

CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS



---

Gandhi's Contribution to Social Theory

Author(s): A. Appadorai

Source: *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (Jul., 1969), pp. 312-328

Published by: [Cambridge University Press](#) for the [University of Notre Dame du lac on behalf of Review of Politics](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1406548>

Accessed: 23/12/2010 13:57

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=cup>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



Cambridge University Press and University of Notre Dame du lac on behalf of Review of Politics are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Review of Politics*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# Gandhi's Contribution to Social Theory

A. Appadorai

## Introduction

**G**ANDHI (1869-1948) is known primarily as the leader who led the national movement for the freedom of India from British rule; he also has an important place in social theory. "The only nonofficial figure," says Louis Fischer, "comparable to Gandhi in his effect on man's mind is Karl Marx."<sup>1</sup> His *Collected Works*, including his speeches, writings, and letters, have appeared in thirty volumes with some forty more scheduled for publication.<sup>2</sup> The more important of his writings from the point of view of social theory are found in two weekly journals which he edited, *Young India* (1919-32) and *Harijan* (1933-48);<sup>3</sup> his social and political ideas can also be gleaned from *Hind Swaraj* (1908) or Indian Home Rule, *The Story of My Experiments With Truth* (2 vols. 1927, 1929), *Delhi Diary* (1948), and *Satyagraha in South Africa* (1950).

In what follows, I shall analyze Gandhi's social and political ideas under four heads: a) the aim and nature of the State; b) the economic basis of society; c) democracy; and d) *Satyagraha* and nonviolence. Thereafter I shall briefly trace the influences, Indian and foreign, on his theory. Finally, I shall attempt to assess his contribution to social theory.

Before discussing these aspects of Gandhi's ideas, we must add a caution: it must not be thought that Gandhi himself worked out a set theory of the State. He expressed his ideas on a variety of topics as comments on particular situations, often in answer to correspondents who wanted his guidance. Thus he developed his theory of *Satyagraha* to meet the threat of racial discrimination against people of Indian origin in South Africa (1908-10) and later to meet the situation created in India by the repressive policy adopted by the Government (1920-1947) to put down the national movement for freedom from foreign rule. Among landlords and

---

<sup>1</sup> Louis Fischer, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi* (London, 1951), p. 397.

<sup>2</sup> *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Delhi, The Director of Publications Division, from 1958).

<sup>3</sup> *Harijan* continued to be published after Gandhi's death and is still in course of publication.

others with vested interests there was considerable fear as to what would happen to their property rights if a radical government came to power after India became independent; in response Gandhi developed his theory of trusteeship, that is, those with property should hold their surplus property in trust for the have-nots and so on. From his writings emerges an integrated view of the individual, society, and the State, for his ideas proceeded from an original mind deeply devoted to the welfare of all and social harmony and were based on moral principles—truth, love, and nonviolence — of which he leaves his readers in no doubt.

### SOCIAL AND POLITICAL IDEAS

#### a) *Aim and nature of the state*

The key to Gandhi's conception of the State is his view of human nature and the place of the individual in the Great Society. "I refuse," he wrote in *Young India* in 1920,<sup>4</sup> "to suspect human nature. It will, is bound to, respond to any noble and friendly action." The inherent goodness of human nature was an article of faith with him;<sup>5</sup> on it was built his theory of *Satyagraha*. The individual must be allowed fair opportunities to develop the goodness in him; the State is a means for the development of individuality. Not the power or the glory of the State but, he wrote categorically, the individual is the one supreme consideration.<sup>6</sup> Too much State interference destroys individuality; Gandhi looked upon an increase in the power of the State with the greatest fear, for, although it apparently does good by minimizing exploitation, it does the greatest harm to mankind by destroying individuality which lies at the root of all progress.<sup>7</sup> In his view, then, authority had definite limits. He wrote in *Young India* (1925) that *swaraj* government (self-government) would be a sorry affair if people looked up to it for the regulation of every detail of life. "Self-government means," he wrote, "continuous effort to be independent of government control whether it is foreign government or whether it is national."<sup>8</sup> In the ideal society there would be enlightened anarchy and every one would be his own ruler, ruling himself in such a manner that he would never be a hindrance to his neighbor. But

<sup>4</sup> *Young India*, August 4, 1920, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Harijan*, March 25, 1939, p. 64.

<sup>6</sup> *Young India*, November 13, 1924, p. 378.

<sup>7</sup> Bose, "Interview With Mahatma Gandhi," *Modern Review*, 1935, p. 413.

<sup>8</sup> *Young India*, August 6, 1925, p. 276.

since the ideal was never fully realized, he would be content with commending Thoreau's dictum that that Government is best which governs least.<sup>9</sup>

While Gandhi's concern for the development of individuality was the main reason for his plea for the least government, he, as a votary of nonviolence, saw the State as representing "violence in a concentrated and organized form."<sup>10</sup> To foster a climate of non-violence in society, therefore, made it desirable to reduce the functions of the State to a minimum.

With considerable logic he developed a second basic idea of the State: its aim is to promote the welfare of all, and not merely the greatest happiness of the greatest number.<sup>11</sup> According to the Utilitarian position, he argued, people in the West generally hold that it is man's duty to promote the happiness, that is, prosperity, of the greatest number.<sup>12</sup> Happiness is taken exclusively to mean material happiness and economic prosperity. If, in the pursuit of this happiness, moral laws are violated, it does not matter much. Again, as the object is the happiness of the greatest number, people in the West do not believe it to be wrong if it is secured at the cost of the minority. But the exclusive quest for the physical and material happiness of the majority has no sanction in divine law. He cited a Western writer, John Ruskin, in support of his view that the well-being of the people at large consists in conforming to the moral law.<sup>13</sup>

Gandhi was careful to note that he and the Utilitarians would converge at some points as the greatest good of all inevitably included the good of the greater number,<sup>14</sup> but he could not subscribe to the Utilitarian formula for one significant reason: the votary of nonviolence will strive for the greatest good of all and die in the attempt to realize the ideal; he will, therefore, be willing to die so that others may live. "The utilitarian to be logical will never sacrifice himself." Further, the former's sphere of destruction will always be the narrowest possible; the Utilitarian's has no limit. Gandhi gives an example from contemporary history to illustrate his point: "judged by the standard of non-violence the late war

<sup>9</sup> *Young India*, July 12, 1931, p. 162.

<sup>10</sup> Bose, *op. cit.*, p. 412.

<sup>11</sup> Gandhi used the term *sarvodaya*, meaning the welfare of all.

<sup>12</sup> Mahatma Gandhi, *Collected Works*, VIII, 239-41.

<sup>13</sup> John Ruskin, *Unto This Last*.

<sup>14</sup> *Young India*, 1924-26, pp. 956-57.

[of 1914-18] was wholly wrong. Judged by the utilitarian standard each party has justified it according to its idea of utility."

A third idea concerns the means and the end.<sup>15</sup> The means may be likened to a seed, the end to a tree; and there is just the same inviolable connection between the means and the end as there is between the seed and the tree. We reap exactly as we sow. "Would it be possible," he rightly asks, "to obtain the result flowing from the worship of God by laying oneself prostrate before Satan?" Briefly, means and end were convertible terms in Gandhi's social philosophy.

It will be appropriate here to point out that in defending the equation of means and end, Gandhi goes against the political maxim laid down by the Italian political thinker Machiavelli in *The Prince* (1513) and by Kautilya, the Indian political thinker of the fourth century B.C. in his *Arthashastra*. Machiavelli's doctrine of *raison d'état* is well known to students of Western political thought. Kautilya recommended the adoption of methods of statecraft according to circumstances and expressed the view that what produces unfavorable results is bad policy; a policy is to be judged by the results it produces.<sup>16</sup> The equation of means and end does not allow any distinction between public and private morality and invests the State with the great responsibility of following moral principles in dealing with its citizens and the outside world.

#### b) *The economic basis of society*

A good society, according to Gandhi, must be based on economic equality. That economic equality is an essential condition of a good and harmonious society is commonplace in contemporary thought. Gandhi's conception of economic equality has a two-fold aspect: the ideal; and the practical.

a) The ideal is what may be compendiously termed "bread labor." It is a divine law that man must earn his bread by laboring with his own hands. Agriculture, spinning, weaving, carpentry, smithery, scavenging, all come under "bread labor." Intellect is necessary and socially useful, but intellectual faculties must not be used as they are now to amass a fortune. They are to be used only in the service of mankind.

<sup>15</sup> *Hind Swaraj*, p. 106; *Young India*, July 17, 1924, pp. 236-37.

<sup>16</sup> Kautilya, *Arthashastra*, translated by R. Shama Sastry (Bangalore, 1915), Bk. VII.

Gandhi acknowledges that the concept of bread labor was first stressed by a Russian writer, Bondaref, though he himself learned of it through reading Tolstoy's writings on the subject and Ruskin's *Unto This Last*. In support of his position he cited the Bible statement: "In the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat thy bread." The *Bhagavad Gita* in his view enunciated the same doctrine where it says that "he who eats without offering sacrifice eats stolen food."<sup>17</sup> Whatever be the source of Gandhi's ideas on the subject, it is clear that he thought it was a sound principle of social organization: "There is a world-wide conflict between capital and labour and the poor envy the rich. If all worked for their bread, distinctions of rank would be obliterated, the rich would still be there, but they would deem themselves trustees of their property and would use it mainly in the public interest."

Allied to bread labor is the idea that limitation of wants, not their multiplication, is essential for contentment and harmony in society. Nature produces what is strictly needed for our wants from day to day; therefore, if everybody took enough for himself and nothing more, nobody would die of starvation. Anyone who takes more than the minimum is in effect guilty of theft.

b) Bread labor, is the ideal but Gandhi knew that imperfect man would ever fall short of it. Economic equality must in practice mean equitable distribution. Everyone must be assured of a balanced diet, a decent house to live in, sufficient cloth with which to cover himself, facilities for the education of his children, and adequate medical relief. "To each man according to his needs" would aptly summarize the principle of equitable distribution. A capable and talented person may be permitted to acquire more; to restrict such acquisition would be a social loss. The rich man will be left in possession of his wealth of which he will use what he reasonably requires for his personal needs and for the remainder will act as a trustee to use it for society.

Was Gandhi a socialist? Starting with the premises that class war is not inevitable, and that capital and labor need not be antagonistic to each other, Gandhi held that to dispossess people of their property by force was neither desirable nor just. If the essence of socialism was equality, he was a socialist. But he did not subscribe to the method advocated by socialists, for consistent with his

---

<sup>17</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *From Yeravda Mandir* (3rd edition: Ahmedabad, 1945), Ch. III.

basic outlook of nonviolence, he would not use force to dispossess the owners of their private property. "The idea I want to realize," he wrote in *Young India* in 1929, "is not spoliation of the property of private owners but to restrict its enjoyment so as to avoid all pauperism, consequent discontent and the hideously ugly contrast that exists today between the lives and surroundings of the rich and the poor." Gandhi, then, would rely upon the conversion of the heart of the rich to achieve socialistic equality. The theory of trusteeship was his socialism.

While all men have a right to equal opportunity, all have not the same capacity. Some will, therefore, have the ability to earn more, others less. Those who earn more exist as trustees, and on no other terms.

I would allow a man of intellect to earn more. I would not cramp his talent. But the bulk of his greater earnings must be used for the good of the State just as the income of all earning sons of the father goes to the common family fund. They would have their earnings only as trustees.<sup>18</sup>

But the trusteeship, he adds, is not unilateral. If the rich are trustees, that is, have to use their surplus income for the good of those who are less rich, the latter too have their duties towards the rich. The idea of conflict of interests arises because now the poor do not consider the property of the rich as meant for their good. But once the capitalists consider themselves as trustees and use their property for the good of the workers, the outlook of labor will undergo a transformation. They will not regard the mill and the machinery as belonging to exploiting agents and grinding them down but as their own instruments of production, and will therefore protect them as well as they would their own property. They will not steal time and turn out less work but will put in the most they can. "In fact, capital and labour will be mutual trustees and both will be trustees of consumers."<sup>19</sup> The trusteeship in Gandhi's view, is a "perfectly mutual affair";<sup>20</sup> each party, the trustee and the ward, will believe that his own interest is best safeguarded by safeguarding the interest of the other.

---

<sup>18</sup> *Young India*, November 26, 1931, p. 368.

<sup>19</sup> *Harijan*, June 25, 1938, pp. 161-62.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

c) *Democracy*

Gandhi's conception of democracy was in tune with his ideals of individual freedom: and a nonviolent social order and those ideals were articles of faith with him. Describing democracy as the art and science of mobilizing the entire physical, economic, and spiritual resources of all sections of the people in the service of the common good, he maintained that democracy and violence cannot seriously coexist.<sup>21</sup> "The States that are today nominally democratic," he declared, "have either to become frankly totalitarian or, if they are to become truly democratic, they must become courageously non-violent."<sup>22</sup> The implication of a nonviolent democracy is that it is wholly inconsistent with the use of physical force for implementing its will. It would follow that a true democracy should cease to rely upon the army for anything. Gandhi connected this need for the State to abandon use of the army with the preservation of individual freedom:

True democracy . . . can never come through untruthful and violent means for the simple reason that the natural corollary to their use would be to remove all opposition through the suppression or extermination of the antagonists and that does not make for individual freedom. Individual freedom can have the fullest play only under a regime of unadulterated ahimsa (non-violence).<sup>23</sup>

On democracy and individual freedom, apart from the use of violence, Gandhi believed that the rule of the majority has a narrow application, that is, one should yield to the majority in matters of detail. "Where there is no principle involved and there is a programme to be carried out, the minority has got to follow the majority. But where there is a principle involved, the dissent stands and it is bound to express itself in practice when the occasion arises."<sup>24</sup> It follows, too, that in matters of conscience, the law of majority has no place. Democracy imposes a duty on the majority to respect the rights of minorities. The majority must tolerate and respect their opinion and action and see to it that the minorities receive proper hearings.

Does individual freedom include the right of civil disobedience?

---

<sup>21</sup> *Harijan*, May 27, 1939, p. 143.

<sup>22</sup> *Harijan*, November 12, 1938, p. 328.

<sup>23</sup> *Harijan*, May 27, 1939, p. 143.

<sup>24</sup> *Harijan*, August 11, 1940, p. 244.



Yes, says Gandhi, provided the individual is qualified by discipline and selflessness:

A born democrat is a born disciplinarian. Democracy comes naturally to him who is habituated normally to yield willing obedience to all laws, human or divine. . . . Let those who are ambitious to serve democracy qualify themselves by satisfying first this acid test of democracy. Moreover a democrat must be utterly selfless. He must think and dream not in terms of self or party but only of democracy. Only then does he acquire the right of civil disobedience.<sup>25</sup>

d) *Satyagraha and nonviolence*

These ideas relate to social and political organization. Gandhi's distinctive contribution lies in his having evolved a political method to resolve the conflicts arising when individuals and nations feel that their just rights are denied to them. This was the case with the untouchables in India (Gandhi called them *Harijans*) who felt that the caste Hindus denied to them their social and political rights. For their part, the Indian people felt that they were entitled to self-government. Persuasion by reason and, when it fails, resort to physical force were the time-honored methods to resolve such conflicts; Gandhi came to the conclusion that reason might, in the final analysis, fail to persuade, and the use of force is immoral. What then is the remedy?

The conviction has been growing upon me, that things of fundamental importance to the people are not secured by reason alone but have to be purchased with their suffering. The appeal of reason is more to the head but the penetration of the heart comes from suffering. It opens up the inner understanding in man.<sup>26</sup>

Gandhi called his technique, "*Satyagraha*," which literally means a relentless search for truth and a determination to reach it.<sup>27</sup>

The world rests upon the bedrock of *Satya* or truth. *Asatya* meaning untruth also means non-existent, and *Satya* or truth also means that which is. If untruth does not so much as exist, its victory is out of the question. And truth being that which is

<sup>25</sup> *Harijan*, May 27, 1939, p. 136.

<sup>26</sup> *Young India*, November 5, 1931, p. 341.

<sup>27</sup> *Satya* = truth + *agraha* = determination to reach.

can never be destroyed. This is the doctrine of Satyagraha in a nutshell.<sup>28</sup>

*Satyagraha* stresses four basic ideas: a) it is essentially the use of soul force; b) the suffering of the *Satyagrahi* appeals to the heart and thus seeks to convert the wrongdoer; c) it excludes the use of physical force: because every human being partakes of the divine essence and, however degraded, is capable of responding to kind and generous treatment; and because man is not capable of knowing the absolute truth and is, therefore, not competent to punish; and d) means and end are convertible terms: "as the means, so the end." A good result can be produced only by good means. Truth can be realized only through nonviolence.

The principle of suffering to gain the sympathy and support of others for one's cause when ordinary political methods of reasoning and persuasion fail is thus the essence of *Satyagraha*.

The questions of interest to students of social theory that arise from this analysis are twofold: 1) why does Gandhi condemn the use of violence? and 2) how does suffering convert the wrongdoer or the opponent to the just path, even though reason fails?

Violence means causing pain to, or killing, any life out of anger, from a selfish purpose, or with the intention of injuring it. Within national frontiers it appears in such forms as riots, and individual murders; in the international arena its manifestation is war.

Gandhi adduces the following reasons for deprecating the use of physical force to overcome an opponent:

1) It does not decide whose cause is just. "The strong are often seen preying upon the weak. The wrongness of the latter's cause is not to be inferred from their defeat in a trial of brute strength, nor is the rightness of the strong to be inferred from their success in such a trial."<sup>29</sup>

2) The wielder of brute force does not scruple about the means to be used. He does not question the propriety of the means if he can somehow achieve his purpose. His behavior is immoral.<sup>30</sup>

3) It does not achieve a stable result. The believer in brute force becomes impatient and desires the death of the so-called

<sup>28</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, p. 285.

<sup>29</sup> *Speeches and Writings of M.K. Gandhi* (4th edition: Madras, 1933), pp. 417-20.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

enemy. There can be but one result of such an activity: hatred increases. The defeated party vows vengeance and bides his time for it.<sup>31</sup>

4) Physical force is wrongly considered to be used to protect the weak. As a matter of fact it still further weakens the weak insofar as it makes them dependent upon their so-called defenders or protectors.<sup>32</sup>

By contrast nonviolence means not injuring any living being whether in body or mind. The votary of nonviolence may not, therefore, hurt the person of any wrongdoer or bear any ill will to him and so cause him mental suffering. Nonviolence is not merely a negative state of harmlessness; it is also a positive state of love and of doing good even to the evildoer. Nonviolence in its dynamic condition also means conscious suffering on the part of the *Satyagrahi*, for in trying to resist an evil law or the evildoer he may have to undergo suffering in one or more ways: he may have to fast; he may be beaten or put in prison; his family may suffer deprivations of all sorts caused by his *Satyagraha*.

The nonviolent *Satyagrahi* derives his strength from soul force. Let it be remembered, Gandhi writes, that "strength does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will."<sup>33</sup> A truly nonviolent *Satyagrahi* never does anything out of fear from without; he should fear only God. He does not harbor ill will or hatred against his opponent. He will always be courteous. As he bids good-bye to fear, he is never tired of trusting the opponent. Since *Satyagraha* is one of the most powerful methods of direct action, a *Satyagrahi* exhausts all other means before he resorts to *Satyagraha*. He will, therefore, constantly and continually approach the constituted authority; he will appeal to public opinion, state his case clearly and calmly before everyone who wants to listen to him; and only after he has exhausted all these avenues will he resort to *Satyagraha*. He never misses a chance of compromise on honorable terms. He abjures the right of self-defense. He is truthful and pure in heart.

Provided these conditions are fulfilled, nonviolence, according to Gandhi, is infinitely superior to violence. It has the advantage over physical force in that soul force is a weapon that can be used

---

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Mahatma Gandhi, *Collected Works*, X, 129.

<sup>33</sup> *Young India*, August 11, 1920, p. 3.

independently of anyone else, and by one individual as effectively as by many.<sup>34</sup> *Satyagraha* is based on self-help, self-sacrifice, and faith in God — on the faith that all activity pursued with a pure heart is bound to bear fruit. It is Gandhi's faith that the self-sacrifice of one innocent man is a million times more potent than the sacrifice of a million men who die in the act of killing others.<sup>35</sup>

On the crucial question as to how suffering converts the wrongdoer, Gandhi answers:

I contemplate a mental and, therefore, a moral opposition to immoralities. I seek entirely to blunt the edge of the tyrant's sword not by putting up against it a sharper edged weapon, but by disappointing his expectation that I would be offering physical resistance. The resistance of the soul that I should offer instead would elude him. It would at first dazzle him and at last compel recognition from him which recognition would not humiliate him but would uplift him.<sup>36</sup>

The sense of justice in the wrongdoer is awakened; he also realizes that without the cooperation, direct or indirect, of the wronged, he cannot do the wrong he intends.<sup>37</sup> The soul force of the *Satyagrahi* thus succeeds in converting the wrongdoer to follow the right path as envisaged by the *Satyagrahi*.

### INFLUENCES ON GANDHI

In his *Autobiography* Gandhi noted his indebtedness to three Western books and essays: Ruskin's *Unto This Last*, Thoreau's "Duty of Civil Disobedience," and Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*. Ruskin's *Unto This Last* exercised a "magic spell" on him. "I discovered some of my deepest convictions reflected in this great book of Ruskin, and that is why it so captured me and made me transform my life."<sup>38</sup> From it he claimed to have learned two important principles:

That a lawyer's work has the same value as the barber's inasmuch as all have the same right of earning their livelihood from their work.

<sup>34</sup> Mahatma Gandhi, *Collected Works*, X, 129.

<sup>35</sup> *Young India*, February 12, 1925, p. 60.

<sup>36</sup> *Young India*, October 8, 1925, p. 346.

<sup>37</sup> *Harijan*, December 10, 1938, p. 369.

<sup>38</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography* (Ahmedabad, 1958), I, 99, 220-21.

That a life of labour, i.e., the life of the tiller of the soil and the handicraftsman, is the life worth living;<sup>39</sup>

indeed, the two latter are essential to the achievement of the welfare of all.

Thoreau's essay provided him with a scientific confirmation of "What I was doing in South Africa." He also approvingly attributed to Thoreau the dictum that the best government is that which governs least.

Gandhi was also a devoted admirer of Tolstoy. *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* "overwhelmed" him and left an abiding impression on him.

While the impact of Western thinkers on Gandhi is clear and unmistakable, the core of his political thinking must be traced to his study of Indian tradition. This is clear from Gandhi's own writings:<sup>40</sup>

I have therefore ventured to place before India the *ancient* law of self-sacrifice. For satyagraha and its offshoots, non-cooperation and civil resistance, are nothing but new names for the law of suffering. The Rishis ("saints"), who discovered the law of non-violence in the midst of violence, were greater geniuses than Newton. They were themselves greater warriors than Wellington. Having themselves known the use of arms, they realized their uselessness, and taught a weary world that its salvation lay not through violence but through non-violence.

The Jain tradition which stressed nonviolence, the *Bhagavad-gita*, the great Indian scripture, the Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the principles of Islam and Christianity all had their influence on his thinking. These, together with the impact of the Western writers referred to above, helped him to evolve a moral and spiritual outlook on life, tolerant, fearless, truthful and nonviolent.

### AN ASSESSMENT

Gandhi's contribution to social theory is acknowledged as the most profound in modern India; with General Smuts, we may say that the principle of suffering to move the sympathy and gain the support of others for the cause one has at heart — where

<sup>39</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, II, 106-08.

<sup>40</sup> *Young India*, August 11, 1920, p. 3; my italics.

ordinary political methods of reasoning and persuasion fail — is Gandhi's distinctive contribution to political method.

While Gandhi was aware of the great potentiality of *Satyagraha*, he was also aware that *Satyagraha* is a science in the making, and it needed great advances before it could be considered perfect. "I have no set theory to go by"; "I have not worked out the science of satyagraha in its entirety"<sup>41</sup> and "satyagraha, as conceived by me, is a science in the making."<sup>42</sup>

In considering whether conflicts, individual, intergroup, and international, can be resolved nonviolently through the power of truth, love, and suffering, two questions appear to me, as a student of Gandhi's ideas, in need of clarification.

*Can the Individual Conscience Always Be Trusted  
To Reach a Just Solution?*

First, let us recall the basis of *Satyagraha* as a method of resisting injustice. Brute force as a method of settling conflicts has been tried for centuries and is found wanting, primarily because such force does not necessarily defend the right, for might becomes right. As the means, so the end: the use of physical force to end a conflict will not, in the long run, end the conflict. Though temporarily the conflict may end, the hatred generated by the use of physical force is likely to create a spirit of vengeance, and the conflict will break out again as soon as the defeated party feels physically strong. In place of might soul force, because it does not depend for success on physical force and because the person who uses it is prepared to suffer for a just cause, is more likely to be on the side of justice. I say more likely because there is no absolute certainty that what the *Satyagrahi's* conscience tells him is necessarily right. His conscience may mislead him too. There is room for research here: how to ensure that the soul force, which is used to convert the wrongdoer, is used only for what can be morally considered as absolute justice. Gandhi was aware of this *lacuna* in his theory; his answer was that no man can claim that he is absolutely in the right or that a particular thing is wrong because he thinks so, but it is wrong for him so long as that is his deliberate judgment. It is therefore meet that he should not do that which he knows to be wrong and suffer the consequence

---

<sup>41</sup> *Harijan*, May 27, 1939, p. 136.

<sup>42</sup> *Harijan*, September 24, 1938, p. 266.

whatever it may be. Does this meet the demands of absolute justice?

In this connection mention may be made of the criticism which Srinivasa Sastri made about Gandhi's expressed willingness to fast unto death. On May 7, 1933, he wrote to Gandhi: "You have enough philosophy to understand that to claim divine sanction for a course of conduct is to withdraw it from the field of discussion and deprive it of direct validity to other minds." In short, research is needed to show how a course of action which appeals to the conscience of a *Satyagrahi* as being in the interest of social good — in preference to a law which is considered wrong — is also in the judgment of "other minds" equally so.

That the *Satyagrahi* is not always necessarily right may be argued from Gandhi's own writings and experience. Gandhi himself, the purest soul we have known for centuries, admitted to having committed Himalayan blunders. That apart, there are two poignant passages in his statements which are worth recalling in this connection.

The first was made in 1947:

Today he was getting news of *Satyagraha* being started in many places. Often he wondered whether the so-called *Satyagraha* was not really *duragraha*. Whether it was strikes in mills or railways or post-offices or movements in some of the States, it seemed as if it were a question of seizing power. A virulent poison was leavening society today and every opportunity for obtaining their object was seized by those who did not stop to consider that means and ends were convertible terms.<sup>43</sup>

In December of the same year Gandhi said: "My eyes have now been opened. I see that what we practised during the fight with the British under the name of non-violence, was not really non-violence."<sup>44</sup>

These passages substantiate the suggestion made earlier that some means must be found to make sure — as sure as human efforts can make it — that a course of action which appeals to the conscience of a *Satyagrahi* as being in the interest of social good, in preference to a law or custom which is considered wrong, is also in the judgment of other pure and conscientious minds equally so. An analogy may not be out of place here. Some of

<sup>43</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *Delhi Diary*, (Ahmedabad, 1948), p. 58.

<sup>44</sup> D.G. Tendulkar, *Mahatma*, VIII (Bombay, 1954), VIII, 280-81.

the most difficult questions of constitutional law which come before the Supreme Court are considered by a Full Bench — not by a single judge — as recognition of the fact that even one single impartial mind — which clearly a Supreme Court judge has — cannot be entrusted with the final decision on questions which have important social and political consequences.

*The Capacity of Human Nature to Develop  
Primary Virtues*

A second question which also needs clarification applies to the field of mass *Satyagraha*. Gandhi repeatedly stated — and this is the basis of mass *Satyagraha* — that every individual is potentially capable of understanding and practicing the primary human virtues of love, understanding the other man's point of view, *ahimsa* (nonviolence), and suffering in order to achieve the right. Further, Gandhi laid down certain conditions for the understanding of *Satyagraha* and evolved a system of training for the *Satyagrahi* so that the required qualities of truth and *ahimsa* could be developed in him. Moreover, in mass *Satyagraha*, it is not essential that every one should be all-perfect so long as he is disciplined and has learned to obey. Just as in a war, the commander, a perfect soldier, is obeyed by the rank and file, so too if the select leaders in a *Satyagraha* campaign were well trained, the men under them would carry out the orders. Nevertheless, criticism reveals two directions in which research in mass *Satyagraha* would be useful.

First, Gandhi's view of the potential capacity of every individual to develop the primary human virtues is correct — for the *nature* of a person is what he is capable of becoming, and not how he has developed at a particular time. Aristotle had stated centuries ago that man is by nature a social animal. But the difficult question which worries social reformers and political administrators is that at a particular time, the development of individuals is so different that the ultimate capacity of all to develop the virtues does not help them to solve present problems. The point is that while every man, as Gandhi said, is capable of understanding and practicing the primary human virtues, at a particular point of time most do not understand or practice them — and for one basic reason. It takes time and effort for an individual to grow. He has to grow, battling against the bad in him. As one writer put it:



Human character is not the fine flower of a beautiful sentiment but the hard won fruit of a painful and prolonged conquest. The making of individual character is spread over years, and that of nations over centuries. There is a law of friction in the moral world as in the physical. The character of men is not a uniform composition. At its best it is in the main a triumph of virtue over many venial faults — of temper, of knowledge, of vision.<sup>45</sup>

In this view, Gandhi's mistake is that he has tried to annihilate time, but time is of the very essence of progress whether of individuals or of nations.

Second, modern research in social psychology has brought out that a crowd develops certain traits — of fear, imitation, and insincerity — which no member of the crowd, as an individual in isolation, would think of developing. How can the qualities expected of the rank and file in a mass *Satyagraha* be developed in the context of these revelations?

*Satyagraha* apart, a word may be said about Gandhi's ideas on society and political and economic organization. His conception of "least government" is not universally applicable; in commending Thoreau's dictum he ignored the fact that Thoreau was writing in the mid-nineteenth century in the United States, when the problem was to increase the incentives whereby individual initiative would lead to the development of a virgin and sparsely populated land. But in an underdeveloped society — large, poor, diseased, illiterate — obviously the State will have to undertake many more functions than it has to accept in a developed society where there is no poverty, the standards of health and education are well advanced, and the people may be expected more and more to take care of themselves. Briefly, the idea of self-help is good in certain circumstances, not in all. The principle which will find general acceptance in relation to the functions of the State over and above the minimum function of protection is this: where the people can do the necessary things by themselves, the State should not interfere; but where the State alone can do them, there should be, *prima facie*, no objection to the State taking up those functions.

On the other hand, Gandhi's political and economic analysis, and especially his plea for limitation of wants, is in my judgment, well placed. It draws attention to the excesses in modern society:

<sup>45</sup> M. Ruthnaswamy, *The Political Philosophy of Mr. Gandhi*, (Madras, 1922), pp. 46-63.

the worship of mammon, the exaltation of the State over the individual, and economic inequalities among both individuals and nations. Gandhi's plea for developing the initiative of the people, as distinct from dependence on government for all social improvement, and for limitation of wants and his emphasis on the moral and spiritual nature of man provide a most desirable leavening influence in favor of an egalitarian as distinct from the acquisitive society of today. If his ideals of bread labor, limitation of wants, and least government are not acceptable as an extreme remedy to cure existing defects, that at least suggests to discerning minds the desirability of adopting what may be called the middle path in social and political organization. The acquisitive instinct must be curbed, economic inequalities must be reduced, and individual initiative must be encouraged. The principle of the mean is the safest one;<sup>46</sup> society is ill ordered not only when liberty and equality are extinct, but when the citizens carry them too far. The landlord of the "Rainbow" in *Silas Marner* had firmly grasped this truth when, after having listened to hundreds of political discussions, he framed his formula: "The truth lies atween you: you're both right and both wrong, as I alays say."

---

<sup>46</sup> See the author's essay on "Sarvodaya in Politics and Administration" in the *Journal of the Administrative Sciences*, Vol. XII, 88.