

GANDHIJI AND THE INDIAN INTELLECTUALS

The view that Gandhiji failed to influence the intellectuals in this country and therefore whatever reform or awakening he sought to bring about, did not have a stable objective foundation and could not make a permanent impact on conditions in this country is a very common one — not only on the part of those who are considered intellectuals, but also in their own way among many of Gandhiji's followers and admirers. This was my experience, when I and some others made efforts to introduce two papers on 'Gandhian Thought' among the many subjects to be chosen voluntarily by students going for the B. A. Examination. We found that both the academicians and several others known to be Gandhi's followers joined in the argument that there was not either enough matter or suitable method in Gandhi's theoretical contribution to social thought, to justify its inclusion in our courses as one of the subjects of study. Gandhi himself often used to say that he had no philosophy of his own, and all that he wished to teach was best expressed in his life "—'in what I have done and what I have avoided doing'. Besides, I am always open to be convinced by those who differ from me and shall then willingly change my position". This was of course sincere, but this is all perfectly rational and it should not lead us to conclude that if studied properly Gandhi's teaching will not yield a reasonably consistent and original, profound and definite philosophy of social life.

The problem before us, is not whether Gandhiji was an intellectual — he never made any such claim — but whether the intellectuals of the country tried to understand what he had to say, point out its deficiencies if any, and suggested suitable correction and, on the other hand, if there was anything of value in what he was saying and doing, they considered it to be their duty to put it in such a way as the common man would understand — and suggesting ways and means of developing it on proper lines. Actually, in one sense, all that Gandhi said is ancient truth and all great men have said or meant it and certainly no one will say that they all gave to humanity something essentially irrational or contrary to fact. Yet taken as a whole, I think no thinker or man of action had so explicitly expressed these ideas or tried to live them in the context of

a very wide social life — involving international relationship in a world which was today vaster than ever before, and one in a sense in which it could never be before.

Let us consider how far the intellectualist is justified in ignoring Gandhi's utterances and contributions as being unsuitable for intellectual analysis and comprehension. It is true that being a man of action and depending essentially on an appeal to emotion Gandhi did quite often say things which can not stand the test of reason. But we must distinguish between the contents—between *what* he wished to say and his manner of saying it. If the contents themselves are subjective and can not ensure support from common experience, or if the conclusions which he draws from his premises are illogically drawn and cannot be validly inferred from his premises, then certainly it would be impossible and not worthwhile to approach his teachings intellectually and understand what he had to say. We find however that if we try to shift the essential from the unessential in his utterances and action, we find that his basic premises are not subjective and do have a foundation in common experience and the conclusions which he draws from his premises do logically follow from his premises.

Let me briefly outline what I think are Gandhi's substantial assumptions or starting points. Gandhi holds that man is a part of nature (and the individual a part of society) and that he must therefore live as far as possible in harmony with nature and society. Gandhi holds that in spite of many weaknesses and deficiencies man is essentially good and is amenable to persuasion. This proposition of his has been declared to be invalid, for man, it is said, is a mixture of good and bad impulses. I am of the opinion that this criticism ignores the fact that Gandhi was a shrewd and truthful observer of his own and other people's deficiencies and mistakes and has very cheerfully pointed out the dangers. When, therefore, he nevertheless advances the proposition that man is essentially good, he does so at a deeper level, i. e. at the level at which Socrates and Aristotle described man as essentially rational. Such a statement merely means that the distinguishing characteristic of man is his reason, and that, provided he makes the effort, it is possible for him to make it the dominant constituent of his personality and succeed in being a wise man. That is exactly what Gandhi means when he describes man as being essentially good. And Gandhiji

as well as Aristotle can claim support in common experience. If we look at our common social life we shall find that we normally behave to each other on the assumption that man is good. That is how the family as an institution has become a permanent aspect of our social life. Not only within the family but with our friends, colleagues and other members of our social group we do normally and naturally use persuasion, affection, self-sacrifice as the proper methods to persuade them to our view. Of course, there are quarrels within the family and within various social groups or between them, but nevertheless the family lasted as a permanent institution in our social life only because although members of family have often quarrelled, their normal attitude to each other is of mutual trust, confidence, affection and frequent subordination of one's own interest to that of other members of the family. This is so even with regard to the larger groups of which too we are members and the groups themselves like families, although they do quarrel, are normally, friendly and cooperative. This natural development has, it is true, been complicated by the fact that deceit and violence have often been resorted to, and they have left behind characteristic aftereffects — but even so the general direction is towards better mutual understanding and trust.

To say that the intellectuals of our country failed in appreciating the importance of Gandhi's point of view and utterances does not mean that every little detail of what he said or did was valid. Gandhi was not himself an intellectual nor learned. Many of his opinions as for instance, in medical matters, about diet etc., are not objectively valid and in exceptional circumstances he himself departed from them and did not seek to interfere with the habits of his colleagues like Maulana Azad or Pandit Nehru. The only persons on whose personal liberty he made inroads directly and indirectly were the members of his Ashram, Kasturba and a few others very intimate and who could be described as in some way as his wards. In substance, the Vratas he laid down as necessary for a true satyagrahi or a member of his Ashram are not irrational and as goals to be pointed out or the direction to be indicated for those who desire to serve the public, they are valid. Of course, Gandhi was a very shrewd person and knew the weaknesses of human nature so well that he did not altogether reject those who could not fulfill all his tests and made use of all the human material available to him for the manifold activities involved in national awakening

and the fight with British domination of which for nearly three decades he was the most outstanding leader indeed without a peer. Although Jinnah, Ambedkar and Savarkar were never under Gandhi's influence and each in his own way contributed towards the well being of those who followed them if we take an overall view, the first place among nation builders must nevertheless go to Gandhi.

Speaking before the philosophy faculty of the Gujarat University some years ago, I stated that basically Gandhi's faith that in spite of his imperfections and lapses man was essentially good and is therefore best approached through persuasion and not through force or deceit was similar to the faith of Socrates and the definition of Aristotle that man was a *rational* animal. They knew how frequently man is liable to err and be governed by passion. All that they mean is that Rationality is the distinctive characteristic of man and that if he so determines he could be thoroughly rational i. e. wise and that to improve his lapses in any field we must in the first place appeal to his Reason and try and make him more enlightened. Men, said Socrates, are never deliberately wicked—they are wicked when they do not know the nature of their actions a position which Christ too stands for. Professor C. N. Patel, the Assistant Chief Editor of the Complete Gandhi Works Series being published at Delhi, who happened to be present, raised a difficulty in this connexion. He said that Gandhi himself used to say that he had failed to convert the Indian intellectual, that his appeal was to the heart and we find that as compared with the earlier national leaders like Dadabhai Naoroji, Ranade, Tilak, Gokhale, Gandhi was able to bring in the large masses of the country in the national movement for he appealed to emotion rather than try to argue with them and convince them of the correctness of his programme of national regeneration.

During this visit to Ahmedabad, I had the opportunity of meeting Shri Shankerlal Banker who was Gandhi's companion during his first imprisonment in 1921 and was all along very closely connected with one item of Gandhi's programme namely the encouragement of Khadi and other village industries. During the chat with him and also in his book *Reminiscences of Gandhi* he has made mention of one particular incident which according to him showed that Gandhi dealt with the heart and ultimately persuaded

others to his side by overpowering them with his kindness and love and good nature. The incident referred to was that at a meeting of the All India Congress Committee a resolution regarding the death of Gopinath Saha, a revolutionary from Bengal, was moved along with an amendment sponsored by Deshbandhu Das and Pandit Motilal Nehru, praising his noble and courageous patriotism was being discussed. Gandhiji opposed the amendment and after a stormy debate succeeded in defeating the amendment by a narrow margin. Gandhiji felt very sad to find that friends and colleagues for whom he had great respect and whose patriotism was unquestioned should differ from him on so fundamental an issue. On being told by Maulana Shaukat Ali, not to worry and assuring him that Das and other leaders of his way of thinking could easily be defeated, Gandhiji explained 'What is the use of that ? It is clear that I have not been able to win the hearts of these dear and distinguished friends— this shows how far I am from my cherished goal I still am'. Shri Banker proceeded to tell me that in the end it was Gandhiji's love for these friends which converted them and they came completely under his sway in the following years. Professor Patel also felt that if Gandhiji was really guided by Reason, he would not have stuck to Hinduism which he knew and admitted had many imperfections and tolerated such evils as untouchability, and that he as a rationalist, would have openly accepted a Universal Religion which, while accepting the good points of all religions, rejected what was irrational in any of them. Gandhi as a matter of fact did say that all religions were equally true but that all had imperfections. He nevertheless said that he himself was a staunch Hindu.

To take professor Patel's argument first : I do not think that as a rationalist Gandhi would have been justified or rationally required to start support a new and universal religion instead of Hinduism. A rationalist does not and need not maintain that the past should be given up but only that it should be corrected. Completely ignoring the past would have been the cutting off of the tradition and the momentum which continuous tradition gives. Like Gandhi, Swami Vivekanand was also a universalist, because he told the followers of other religions not to adopt Hinduism, but to follow their own religion with sincerity and devotion. 'If you do that you are already Hindus in your own way'. For Hinduism truly understood is like the vast ocean into which all rivers flow.

Although, thus a universalist — Vivekanand was proud to describe himself as a Hindu and a Vedantin. And it is as such that the Ramakrishna Maths devoted to human service came to be established. As a matter of fact, a narrow view of rationalism such as is frequently held at the present time would even disallow the acceptance of a universal religion, for there is no proof of God or perhaps even spirituality in the sense in which there is proof of matter. The statement of Professor Patel that Gandhi often used to say that he has failed to convince the Indian intellectuals and could not reach their hearts, is true, but what he really meant was that he could not with arguments convince them, such as they appreciated but the fault could be theirs and not necessarily his. As Shri. Shankerlal Banker told me, although—leaders of the Congress like Das and Nehru at first expressed their differences from Gandhi, in the long run, both of them and many others like them too were prepared to follow Gandhi without hesitation even when they happened to differ. Pandit Nehru has in fact quite often said that there were many occasions when he differed from Gandhi about the line of action to be taken in a particular situation. He goes on however to add that having expressed his differences, he nevertheless accepted Gandhi's lead, because it was his experience that while Gandhi's arguments would not convince one — the actual sequence of events as they happened would invariably show that Gandhi was right. This statement when carefully understood shows that Gandhi in his own unconventional, unscholarly, non-technical manner managed to arrive at the correct conclusion and must therefore be considered to be in substance and essence a rationalist, although he himself would say that he followed his inner voice and the dictates of his heart. It would be interesting from this point of view to consider the mutual relationship of Gandhi and many other contemporary leaders chiefly those belonging to non-congress parties. The liberal leaders as a group adopted during Gandhi's times an attitude more of observers than actors on the Indian national scene, and naturally their statements could not be considered to be on the same plane as those of Gandhi who was the central leader of the new national awakening. But one notes that the doyen of the liberal leaders — the Rt. Hon'ble Shrinivas Shastri, had in spite of difference in politics, a unique regard and gave special consideration to Gandhi's views. So did Sri Tej Bahadur Sapru, another eminent liberal leader. The

three prominent exceptions were those of Jinnah, Ambedkar and Savarkar. It was indeed unfortunate that they and Gandhi could not discuss matters of permanent national interest in a free and friendly manner. It seemed that Gandhi's personal magic had no effect on any of them and somehow they seem to have developed a kind of allergy to Gandhi. But if we remember that other congress leaders — like Nehru, Rajaji and Subhash also failed to establish any real understanding with any of the three leaders, it was not Gandhi's inadequacy as a rationalist but something else — in the situation that prevented mutual understanding between him and the leaders.

To judge how far it could be said that the intellectuals found it impossible to incorporate and utilize what Gandhi stood for and taught, let us turn to the two main messages which Gandhi sought to give to Indians in order to secure independence. The first was his constructive programme. This constituted as we all know in requiring all Indians to be self-reliant and mutually friendly and helpful. From the various items chosen in the constructive programme, it is clear that Gandhi must have given deep thought to this matter. The first and much criticised item was the spinning and weaving of Khadi and wearing Khadi clothes. As a matter of fact, any serious thought about Khadi reveals that, to Gandhi, it represented the essentials both of the spirit of Swadeshi and the establishment at least in some part of our life of equality among all Indian citizens. Gandhi was very keen that the spinning of Khadi should form part of the annual subscription one had to give to enrol as a member of Indian National Congress. He thus meant that everyone who calls himself a congressman, adopts Swadeshi and regards himself as one among his fellowmen and is prepared to take some personal trouble every day to show that he seriously values both the acceptance of Swadeshi and the establishment of equality among all his countrymen. The other items of the constructive programme — 'removal of untouchability', 'Hindu-Muslim unity', 'Prohibition and Nai Talim' are all such as could be defended rationally as essential constituents of genuine nationalism and are in no way subjective or just a matter of sentiment.

This is also true of the other part of the programme which Gandhi put forward. That was his non-violent, non-cooperation and civil disobedience if necessary. This also is a perfectly rational

programme for an unarmed nation like India to adopt to press its demands. After all, the British rule here was possible because at all levels Indians agreed to carry out the orders issued by their English superiors. If the village patil and the police constable, and the revenue clerk did not carry out their work, the administration would necessarily collapse. That the British with a small army and some thousands of officers could smoothly run the administration of such a large country was due to the fact that the Indians accepted them as rulers and carried out their orders. If this cooperation was reduced and more and more withdrawn, the British rulers would be helpless. Also as regards the laws enacted by the rulers, if one or the other of them was regarded as essentially unjust or partial it should be broken, and punishment awarded for the breach willingly accepted without any use of force on our part. If this was done as far as possible, gradually the British domination here would loosen its grip and people would learn to be courageous and peaceful, and mass demonstrations of our dissatisfaction with the British rule would humiliate the British in the international world and bring moral pressure on them. With both the parts of Gandhi's programme being followed the British grip on us was bound to loosen and as actually happened, after the second world war the British themselves would realise that it was better to part with power gracefully and keep India as a friendly nation in the Commonwealth, instead of straining its strength to rule such a vast mass of discontented population when in the changed world conditions, Britain itself had become a second grade nation and needed urgently to attend to its commerce and secure the daily needs of life of its own population by putting in maximum work. This as we know is what actually happened in 1947.

I for one am quite certain that the Indian intellectuals did not do their duty with regard to Gandhi's teachings and activity. They had of course every right to criticise it, but they kept it at an arm's length, pronounced that what he was saying was so to say 'out of court' for reason. Even if Gandhi by some of his utterances and ways seemed to disclaim that he had any interest in the intellectuals' judgement — the intellectuals had every right to go into what he said and preached and consider its reasonableness and see how far, and with what modifications, the nation could benefit from his programme and should have declared their support for him to that extent by word and action. Only if what Gandhi was

saying was merely subjective fancy, the goals he set totally out of reach for men, or he was illogical even in drawing conclusions from his premises — only then ignoring him was justified and not otherwise. Taken as a whole the programme which Gandhi gave to the nation was essentially correct — in fact it was only all the older programmes of Indian nationalists in a wider and deeper synthesis adapted to the needs of the changing times in which India and the world were passing. As regards the wider, moral and religious stand of Gandhi too on which in his opinion his political programme was based — in substance, the same may be said and I feel that if the intellectualists had played their proper part, the Swaraj which dawned in 1947, would have been a less vitiated gift and the citizens and their leaders would have better learnt to carry out their responsibilities as citizens of a Free India — much better than they have done during the last thirty years. All over the world some of the topmost intellectuals and men of science had realised the unique value of what Gandhi stood for and suggested for overcoming the deadlock which our civilisation has reached — and any serious effort by Indian intellectuals to understand and communicate what Gandhi was saying would have been welcomed all over the world as well as helped national progress.

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