

5. ABSTRACT AND CONCRETE

I will talk to you today of certain very topical questions in a fundamental way. I will try to put them in the setting of fundamental theory, and I would like you to understand the mental process that lie underneath those questions. The use of the mind is both simple and extraordinarily difficult. For instance, the attendance at this conference may be looked at two ways. The attendance is thin. One way of looking at it may be to ascribe the thin attendance to the ban imposed by the Praja Socialist Executive. The other way, and I think a more correct one, would be to ask if it is any thinner than at the Youth Conference of Banaras or at the General Council meeting of Indore. The answer would be no, and it would then lead us to the real cause of thin attendance at conferences, and that is lack of money. Even lack of money is ultimately and at least partly due to lack of interest. This illustrates how the mind slides easily into accepting erroneous notions.

I will take you back to a resolution that you passed at the Banaras Conference. It related to the setting up of youth centres as models that the youth could imitate in a massive way. They were to be rallying points of all kinds of activities, play, sport, constructive work, instruction, and resistance to injustice. The minimum target fixed was one such centre in each State. Now that has not happened. No purpose would be served in trying to dismiss it by bringing in one difficulty or another. Lack of money or of enthusiasm or of effort are all reasons for not doing it, but none of them can be called the basic reason. Each one of these reasons has in its own turn to be accounted for, and then a chain of question about the real reason starts. The important fact, however, remains that nothing whatever was done to achieve the end in almost two

years in fact, the idea of youth centres existed in the mind a very vague way, and there was no concrete picture of such a youth centre. Had a concrete picture of the centre been formed, it would have been possible to exert towards at least a partial realization of the picture. In the same way, in spite of a general adherence to the Allahabad policy, there is a tendency to reject its concrete applications.

This has been shown not only in regard to issues of discipline but also of police firing. The arguments advanced are similar. Persons who voted for unspecified police firing also declared fervid acceptance of the Allahabad policy. It is conveniently forgotten that the policy statement has called for pursuit of peaceful methods, transfer of police control to district and local panchayats, and recognition of human worth. Are peaceful methods to be pursued only while a party is in opposition and are they to be discarded when the party becomes the Government? Even assuming that reverence for life and pursuit of peaceful methods are not concrete enough directives, district and local control of the police is an unmistakably concrete proposition, and a mind that genuinely accepts it will abhor all police firing except in the event of killing or armed insurrection. To state that the policy statement did not categorically lay down any policy on police firing is like saying that it did not lay down a categorical policy regarding bribery or thieving. Such an argument betrays a fraudulent mind if it has carefully grasped the policy principle of decentralization and does not care to note that the principle has been concretized into local control over the police. The consequences are alike in either case.

In a similar manner, disciplinary action is being taken against serious adherents of the Allahabad policy on behalf of and in the name precisely of that policy. The mind professes to accept a policy but refuses to draw practical conclusions from it.

Before going into these errors I would like you to bear in mind that I am not referring to the common failing of

difference between precept and practice. Always, the ideal suffers somewhat during its translation into practice. As long as a man lives in his body, there shall be a margin between the precept and its practice, as allowance has to be made for human nature. Emotions like greed, selfishness, anger, and the like influence our thinking action and give rise to what may be termed, “errors of emotions” or fault of character. However, the difficulties that crop into achievement of the ideal are not merely due to these errors of emotions. There is another type of error that arises from that incapacity to discern the fulfilment of a general principle in a particular practical application or to find solutions for concrete issue consistent with the general principles. While man is keenly aware of errors due to emotions, he is not aware of such errors of understanding. He, on the contrary, believes that he is doing something righteous and good and instead of being painfully aware of error, gloats over it.

A fault of character is wholly different from fault of understanding. When character is just about going wrong and has not yet formed into habit, there is always the possibility of remorse and repentance. An emotion of greed or envy, after it has polluted an act, may well bring on repentance in its train, and the person improves. But a faulty understanding knows no mode of correction beyond itself. It is indeed true that errors of emotion may become so frequent as to form into a habit and a character so that the light issuing from understanding becomes increasingly feeble. In such a case, the cure to a bad habit must come from within the realm of habits themselves, although understanding never ceases to be an aid, and a necessary aid. But insincerity, bribe-taking, arrogant or degrading ambition, and the like, however reprehensible, are not so disastrous to public life and private conduct as a faulty understanding. A fault of understanding knows no remorse. It just keeps on rolling. It may even exult in itself until disaster overtakes it. This is not to say that effort to remove a fault of character is any less necessary than that to remove a fault of

understanding; this is only a plea to consider folly or stupidity just as great an enemy of man as insincerity or greed. The religious type, however, is depravedly interested in motive, and will almost pardon a crime if no bad motives went with it. But who can tell of motives, for to delve into the human heart may be at one end like diving into a fathomless sea and at another running after a mirage? The science of motivology is either spurious or impossibly difficult to practice. Therefore, knowledge should concern itself more with faults of understanding. Without a doubt, bad habits must be weeded out and character should improve. Even in this, the discerning light of understanding is of the utmost importance, and in any case, faults of character and of knowledge must be considered separately for purposes of analysis. Why is it that such errors of understanding can creep into the human mind and it is bedevilled but feels that it is right?

I will refer you to some very prevalent beliefs, particularly amongst socialists. Some of them pertain to the unity between theory and practice. What does this unity mean? It has come to mean something to do with our ideas about the ideal and the actual as two separate identities, but we sometimes see our ideal in the actual like children for whom the mother or the father is the ideal. The ideal and the actual then tend to coalesce in some embodiment. This fallacy of idealization of the actual often creeps into man's thought. Social philosophies also err in it. Hegelians, Marxists, capitalists, and Gandhians are all vitiated by this method of understanding. The European mind has sought to place progress in historical events as they unfold themselves. Society is progressing continually. Philosophies of continual progress err in seeing the ultimate picture in the existing present. I would like you to understand the Communist mind. It is not sold to something outside itself. It is like our own. There was in Mahatma Gandhi such an embodiment of the ideal.

Conditions must be studied before they can be improved upon. There is often no effort in the human mind to

investigate the real conditions but a frequent attempt to advise, exhort, and give moral precepts. One should never identify what is with what ought to be. This effort at identifying the ideal with the actual continues till death, and love is mainly responsible for it, but it always results in the loss of the capacity to investigate and understand. To the Communist, Russia is the manifestation of current progress and his unquestioned ideal. Similarly, capitalists idealize progress in America. Thus the use of critical faculties to see, to examine, and to understand degenerates into idealizing a thing when seen in relation to something one likes or abusing it when seen in relation to something one dislikes. Under such a fallacy, the human mind either justifies or attacks but ceases to understand. In this respect, people who accept nonviolence are no different. They too merely accept an ideal but do not understand it. The ideal is accepted in speech but not the critical faculties. After Mahatma Gandhi no man has made the attempt to accept an ideal through the mind. You should be amply warned against trying to justify or attack. You should seek to understand.

In essentials, the Gandhian and the Communist have the same mind. Mahatma Gandhi, of course, was different, although there might have been some evil in him too. For instance, he sought to trace the Bihar earthquake to the untouchability prevalent in India. He was no doubt doing so for the high aim of banishing untouchability but at the same time was violating the human mind. I could not perceive it at that time, for the noble aim justified the act for me. But in order to achieve a great aim he was violating his own principle of ends and means. The situation is similar with socialism. There is no attempt to understand things. Those, who have adopted a viewpoint similar to that of the Praja Socialist Executive have lost their faculty of criticism and understanding.

This leads us to ask why such an identification comes about. I will not touch the psychological and historical reasons.

I will place before you a reason that has yet found no place in the analysis of the problem.

The ideal appears in the human mind in two shapes. One is abstract and the other concrete. An abstract ideal has a concrete shape although it remains an ideal still. Sometimes it happens that a general idea fails to get a concrete shape, and then it becomes meaningless. In order to convey a meaning an idea has to have both its forms, the abstract and the concrete. The abstract ideal relates to general desires. Democracy, justice, equality, and the ending of exploitation by man of man are such general ideals. They have powerfully motivated human minds. They are purely abstract and eternal, although the content of these abstractions has been changing from time to time. Thus the equality of the French revolution had a meaning different from what it has today. Thus to the protagonists of these ideals they must have concrete shape, although the shapes may differ from time to time and from place to place. It is only when the ideal appears in a concrete shape that it can influence human action. During the French and Russian revolutions it was not the general ideal but its concrete contents, which of course have changed since then, that brought about the action. Thus the ideal in its abstract form motivates thought and its concrete form motivates action. The one cannot live without the other and, if it does it stinks. In order to link the general ideal to the current reality, it must have a concrete image. The abstract must first be translated into the concrete in order to be standard for measuring the current reality.

Equality, for instance, is a highly generalized and abstract principle, timeless and ageless, eternally and universally true. It is, as a category of thought, like that other principle of deliverance and Nirvana, the most highly generalized principle of *Advaita* or the undifferentiated Absolute, also eternally and universally true. Both equality and *Advaita* can be so highly explosive as to change the life of a man or the course of society, but they can also be reduced to mere manners of speech, the

meaningless prattle of such children as will never grow up. In order that such generalized principles may become relevant to life and action, they must always appear in a concrete shape to the meditator. The shape changes with time and space. It should. For the danger exists that the particular and the concrete may freeze. A frozen particular easily slides into status quo first and reaction afterwards. All movement, particularly of the mind, ceases completely. The laws of Manu and Yajnavalkya must at one time have given life and concrete meaning to the generalized principles to which they corresponded: but they later froze and, in themselves becoming the generalized principles, they stopped all movement of thought and society. In similar manner, equality appears today in the highly relevant form of income margin of one to ten, but, should it freeze there, all movement would stop. It may well be possible to reach the concept of one to five some decades later. Even there gainful tensions may succeed in achieving in still more egalitarian equilibrium. A frozen particular, however, is no more dangerous than a slushy general. I am amazed how some men are like swine and can wallow in the slush and muck of generalized principles and make no attempt to drive the stakes and signpost of concrete particulars into it in order to create firm ground. India seems at the moment to be passing through such a phase in her thought. She wallows in the slush of the generalized principles of socialism, equality, nonviolence, decentralization, and democracy. The Indian mind is making little effort to think out such concrete particulars as would turn this slush of generalized principles into firm ground. Generalized principles have thus become mere manners of speech. To wallow in this slush of generalized principles like swine is to be gentle and tolerant and wise. Saintliness and dirt of unconscious hypocrisy at one end and blubbering imbecility at the other have become synonymous virtues. The beatific smile on the faces of such saints and swine is similar to, I believe, readiness with which their bleary eyes water. To end this cheating or

senility, the Indian mind must in every single instance learn to trace back and forth a statement to its more generalized principle at one end and its more concrete form at other. The consistent interplay of the particular and the general must become a habit of the mind.

The absence of concrete images is primarily responsible for the ideological crisis in our politics. We have been permanently told that there are no ideological differences between Congressmen and Socialists. This seems to be true if we consider the highly abstract ideal alone, and the reasoning can even be extended to prove that there are no ideological differences between us and many other parties, for who does not subscribe to the abstract ideals of democracy, equality, justice, and the like? Only when the concrete meaning that we put into these generalized concepts is brought to the fore do differences reveal themselves.

While asserting the absence of ideological differences, it is said that difference lies in sincerity, honesty in the practice of these ideals. This argument can be bodily transferred to inner party crisis in the PSP. Although there may be difference in the evaluation of human life and some may equate it with the fly, ideological differences are still denied. This is strange. We differ on such fundamental issues, and yet ideological unanimity is asserted. Similarly, fifteen years back, ideological differences between Socialists and Communists were denied, and it was asserted that there was a difference of method and practice alone. Such assertions are born out of minds that are occupied only with general abstract principles. Whenever a set of persons professes adherence to those purely abstract principles, all ideological difference are said to cease.

To a person who truly accept a principle, there is always a concrete image of that abstract principle. Only parasites can do without such an image.

Going back to the Allahabad policy, there are two types of thought that profess to accept it. One type is that which wants to apply it to any problem that arises and find a consistent

solution for it. The other type accepts it and also qualifies that necessary changes will be introduced. They should have attacked it boldly. Six months back, to a certain extent, they used to attack it, but tactical considerations have now made them mouth acceptance of the policy and at the same time turn out its real adherents on engineered grounds. The British Labour Party is experiencing a similar phenomenon. The official leadership there adopts the foreign policy outlined by the minority group but excludes the minority from positions of power in the party.

Of late there has sprung a third group in the Praja Socialist Party. This group accepts the policy statement but refuses to draw conclusions from it. It claims to be above groups and thinks in terms of mediation between two groups and avoiding a split. It does nothing of its own. Its function is to adjust and to live upon the differences of others. They have as yet not disclosed any new line of action or thought. In the absence of an independent line, this position can at best be compared to that of a broker. A broker does not produce anything but merely brings into contact other producers. Similarly, the PSP has brokers who find it necessary to mediate between the cooperationists and the militants. In the absence of any characteristic thought or action they are parasites wanting to continue their meaningless existence.

At times, there were controversies in the Congress Party during the pre-independence period. There were the Swarajists and the no-changers. A tussle arose between those who stood for complete independence and those who would be satisfied by dominion status as a first step. During those controversies also there was third group, but it was different from the one in the PSP today. Even the middle group acted in those days, although with caution. It stood for radicalism in speech and action but wanted prudence and wisdom, sometimes a little too much of it, to be exercised before acting. There was no attempt to cover up conservatism by radical phrases. In those days radicalism in speech was joined up with

conservatism in action in order to mature the national forces. Thus, for instance, although the middle forces of the Congress Party in 1928 could be accused of betraying Subhas Chandra Bose in his unequivocal stand for complete independence, they could with some justice claim total victory a year later.

Moderation now in order to achieve the total aim soon after and yet to keep together is something vastly different from congenital sterility of conservative action and radical speech as matter of habit and opportunism.

There is no attempt on the part of the middle group in the PSP to bring about such a combination. They complain that we do not raise general issues on which they can support us but that we find particular issues on which they cannot go with us. In the present controversy, they are accusing us of making a foolish issue out of discipline. The activities of this group are completely sterile, and their interpretation of discipline accords with what should not be done and as they do nothing whatever, they consider themselves to be great disciplinarians. Discipline does not concern itself merely with what should not be done but more with what should be done. However, by doing nothing at all, in the PSP you can achieve discipline. The basic questions in this connection are never asked. What do we do to encourage and further the Socialist movement? What have we done that has harmed the Socialist movement, and what is it that we should not do in the future? The sterile group in the PSP has formed a definition of discipline consistent with its own position of do-nothing. We on the other hand, will have to apply discipline in order to find satisfactory answers to these basic questions.

The gap between precept and practice will never altogether disappear so long as the agency to realize the precept is human. Let us therefore not think so much about the errors of behaviour due to emotions, but let us investigate fully the errors that creep into the understanding of a situation. The European mind has tried to deny this gap between scaffolding. But the Indian mind is different. In the process of explaining

the gap between precept and practice it has achieved a complete divorce of the ideal from the actual. Shankaracharya truly represents the Indian mind. In a stupendous sweep of the mind, he differentiated between worldly truth and absolute truth, and thus made it possible for the human mind not only to distinguish a stone from a man but also of one caste from a man of another caste, and yet to believe in the Advaita, the undifferentiated absolute. He endowed the Indian mind with the capacity of divorcing the actual from the ideal and of doing almost any thing in the name of the ideal.

The correspondences between the generalized abstract and the concrete specific is of the utmost importance. High principle wrenched away from the soil from a habitat of their own, and without their concrete image we start living in an ethereal world of generalized concepts. This is what makes it possible for Communists to strut as upholders of democracy. Equality is a generalized concept, universally valid. It must acquire a definite content before being practised. Socialism has tried to put a meaning into it by way of income ceilings, restricted land holdings, and the like. Socialists should seek to achieve equality by achieving the specific and definite concept that they have about equality. In order to achieve the general, we have to start with the particular. The general concept may be eternal but it will have a varying particular from age to age. Without the particular the general becomes a fraud, while the particular also without the general may end in rigidity. The concrete images by themselves may not be sufficient, for at the back of them is always the general concept, but they are necessary. Thus an interplay between the general and the particular must go on.

The European mind has achieved an identification of the ideal with the actual, while the Indian mind has achieved a total divorce of the ideal from the actual. Herein lies the crisis of the human mind today.

By denying the gap between the abstract and the concrete and by espousing in one crude form or another theories of

progress, the European mind can only justify or condemn and has lost its capacity to understand. By raising this gap to a high principle and roaming into the rarefied atmosphere of the idea to the utter exclusion of blood and flesh realities the Indian mind has become a bog into which everything sink and a kind of boneless, meaningless synthesis passes for understanding. A primary work of young Socialists in India is to put an end to this sorry mental condition. They should unfold such a vigorous and widespread mental activity all over the land that the division of the Indian mind into an abstract and a concrete compartment ends. At present, these two compartments are almost visibly there. When the abstract compartment opens up for purposes of thought and action, the concrete compartment closes up completely and *vice versa*. The distinction between these two aspects of an idea should of course always be there but the passage between the two compartments of the mind must always be open and unclotted. Thought must freely travel between the abstract and concrete compartments of the mind whenever an idea is contemplated. The five generalized principles of equality, nonviolence, decentralization, democracy, and socialism, which have become the seemingly supreme aims of political endeavour in India, must be continually subject to this treatment of free interplay between the general and the particular. Abstract equality, for instance, must continually be brought into relationship with concrete equality, and other generalization must be treated similarly. Otherwise, the tongue will continually spin the charkha and hands will as continually set up textile machines. The tongue will sing of nonviolence and equality, and hand will practice inequality and use the gun. The tongue will praise decentralization, and concentration of power both in vast secretariats, and in mass production factories will go on. The present gap between the tongue and hands, the most characteristic simple feature of Indian life today, is not all due to dishonesty, greed, or selfishness. The larger part of it is due to error of

understanding. The Indian mind has become a storehouse both of mass production industrialization, which appears to abolish poverty, and the spinning wheel, of nonviolence as the greatest good in man's life and of the rifle as a necessary link between government and order, of decentralization as artistic luxury and a manner of speech and of power concentration in the shape of cheap mass-producing factories or smooth-running octopus-secretariats. This is principally due to error of understanding and not so much to fault of character. Young Socialists must set before themselves the task of removing this error of understanding. They should take up each principle in both its general particular aspects and let the mind engage in a constant interplay between the abstract and general and the concrete and particular of every idea. Abstract equality and concrete quality, abstract socialism and concrete socialism, abstract decentralization and concrete decentralization, and the link must continually interplay in the mind. That can happen only if young Socialists are continually aware of this problem in their talk and in their thought, wherever they are, by themselves or in their study centres, debating societies, and other centres. One point must be noted in this relationship. The abstract must be clothed in such a way as corresponds to the age and the clime. The concrete and the particular should never be so thought out as to be basically similar to the status quo. This will only mean the Indian mind is today utterly revolutionary in statements of highly generalized principles and utterly stationary in respect of concrete realities, and it may well be that such total freedom in thought is at least partly due to the equally total bondage to traditional action. By trying to state the concrete in terms of existing realities, the current situation will be reproduced minus its philosophy. In similar manner, the concrete should not be so stated as to be an extreme and complete form of the general and therefore to lose contact with realities. It must be relevant to the time and the area. It must try to approximate the general to the maximum possible extent but always in such fashion that it

appears possible and reasonable. For instance, any concretization of the general principle of equality that went beyond the ratio of one to ten at the present time would perhaps lose touch with realities, and similarly if it fell short of that ratio, it might only mean the acceptance of the status quo. Any concretization of governmental nonviolence that did not permit shooting in the event of armed insurrection or killing would lose touch with realities. In the same manner it would amount to an acceptance of the status quo if it permitted shooting against every kind of disorder. The concrete must approximate to the general to the fullest possible extent, but always in a relevant and effective way. Young Socialists must pledge themselves to the achievement of this mental revolution wherever they live.

Youth centres must similarly be thought out in both aspects of the general and the particular. A centre for youth should want to be a nucleus for instruction, recreation, intellectual liveliness, and constructive work. Each of these activities is linked up with a corresponding general idea. Thus instruction in good living habits will contribute to the development of awareness. Such simple things as the chewing of food, consideration for others while in company, may, as such, seem to be quite irrelevant to social revolution, but not so their corresponding general principle of awareness.

Similarly, recreations such as sports, swimming, and the like are the concrete manifestations of such general ideas as solidarity, discipline, and social cohesiveness on the one end, and caste abolition on the other. Intellectual liveliness, such as discussions on topical subjects, reading, study, and debate serves to train the mind in disciplined and ordered functioning and also create a sense of mental unrest until ideas and their concrete images are achieved and fulfilled. A powerful incentive to achievement is thus imparted. The value of constructive activity lies not merely in that it develops such qualities as self-help and collective endeavour but also in that it stimulates the desire and strength to resist injustice. The

mind that is able to sweep the dirt and dung-heaps from the village street and fill compost pits can alone revolt against injustices of police, landlords, and rowdies and effectively resist them.

The formation of youth centres should not be delayed now. Socialist municipalities, wherever they exist, should, no doubt, help such youth centres, but young Socialists must on their own make a determined effort towards the fulfilment of this resolve. Difficulties of money and resources will, of course, remain, and it may not be possible to realize the youth centre in its entirety all at once. It may not be possible for the youth centre to have a building of its own in the beginning, but it should not in any way affect those activities of the centre that may be carried out without a building. Then as next step, a small rented building may house the centre, and as the activities of the centre grow, they will themselves bring the resources for expansion. The complete picture of the centre should be in the mind, and a beginning, however small, should immediately be made towards the partial realization of that picture. Bit by bit, perseverance, and determination will no doubt complete the picture some day.

[Speech; Puri, 1955]