is indirect, i.e. the role of the society is indirect in the integration of the pursuit of the goals in the individual himself. However, it is necessary that the society should so organise itself that the pursuit of a goal—say, *artha*—does not by its manner or by its hardships or its ease make it too difficult to attain the moral or the religious goal. Equally, of course, the pursuit of the moral or religious life should not make the attainment of the material goals of the community too difficult.

However, it is a point of considerable importance that this facilitation can be made not for the individuals as such—their differences are too many and too detailed—but for individuals as members of groups. Here too, society does not consider all possible groups and their claims—for example, until very recently, the homosexuals were not recognized as a group. However, the recognised groups would cover all the individuals, though not perhaps in all their aspects. In this framework, the individual was supposed to take care of his own problems. (Incidentally, this has a bearing on the understanding of *sarvodaya*. If it is understood as well-being of all the groups rather than that of all the individuals, it gives a different orientation to questions of social policy.)

The Second Model : As we had said earlier, the second model also uses the framework of *puruṣārthas*. It also accepts that there is interrelationship between these goals. However, it gives a predominant role to a particular factor so that it largely, if not wholly, determines the pursuit of the various goals by the members of the community.

This basic importance given to a particular factor must be distinguished from the importance given to a particular factor for different reasons. For example, at a particular time, in particular circumstances, a particular factor—economic, technological—may be very important on account of significant changes. In these circumstances, to give special attention to a particular factor will not be incompatible with the first model, or again, a historian may be interested in a particular aspect of the life of the community.

This also will not be incompatible with the acceptance of the first model. What is incompatible with the first model is the determining role assigned to one factor generally and universally.

Given this kind of understanding of man and society, our view of the history of the society would be different from the one given to us by the first model. It will direct the attention of the individual or the society or both to the attainment of a particular goal. If the importance is given to the moral or religious goal, the facilitating role of the institutions will be forgotten; and if the importance is given to the material goals, the institutions will be given a determining role rather than a facilitating role; and the role of the individual will be forgotten.

IV

The Two Models and their Application :

In this section, I consider some problems in the use of these models and some tentative applications of the models.

1. In the account of the models, there is an important confusion which needs to be cleared up. It is not at all clear whether the goals or the predominance of a particular goal represents a particular situation or it represents an ideal. What do the models say—that such and such is the state of affairs or that such and such ought to be the state of affairs?

The manner of putting the question suggests that the account has to be understood as one or the other. However, I think that this is to misunderstand the nature of the models. Each model claim is to represent man and society as they are—in a state of health. If they are not in a state of health, then they are sick—in a state of aberration; and they ought to be restored to health. In this context, it is wrong to make a sharp contrast between “is” and “ought”.

2. But now the question will be : who decides what is health? Who decides which of the two models represents health? Is this a matter of personal choice? Or are there criteria by means of which we could decide in favour of one or the other?

One of the criteria suggested might be that the true account of health may be distinguished from the false account by considering which of the two leads us to understand and deal with the situat-

ions. However, such an answer reveals only a further question—what is it to deal with a situation? In a certain sense of the term, both the models will enable one to deal with the situation. (Let us remember that both Gandhi and Ambedkar dealt with the situation.) And both the ways may have their limitations and their merits.

The disadvantage of the comprehensive model is that it makes action difficult; but it has the advantage of being thorough. The advantage of the partial model is that action is easier, however it is not thorough. It deals with only a particular aspect of the problem and therefore it is likely that further problems might arise. It seems therefore that what is good in theory is not so good in practice, or what is good in practice is not so good in theory. But this only means that we must be wrong in our view either of what is good theory or of what is good practice. I am going to assume that the comprehensive model gives us both good theory and good practice. The limitations of practice are only temporary. The partial model is bad both in theory and practice. The advantages of practice are only apparent and temporary. (Though I have said that I am assuming this, the considerations in the next section will show that considerations can be advanced in favour of this assumption.)

V

The Two Models and Consensus and Conflict :

How are these two models of the understanding of society related to the theme of consensus and conflict? In order to answer this question, I should like to distinguish between two ways in which the concepts of consensus and conflict may be understood. In one of the ways, they refer to the mode of settling a conflict. In consensus, an agreement is arrived at though the nature of the agreement could vary greatly. In conflict, a solution to a dispute is sought by fighting it out—legally, in parliament etc. But consensus and conflict represent two different modes of understanding society. In consensus mode of understanding, a dispute or a problem is understood in terms of all the interests and of all the groups. In conflict mode of understanding, a dispute or a problem is understood in terms of a particular interest and of a particular group. The former mode emphasises co-operation, the latter mode conflict.

One might say that the consensus mode of understanding may lead to consensus method, and the conflict mode of understanding to conflict method; but there is no necessary relationship between the modes of understanding and the methods bearing the corresponding names. The method of settling a problem will depend on the tradition and circumstances of the society, whatever the mode of the understanding of the problem.

If I am right, our emphasis should not be so much on the method, but on the mode of understanding. We must go in for consensus as a mode of understanding rather than conflict. We must prefer consensus rather than conflict also as a method. But if necessary, conflict in the service of consensus understanding, is to be preferred to consensus in favour of the conflict mode of understanding.

VI

Some Concluding Remarks :

1. If the distinction between the two models in terms of health and disease is accepted, the criteria in terms of which we judge of the progress of a society will be altered. We would not judge of the progress of a society in terms only of a particular aspect of life.

2. In the light of the considerations presented here, I believe it is plausible to suggest that a particular misunderstanding was an important factor in the decline of the Hindus : the misunderstanding being that if an individual can be indifferent to *artha* and *kāma* in the pursuit of *mokṣa*, a society also can be.

3. It will also alter the understanding of our present problems and their solutions.*

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NOTES

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