

'CAN POLITICS BE SPIRITUALIZED'

[This Paper was originally read in a Symposium held under the auspices of the Fergusson College Philosophy Association as part of its Golden Jubilee Programme. I have now supplemented it suitably so as to make it a systematic exposition of the stand I take. It would be interesting to survey the events in our country since Gandhiji's passing away and illustrate how they, on the whole, support the position taken by Gandhiji. That however will be a subject for another article of equal length and have its due place in a collection of Essays on Gandhiji.]

Let me start with a statement of my conclusions and I can best do so by giving briefly my reply to the main query. In reply, I would state that it is possible to spiritualize politics, and in principle there is no limit to such spiritualization. Indeed, all human progress, and the entire process of civilization mean just this. Politics can and ought to be conceived in the image of Ramarajya, the Machiavellian is only an elementary stage of polity and has to be superseded.

Ends and means together constitute moral life and attempts to talk of either as if they were self-sufficient are basically invalid. Both are interdependent and within limits affect each other. Goals being chosen, one has to use the best available means at every stage; these change according to circumstances but basically good means are means which are in harmony with what in totality is sought in the goals. Goals themselves are not abstractions but are concrete states of existence and experience related to the social and natural set up.

There is no substantial difference between the social and political spheres — the political is social and the social implies some political context. Morality has reference to human life which is both individual and social and if morality has relevance to individual life (in this matter, there is quite often a good deal of misunderstanding and very external and conventional notions of the moral often prevail)—equally well and in the same sense it is relevant to social life. Society is the individual writ large and therefore all the features of individual life are also present in social life.

To state the above position a little more elaborately :

I have no doubt at all that Politics can be spiritualized. We must clearly understand that to spiritualize anything, it is not necessary to de-materialize it. Indeed spirituality will have no meaning and content if it turns its back on the material or the natural. If it is true, that in individual life morality comes to fulfil, that in the long run and in a real sense virtue is prudence, that moral idealism is not a mere matter of sentiment, then there is no reason why this should not be equally so in the social sphere. Gandhiji's great achievement consists in maintaining this explicitly and in the practical efforts he made to realize it during his leadership of the struggle for Indian Independence.

Ends and means are parts of the same process and both affect each other. A clear conception of the ends leads to choice of current means, use of proper means alone leads to desirable ends. Ends independently of means are empty and unrealizable, means without reference to ends are meaningless and are merely mechanical activity. Ambiguity in the use of words such as force often leads to confusion. Force as violence is bad because its result can only be pain, resistance, opposition. But not all force is violence, indeed most of it is not and on the contrary, it is the vehicle and instrument for realizing all desirable ends.

While it seems at first sight that Ramarajya and the Machiavellian image of the State are two extremes, actually they are stages, the latter one being the lower, and the former the higher. It is not right to imagine that a person who stands for the way of persuasion and love, does not understand that human beings have to be gradually educated into these ways and in the interval, may temporarily need less refined methods for self-control and social harmony.

That the standards and categories of social life are, or have to be, different from those of individual life is commonly believed because of the complexity of the social situation, but the belief is not really valid and in spite of grave errors and setbacks, human social life has on the whole been progressing on the same lines as the individual. Our notions of the socially right and good have

deepened, widened and become more subtle. There have always been wars—but only recently we have had a League of Nations and now a United Nations Organization.

Let us try and understand what is meant by saying that moral principles are applicable to individual life! It is of course obvious that even in so-called individual life (if there is any such at all, for what we mean by the individual as distinguished from the social individual, is the individual in small social groups like the family—a completely isolated individual can really be neither moral nor immoral) people, do not always follow them; ought implies 'can' at the most, certainly not 'is'. Secondly, a thoughtful student of desirable moral practice and ethical theory appreciates that man's moral life is inextricably bound up with his natural life (which also to some extent includes the social), that its content is determined by reference to his environment, to his status in life and so on. Virtue certainly is not expediency in a narrow sense and one has often to turn one's back on pleasure or at least moderate one's search of pleasure in the pursuit of other ends of life. Nevertheless, virtue is both useful and pleasant in a sense and must be so. Moral principles tell us what in the long run is in the best interests of man's entire personality, and moral commands are accepted as reasonable and binding in the belief that they do so fulfil human aspirations. Of course, self-denial, some degree of discipline and self-control are the pre-requisites of a healthy moral and contented life. We quite often fail to observe moral principles, but do not, therefore, normally think of denying the validity of the principles. In strikingly different social and physical situations different moral principles prevail or at least different connotations of them are relevant and applicable although there is side by side a common stock on both sides of the situation.

The difference between individual and social life (of which latter, political life is a variety) is only that social life is 'writ large' and therefore the considerations and circumstances which in individual life are easy to spot and identify become complicated and seem transformed and different but cannot really be in principle different from or opposed to those which characterise individual life. If it is wrong as between individuals to practise untruth, injustice or cruelty and violence, then it is equally so as between

societies—and ultimately for the same reason, namely that it is not in the best and lasting interests of social groups, any more than of individuals to be unjust, untruthful or violent.

For guidance in this matter an acquaintance with the facts and laws of social Psychology and Economics is relevant and useful. The laws of Physics and Biology are common both to individual and social life and in their application to social events they have characteristic aspects and features. There is no evidence in any of these to suggest that there is any radical change in human nature when it functions in the social field. Nor is there any radical change between the social and the political for a state is only a society and no society is without a political context.

The most important practical reason of the belief that there is some basic distinction between individual and social (political) morals is the acceptance of nationhood as an ultimate entity, providing the standard of conduct for the individual in the socio-political context. As against that, we must now substitute the entity 'one world'—and/or humanity and realize that nations and their sovereignty within their geographical borders—are only a stage and an instrument towards the goal of human brotherhood. In fact, we in India have even included nature along with man and have believed in and aspired for a harmony of the two in their respective positions. There is nothing unscientific or visionary in this; modern science has made the world one for good or evil. It is for us to ensure that it is for good. If wars now are necessarily global, so is commerce, so is education, and agriculture—and so must be peace and goodwill. We know that even today help in famines or cyclones or quakes anywhere comes from all corners of the world, although we have not yet succeeded in avoiding wars.

To appreciate what Gandhi meant by the spiritualization of politics one should not forget that in his opinion what applied to larger groups i.e. nations also applied to groups within the nation. In fact like charity, spiritualization must start at home. In order to ensure that the over-whelming of the individual by the state which characterizes all centralized groups Gandhi pleads for decentralization of authority and has urged that we must make our village the normal unit of administrative power and economic self-suffi-

ciency and go on to build up a central authority only for carrying out such functions as the smaller units could not perform. Thus, on the one hand for him since all men were equal and essentially good, nationhood was itself only a stage towards universal brotherhood; on the other, within each nation, there would be numerous small units more or less autonomous and self-dependent as far as possible and coming together and constituting a hierarchy of wider units to carry out such tasks as they could not by themselves and also because of the sense of brotherliness which it had with all other units.

We must now also deal with another legitimate query as to how far Gandhiji himself practised what he was teaching and what is the extent to which he may be said to have succeeded. As far as his political activity in Africa is concerned one may say with confidence that he did succeed by using his special technique in the limited end he had there set to himself, of restoring for the Indians who had settled there at least the minimum rights of citizenship, and his method won for him appreciation from the British Government and even from his doughty South African opponent General Smuts.

In India itself, before coming on the national scene, Gandhi had succeeded by his method in two or three smaller problems in the Champaran tea labourers' just demand from their employers, in the dispute between the labourers and millowners at Ahmedabad, and in one other special grievance of famine-affected agriculturists in Gujarat.

The struggle for Indian Independence was a much bigger and more complicated task—for India is a vast country with a large and varied population different from each other in social and economic status, in the languages they speak and although the bulk of the population was Hindu, there was a major minority community namely the Muslims, and there were also numerous Indian Christians, Parsees and Buddhists. To harness all these together in a common awakening and effective resistance to the British who were naturally reluctant to part with what has been described as 'the most precious gem in the crown of the British monarch' was a very important, difficult and complex undertaking. Of course,

Gandhi could not possibly have succeeded unless a great deal of work of the awakening of the public had been done before him for about five decades by distinguished and able patriots like Dadabhai Nowrojee, Justice Ranade, Surendranath Banerjee, Lokamanya Tilak and Gopal Krishna Gokhale and he himself had several able lieutenants like Pandit Nehru, Sardar Patel, Maulana Azad and others. The changed international situation and the use of aeroplanes and modern destructive weapons, and the reduction of Britain to a second grade power with not enough able men to send out to administer a hostile population of thirty or forty crores, and Subhash Bose's heroic exploits in raising out of Indian war prisoners an Indian Army, all these also contributed. A heavy price had also to be paid in accepting the partition of the country for the achievement of Independence. Even so, it must be acknowledged that if one person more than another involved the masses of the country in the fight for freedom and made it well nigh irresistible, it was Gandhi.

Gandhi himself throughout stood for truth and non-violence and the carrying out of his constructive programme which through its various items sought to build up a just, industrious and friendly society and although he had to make or at least connive at numerous compromises in dealing with problems inside the party, at elections, and during the last and decisive struggle from 1942, there is no doubt that because of his leadership, the Indian Freedom Movement was carried on with the minimum use of force and it proved to be an infectious and inspiring example for many Asiatic and African dependent nations, so that Gandhi was looked upon by the leaders of those countries as a person who pointed out and successfully proved that even an armless nation can overthrow a mighty foreign nation chiefly by active awakening among the people, and their refusal to cooperate with the foreign power and being prepared to suffer hardships. It must also be understood that while spiritualizing meant primarily and normally appealing patiently to the opponent for one's just rights (and learning to be self-dependent and just and united) Gandhi was of the view that if injustice could not be corrected by the method of love and friendliness and persuasion, even the use of minimum force was justified. Injustice must in no case be tolerated and cowardice was worse

than violence. His plea really amounts to this that we must first and patiently try to resolve conflicts through persuasion and only if they fail, then use of minimum force is temporarily permissible.

Most readers will remember that Gandhiji considered himself a disciple of Gopal Krishan Gokhale who was the first modern Indian leader to say that 'Politics should be spiritualized'. Gandhiji considerably widened and deepened the connotation of Gokhale's utterance—but basically the Indian Liberal Leaders did believe that persuasion, fair play to one's opponent, making sure of one's facts before expressing one's grievances, the avoidance of personal hostility or even discourtesy to those who were ruling India were all indispensable in India's fight for freedom, at the other end and Gokhale also said in the first or second decade of the present century that failing everything even civil disobedience or non-payment of taxes were legitimate in a freedom struggle. I do not however think that any other Indian liberal would ever have agreed to go so far and Gokhale himself although he very earnestly admired and highly respected and even revered Gandhi, would not, one feels, have in actual life taken this principle to his heart as Gandhi did and *lived what he taught was right*, although Gandhi too had to make some compromises on practical grounds.

In this connexion Gandhiji had quite a controversy with the patriot philosopher—Lokamanya Tilak who stated that while saintliness is the guiding star and norm for all of us—the direction towards which even politicians must direct their activities, in the actual day to day conduct they have to and are justified in making compromises to achieve desirable results. Gandhi's rejoinder was to say that although he was no learned scholar and could not reply to the Lokamanya's learned and skilful arguments, he was quite certain that it was intellectual indolence (and moral timidity) to say that any field of human activity was outside the range of a saint. In fact it is obligatory for one who aspires to live a saintly life to try and prove that even so complex and complicated a field such as politics ought and could be guided by the universal principles of truth and love for which he stood. Having read all the correspondence in the matter between Tilak and Gandhi and in view of what in actual life was their practice I do not think that Tilak differed from Gandhi essentially and on the other hand

Gandhiji in actual life combined diplomacy with saintliness although he did say that it was only because he was an imperfect instrument, that he could not always abide by his principles. The real situation is that while Gandhi was referring to the goal, Tilak only supplemented it by saying that while proceeding to the goal one has to watch the ups and downs and winding in the road and adjust his movements accordingly. Gandhi himself has made it clear that he is no visionary but a practical idealist and that is exactly what Tilak meant. Rajaji in this connexion has very clearly said that Tilak who was known as a veteran and experienced political leader was in fact a very straightforward and simple-minded person and on the other hand, Gandhi known and acknowledged as a saint had a good deal of shrewdness concealed diplomacy. In fact Gandhi himself said that he naturally was a shrewd *bania* whatever high ends he aspired to and his insistence on pure means. For he was not a visionary idealist but a person who desired and was determined to practise what he taught. Gandhi's insistence on simplicity, individual and social, and his plea for decentralization properly understood minimize the causes of conflict and enable the normal peaceful individual to assert himself, and not pulled into wars in spite of himself, Gandhi's ideal of spiritualizing politics would then be easily realized.

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