

Gandhi's altruistic individualism

By T. N. Madan

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ONE OF Gandhi's outstanding contributions to social and political thought, I suggest, was the conception of altruistic individualism within a cultural setting that was generally considered group-centred. A key idea of 19th century western scholarship about eastern cultures was that individualism was absent and communitarianism prevailed. While India and China respectively were characterised as societies based on caste and the family, and clan and the family, western society was said to be built around the individual. Individualism valorised the individual as an end in himself, free to pursue self-chosen goals and to cultivate judgments irrespective of their being in conformity or conflict with prevailing social opinion.

Not that individuals were absent as actors in eastern societies, but everywhere they were embedded in groups (family, clan, caste, community) to an extent that rendered them virtually invisible. Moreover, the group received precedence in the traditional social ideologies of these societies. When the individual did move to the centre of the stage, he did so rather theatrically as a rebel who rejected or transcended the prevailing social norms and cultural values. The best-known example was, of course, the Hindu sanyasi.

The antiquity of group-orientation in the east has been emphasised even in our own times contrastively with the west. It is ignored that in the Christian West too the individual was originally located outside society: it was only after the Reformation, which delegitimised the individual or institutional intermediaries between God and the seeker of salvation, that the individual came to be relocated inside society. Various developments within the secular domain, most notably the rise of capitalism (incorporating the notions of individually owned property and entrepreneurial profit) and liberal democracy, contributed to the making of a full-blown ideology of individualism.

In India too, following the encounter with the west, and particularly since the middle of the 19th century, the individual became salient. In the modernisation of India (some scholars prefer to call it westernisation), the amenability of tradition to forces of change has been well documented

by historians and sociologists. It has been a process of adaptation and juxtaposition rather than that of unqualified antagonism and displacement (of the old by the new). It is thus that some scholars have written about the modernisation of tradition or even the modernity of tradition. The thrust towards individualism of the western type originated in different arenas including those of modern occupations and professions and political activity, but it has been a steady movement rather than a clean sweep. The coexistence of traditional and modern idioms of politics is a good example of the juxtaposition mentioned above, and no one exemplified it better than Gandhi.

Contrary to what is sometimes said, Gandhi was neither an uncritical traditionalist nor a dogmatic opponent of all aspects of modernity. The way he drew upon tradition in formulating his worldview was creative and owed much to his exposure to western values and institutions. He consistently claimed to be a *sanatani* Hindu, but rejected the authority of even the scriptures on particular issues if tradition offended reason or morality. He wrote in 1921, "I do not believe in the exclusive divinity of the Vedas. I decline to be bound by any interpretation, however learned it may be, if it is repugnant to reason or moral sense" (collected works, 21, p 246).

The criteria of reason and moral sensibility are universal. They were available to Gandhi in his own tradition also. The Brahmanical tradition acknowledges four sources of dharma, namely, revelation (*shruti*), remembered tradition (*smriti*), the example of good people (*sadachar*) and 'self-validation' or conscience (*atma tushiti*). The last named notion is the same as Gandhi's 'moral sense'. He also called it the 'inner voice', and claimed that it often 'spoke' to him in times of crisis.

In regarding reason and moral sense as the primary sources of good

conduct, Gandhi asserted the right of the individual to arrive at judgments and, if necessary, to defend them against collective opinion, whether traditional or contemporary. His exhortation of the practice of untouchability was not merely an assertion of his own individual right to make moral judgments — indeed he considered this an obligation — but more importantly the assertion of the moral worth of every single human being, irrespective of his or her ascribed social status. Such moral worth is the basic premise of good society; whether it is enhanced or eroded depends on the dialectic of social pressures and individual agency.

The conflict between individual moral judgment and group (*kula, jati*) dharma is old and abiding: it is one of the principal themes of the Mahabharata. Yudhishtira, the embodiment of moral righteousness in the epic, places absolute moral values above group-specific norms and questions the morality of the dharma of his own Kshatriya *varna*. Victory in the war is more like defeat in his eyes because it involved many moral transgressions. Some scholars consider Yudhishtira Gandhi's exemplar.

The conflict between individual and group judgments is not resolved in the Mahabharata or in the Bhagwad Gita, a text Gandhi called his 'mother', by which, one presumes, he meant the source of his moral sensibility. In the climactic 18th chapter, this text asserts (verse 63) that even in the light of revealed knowledge, the moral agent has the inescapable responsibility of pondering the same and making choices for action according to his or her own best judgment. But almost immediately the idea of surrender to God is introduced (verse 66), more perhaps to stress the possibility of human error than to invalidate the obligation to evaluate the available options and choose from among them.

As a guide to action the foregoing might seem cryptic. Gandhi elaborated what he derived from various sources (Jainism, Hinduism, Christianity) by emphasising the criterion of compassion and glossing social action as selfless service (*seva*), particularly of the needy and the oppressed. Gandhi's position may be called moral or altruistic (other-oriented) individualism as against amoral or utilitarian (self-oriented) individualism. In his worldview, the actor as a self-conscious choice-making individual is the foundation of a moral civil society. He is wedded to truth and non-violence: he is the satyagrahi. It may be recalled that Gandhi chose particular individuals to initiate collective movements (himself at the commencement of the 1930 salt satyagraha, Vinoba Bhave in 1940) and held every participant individually responsible for adherence to the principles of satyagraha (self-purification, personal courage, selflessness, etc.), which were as important as the collective goals (social, economic or political).

In the context of satyagraha as spiritual advancement (or moral refinement), which Gandhi considered intensely personal, the actor's psychological disposition was regarded as more crucial than his social persona. It followed that any external pressure that might erode one's autonomy had to be resisted. Whatever diminished one's capacity to act responsibly — whether caste prejudice, colonial domination or technological encroachment — was to be considered evil. Gandhi's individualism was not anti-social, but the community was not to be allowed to diminish the individual's autonomy.

Self-aware and responsible individuals with a capacity for altruism are, in Gandhi's thinking, the basic constituents of good society everywhere. The enemy of the autonomous individual and therefore of good society is the unbridled power of the state, the economy and the inward-looking social groups; hence, the need to assert the power of the individual against them without the use of force. Autonomy, it may be clarified, is not hostile to collective action through the voluntary association of individuals.

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WHERE IS GANDHI TODAY?

Violent Counter-Terrorism Is Itself Terrorism

By RK DASGUPTA

Perhaps Mahatma Gandhi's ideas are more important today than they were during the two world wars or during our struggle for freedom. Gandhi lived and died in a world that was ready to appreciate the ideal of non-violence although it failed to practise it. But today the world has made a cult of violence and have made it an instrument for the world's salvation. The Indian National Congress which Gandhi led for about 30 years has now no interest in Gandhi when its leaders, if they can be called leaders, are rolling in violence.

'Jhuta' freedom

We can say this because towering political ambition is a form of violence. In this city of Kolkata ruled by a Marxist party Gandhi can have no presence because Marx believed in violent revolution for a socialist world. If the Marxist party is now taking the path of peaceful parliamentary politics it is because it values political power and despairs of organising an armed revolution. But its faith in violence reappears intermittently in its feuds with other parties. And let us not forget that our communists called our freedom, achieved through Gandhi's non-violent struggle, 'jhuta' (false) freedom.

Even otherwise Bengalis have a measure of antipathy towards Gandhi because of his differences with Subhas Bose. We forget that it was Subhas Bose who was the first to call Gandhi the Father of the Nation. And what is Gandhi's standing in the capital of the republic? There our Union government is led by people whose ideas are a negation of the ideas of Gandhi. And the main constituent of the bizarre coalition, the Bharatiya Janata Party, is a child of the RSS, one of the adherents of which killed Gandhi on 30 January 1948.

What about the standing of Mahatma Gandhi in the world? He has certainly a strong presence in the intellectual world of the West. Gandhi made an appeal to the British mind and I say this even remembering that Winston Churchill slighted him as a "half-naked fakir". Let us not forget that the very first biographer of Gandhi was a British missionary, Joseph J Doke, whose *Gandhi: A Patriot in South Africa* appeared in 1909 with a foreword by another Englishman, Lord Ampthill, who recommends the book "to all who are willing to

take my word that it is worth reading". A British churchman and a member of the British House of Lords came together to present Gandhi to the world as a sage in politics. It is again a British scholar, GDH Cole, who said that Gandhi "stands as a great example of spiritual strength which should help to guide us — as well as his own people — in the difficult years that lie ahead".

will be gone. We can imagine what Gandhi would have told the world about the world's war on terrorism. He would have said, gently but firmly, that violent counter-terrorism is itself a terrorism. And that would mean a total rejection of Gandhi and he has actually been rejected by the Anglo-American coalition against terrorism. And that coalition has as its trusted ally a military dictator who has throttled



Gandhi was in the heart of the American people till yesterday. This America is the country of Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman, and not the America of the White House and the Pentagon. It was an American journalist, Edgar P Snow, who said that "once Gandhi had achieved national independence he began to throw the weight of his whole personality on the side of the progressive thesis of international reform and regeneration". But Gandhi had in front of him not even six months to do this work. But did the Congress he led give its mind to this work of reform and regeneration? And who in the world politics today would think of international reform and regeneration?

Political theory

Gandhi was adored by the world's humanity and he is still adored by the higher intelligence of the West. But no politician would look at him even casually. The political world today can have only a horror of Gandhi and his doctrine of non-violence. For if for a moment an American or British politician reflects on the essence of Gandhism he would feel that if it is to be taken seriously his occupation

democracy in his country and has been now creating problems for the world's largest democracy. The voice of those who still value Gandhi and his ideal of non-violence is drowned in the hideous noise produced by the armed men who are determined to end terrorism. Gandhi is dismissed as a saint who had no understanding of politics. But it is again an American scholar who has written one whole book to establish that Gandhi's ideals have a strong foundation in a sound political theory. I have in mind *Gandhi: Struggling for Autonomy* by Ronald J Terchek, Professor of Government and Politics at the University of Maryland. Published by Rowman and Littlefield in 1998 it is now available in an Indian edition issued by Vistar Publications, New Delhi published in 2000. I am happy to see that this distinguished American political scientist has expressed his indebtedness to three works on Gandhi — Buddhadev Bhattacharjee's *Evolution of the Political Philosophy of Gandhi* (1969), Margaret Chatterjee's *Gandhi's Religious Thought* (1983) and Raghavan Iyer's *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*. At the base of this new thought on Mahatma Gandhi I find is a

perspective of Gandhi presented in the work of a German existentialist philosopher, Karl Jasper (1883-1969), whose work *The Future of Mankind* (1958, Eng tr, EB Ashton, 1961) has a particularly enlightening observation on Gandhi's moral politics. In this work the German philosopher says: "Only once has non-violence had supra-political roots and succeeded. Gandhi, this extraordinary figure of our time, baffles us; his life and actions show the self-sacrificing valour that counts in dealing with force — not only if it is mixed with force, as usual, but precisely if nonviolence is attempted... Gandhi developed the theory of his action. He based his politics on religious, supra-political grounds, on the inner activity of satyagraha, the firm adherence to existence and truth."

Universal violence

While we consider Romain Rolland's book *Gandhi* (Eng tr Catherine D Groth, 1924) as one of the most significant studies of Gandhi we often think if Germany is not the country, which amongst the countries of Europe, has a true understanding of the spiritual and moral personality of Mahatma Gandhi. There is a collection of essays on German responses to Gandhi edited by Dr Heimo Ray and published by the Max Muller Bhavan, New Delhi which opens with an essay by the great German physicist Heisenberg who says that Gandhi's non-violence is the only solution to the problems of the modern world. And when we read these essays we remember Albert Einstein's words — "Generations to come, it may be, will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth." Today the question is - is there any person or group of persons who can persuade the present Anglo-American coalition to realise that terror cannot be an answer to terror and that if we do not understand it the world will face a universal violence from which none of us can have any escape. Gandhi said in 1926 that "war will only be stopped when the conscience of mankind has become sufficiently elevated to recognise the undisputed supremacy of the Law of Love in all the walks of life". Rabindranath stressed this idea of love in Gandhi's non-violence when he said: "He advises his followers to hate evil without hating the evil-doer." The war on terrorism that has started is rooted in hatred and this can only generate universal hatred bringing universal doom.

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