

## Rereading Gandhi

The contemporary crisis in public ethics proves the ineffectuality of purely formal democracy and explains the failure of democracy in this period of economic booms that nourish anti-democratic sentiments. It is in the search for the ethical foundations of democracy that we will be forced to rediscover the relevance of Gandhi.

WHILE an orchestrated effort is going on in India today to either reduce Gandhi to the nation's janitor by making him the icon of the Clean India campaign or to replace his image with that of his assassin, the world is turning more and more towards his ideas and examples of non-violent resistance and sustainable development. Most of the recent resistance struggles in the world—like the pro-democracy demonstrations in West Africa and West Asia and others like Occupy Wall Street, the standing demonstrations of the workers at Maruti Udyog, of the tribal people for land and of environmentalists for the implementation of the Gadgil Report on the Western Ghats in Kerala and the Kiss of Love demonstrations against moral policing that began in Kerala and spread all over India —have been inspired by his ideas of the bio-politics of the spontaneous “multitude”, to borrow Antonio Negri's terms, united in love to resist the unnatural exercise of power from above or to transform their own condition as victims and take charge of their own destiny.

The last decade alone has seen a spate of studies on Gandhi by both Indian and Western scholars from a variety of perspectives. Ashis Nandy's innovative work had in the past helped save Gandhi from hagiographers as well as iconoclasts and restore to his thought its true significance. Irfan Habib's essays that look at him from the vantage point of modernity have also helped the Left rethink its earlier, often negative and reductive, evaluations of Gandhi only as a champion of “bourgeois nationalism”. His ideas of active non-violence, civil disobedience, the relationship between ethics and politics, secular religiosity, decentralisation and development from below have found a revival, thanks to the efforts of several scholars from different disciplines ranging from politics to philosophy. The late D.R. Nagaraj' attempts not to see Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar as eternal opponents like the Vasudeva and the Prati-Vasudeva of Jain mythology have found critical recognition in contemporary Dalit thinkers like Gopal Guru who understand the complexity of his ideas and strategies in their context and refuse to reduce him to an anti-Dalit thinker as some Ambedkar enthusiasts seem eager to do.

### **Ethics and politics**

One recent collection of such new studies on Gandhi by Indian and foreign scholars is worth mentioning here: *Between Ethics and Politics: Gandhi Today* edited by Eva Pfostl of the Institute of Political Study in Rome (Routledge, 2014). The anthology carries six essays by Italian and Indian scholars on different aspects of Gandhian thought. Akeel Bilgrami's brief foreword to the volume sums up its significance, dwelling briefly on all the essays including those that deal with Gandhi's political relations with Rabindranath Tagore, Jawaharlal Nehru and Ambedkar. The editor points out that the volume has two dimensions: the book revisits key Gandhian concepts through interdisciplinary research by foregrounding their relevance to contemporary struggles, looking at ways of reconciling the different orientations of ethics and politics. It also carries a new interpretation of Gandhi's turbulent and complicated relationships with his great contemporaries. She points out how we have peacefully accepted the separation of ethics and politics as a fact of life by maintaining that morality concerns the private realm while politics belongs to the public sphere and assigning charity, helping the poor and fighting hunger to morality and justice, paying taxes and building international institutions to politics. But in reality it is impossible to build an authentically democratic system in politics without a substantial ethical background. Procedural democracy without an ethical content is not a neutral structure, and the contemporary crisis in public ethics proves the ineffectuality of purely formal democracy and also explains the failure of democracy across the world in this period of economic booms that nourish anti-democratic sentiments. It is in the search for the ethical foundations of democracy that we will be forced to rediscover the relevance of Gandhi.

Ugo Caruso in his opening essay, "The Struggle of Right against Might: An Introduction to the Figure of Mahatma Gandhi", traces the various phases of the evolution of Gandhian resistance from his early lessons in South Africa in the three satyagraha campaigns, hartal against the repercussions of the Rowlatt Act, the Non-Cooperation and Swadeshi movements and the Salt March to the fast against untouchability, the Quit India Movement, Noakhali and martyrdom, revealing in the process the inevitable connection between his values and methods. Guiliano Pontara in "Reflections on Gandhi: Between Ethics and Politics" points out how Gandhi's power was not founded on a basis of violence and fraud but was a result of his personality, his charisma and, ultimately, his willingness to sacrifice himself. To Gandhi, politics was constructive social action. He considered power politics with its unethical manipulations and underhand dealings "a kind of botheration". He wrote in 1920 that "the politician in me has never dominated a single decision of mine". Applying to Gandhi the Kantian distinction between

the “political moralist” who fashions his morality to suit his own advantage as a statesman and the “moral politician” who conceives of the principles of political expedience in such a way that they can coexist with morality, he concludes that Gandhi was a “moral politician”, a practical idealist who drew his inspiration from high ethical principles which served as a guide to political action. Gandhi dreamed of an enlightened anarchy and said in an article in The Hindustan Times (October 17, 1935): “The state represents violence in a concentrated and organised form...the state is a soulless machine, it can never be weaned from violence, to which it owes its very existence.” But in the real world he had to accept the need for a state that he wanted to be a set of institutions directed primarily towards the maximisation of collective well-being, Sarvodaya. Probably following Mazzini, Gandhi prioritised duties over rights, but he had no doubt that complete independence was a universally valid birthright. He believed that the evil, cruelty and brutality in human behaviour depended to a great extent on the situations in which people found themselves rather than it being a latent, intrinsic and ineradicable human wickedness. He found non-violence in a world of weapons of mass destruction that render all human beings weak and vulnerable more a necessity than a virtue.

### **Positive non-violence**

Neera Chandoke in her well-argued essay “Negating Violence, the Gandhi Way”, carefully traces the development of Gandhi’s idea of positive non-violence. He first came to think of it in detail after the symbolic murder of Sir William H. Curzon-Wylie, the political Aide-de-camp to the Secretary of State for India by a young Indian student, Madan Lal Dhingra, on July 1, 1909. He was one of the India House radicals in London swayed by V.D. Savarkar, who at that period in his life tended to glorify the cult of violence and advocated a guerilla war against the colonial government. Gandhi had already come to believe after his experiments with satyagraha in South Africa that violence was not only utterly futile, but that it was corrupt, corrupting and sterile and could produce only more violence. In London, he used to hold extensive discussions with the advocates of violence as he had despaired much after Savarkar’s direct exhortation to violence. The revolutionary terrorists had legitimised violence by invoking some parts of the Bhagavad Gita, hence Gandhi, too, was forced to formulate a culture-specific theory of non-violence based on Hindu and Jain texts.

Indeed, anti-colonial violence was a product of the colonial policies of discrimination, disgracing, imprisonment, hanging, deportation and other forms of violence the British practised in India. Madan Lal Dhingra, too, had cut his teeth on memories of colonial brutality. Neera Chandoke traces the whole

trajectory of political violence initiated in Maharashtra in June 1897 by the Chapekar brothers who had shot dead W.C. Rand, the plague commissioner of Poona, and were hanged in 1899. These worshippers of violence and votaries of a muscular rhetoric like Savarkar were least interested in politicising and mobilising people and building a mass movement in the cause of freedom. This was where Gandhi came in, strongly condemning the culture of violence in Hind Swaraj. He knew violence would lead to the intensification of oppression of the largely rural masses. He posed the question to the champions of violence: "Do you not tremble to think of freeing India by assassination?" He continued: Those who will rise to power by murder will certainly not make the nation happy. About half a century later, Frantz Fanon theorised decolonisation and the new regime that it gives birth to as a mirror image of the oppressive colonial regime. A violent colonialism fought by a violent anti-colonial movement can only produce a violent new regime. Gandhi looked at the spectacularly courageous acts of violence and their celebration as heroism as belonging to the realm of illusion. The masses may admire the bravery of the terrorists, but they will remain passive spectators untouched by their act. Thus, it denies them agency of any kind and retains them as subjects. Gandhi, on the other hand, wanted to give them agency, make them conscious of the hard work ahead that required real courage, commitment to truth, steadfastness and public ethics.

Swaraj, Gandhi knew, could not be won by the actions of a few; it demanded collective efforts and transformation. Neera Chandoke finds Gandhi's idea of agency close to Marx's idea of political mobilisation that precedes revolutionary transformation. Society, once radicalised, can never be the same. Gandhi believed, like Lenin, in a vanguard that would awaken the slumbering public consciousness through their ability to challenge the wrong, their rigour and discipline, their freedom from fear and greed and their readiness to face the consequences of their action. The satyagrahi should show the people that injustice is a violation of what human beings are owed and highlight the need for struggle. Satyagraha is a theory of action that demands tremendous moral strength and fortitude, the readiness to relentlessly battle injustice and the willingness to accept punishment. It helps people transform from an audience to agents. The body politic to Gandhi, as to Plato, is the individual writ large. Only when individuals achieve personal freedom by conquering base passions can a free society come into being. Non-violence thus gets connected to Swaraj; freedom would be empty of possibilities if it were won by violence as violence can only befuddle the mind and obscure the issues at stake.

### **Violence and certitude**

Gandhi also has an epistemological argument against violence. Violence is a product of certitude: it stems from the conviction that we as perpetrators of violence are right, we know the truth and our notion of truth has to be imposed on others who must necessarily be short of truth or even wrong. Great historical injustices have been committed on the basis of this certitude: we found it in the Crusades, in communal conflicts that uphold one's truth to be superior to the other's, in Hitler's Germany, Mussolini's Italy, Franco's Spain and Stalin's Russia and are beginning to fear India now is trying to go the same way. The problem is not in the truth, but in the very pride that "we" know the truth and hence we are wise. Gandhi had translated Plato's Apology—where Socrates elaborates this—into Gujarati. Socrates was puzzled when, in response to a question from Chaerephon, the Oracle of Delphi said that there was none wiser than Socrates. But speaking to men, he realised how he was wiser: "I am better off than he is—for he knows nothing and thinks he knows, I neither know nor think that I know." Gandhi's conclusion about the nature of truth is similar. He said that as he advanced towards truth, he perceived his weakness even more clearly and that knowledge made him humble. When this is so, none has the competence to punish others through violent words, deeds or even thoughts.

### **Beyond 'otherness'**

While this is the epistemological argument against violence, Gandhi also has an ontological argument. He eschews the idea that the other is distinct from us or separable; we harm a part of ourselves when we allow harm to others. "I do not believe... That an individual may gain spiritually and those that surround him suffer." He substantiates it with advaita though he is applying it to a social context as he does karmayoga. Thomas Weber, too, has observed that Gandhian ethics stems not from the intellectually deductive formula "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" but on the statement of faith that "what in fact you do to others, you also do to yourself". The choice of an individual is the choice for mankind—a thought that would also bring him close to the existentialists. Gandhi, however, did not see things in sheer black and white: while non-violence was infinitely superior to violence, there could be times when violence was preferable to cowardice: "I would rather have India resort to arms in order to defend her honour than that she should in a cowardly manner become or remain a helpless witness to her own dishonour" (one may recall that Gandhi had given a similar advice to women being subjected to rape). For Gandhi, "the choice of non-violence presupposes that while the person is in apposition to impose violence on another human being, or retaliate with violence, he or she

chooses not to do so. Non-violence is the prerogative of the strong, those who could do harm, but who reject this option.” This voluntary choice transforms the agent into a moral being. Gandhi would say justified violence, like using force to prevent a child from rushing at a fire or even killing an armed man running amuck killing anyone that comes his way or causing an injury in order to bring relief as the doctor does, is a form of non-violence. Violence committed for the sake of violence, or to promote our selfish ends is condemnable while violence committed dispassionately and unselfishly to make someone happy is non-violence. So violence is that committed by an agent, with the intention of harming, through the use of force. Non-violence is the default principle for Gandhi; any use of violence needs rigorous justification and entails moral responsibility.

### **Gandhi and Ambedkar**

The collection carries insightful essays on Gandhi and Tagore looked at from the perspective of the moral and the aesthetic as parallel worlds, by Ranabir Samaddar and on Gandhi and Nehru by Sangita Mallik. Aakash Singh Rathore, in his sophisticated essay “M.K. Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar: Irreconcilable Differences?” reviews the attempts made in our time to reconcile the differences between the two great leaders and find them lacking. Quoting Ramachandra Guha, Aakash Singh shows how Gandhi wished to save Hinduism by abolishing untouchability, whereas Ambedkar saw a solution for his people outside the fold of the dominant religion of the Indian people. Gandhi wished to make the self-governing village the bedrock of free India, while Ambedkar was a votary of city life and modern technology as he found the village to be a den of inequality. “Gandhi was a crypto-anarchist who favoured non-violent protest while being suspicious of the state; Ambedkar, a steadfast constitutionalist, who worked within the state and sought solutions to social problems within the state” (Ramachandra Guha: “Gandhi’s Ambedkar”, in *Indian Political Thought*, edited by Aakash Singh and Silika Mohapatra, Routledge, London, 2010). Thinkers and commentators like D.R. Nagaraj, Suhas Palshikar, Guha, Thomas Pantham and Partha Chatterjee have proposed different ways of reconciling the two strains of thought. Palshikar and Pantham attempt to uncover the homogeneity in the fundamental goal of emancipation that both Gandhi and Ambedkar had shared. Guha unites them retrospectively, as their political rivalry belongs to the past and we can now see their contributions as complementing one another’s. The unfinished history of Dalit emancipation can view both as the pioneering heroes of their struggle in different ways.

Partha Chatterjee attempts a dialectical reconciliation “where homogeneity and heterogeneity interplay and play out on the one hand on the historical stage, and on the other, within the political scientist’s pure theory”. Ambedkar and Gandhi, according to Partha Chatterjee, agreed on the idea of the

homogeneous nation as a pedagogical category; only Ambedkar refused to join Gandhi in performing that homogeneity in constitutional negotiations over citizenship. “Homogeneity breaks down on one plane... heterogeneity, unstoppable at one point, is forcibly suppressed at another” (Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2004).

After an elaborate examination of the arguments of Pantham, Guha and Chatterjee, Aakash Singh concludes that the two figures finally remain irreconcilable: Pantham’s argument of homogeneity does not hold as, in spite of Gandhi’s abhorrence of untouchability, he remained attached to an idealised version of *varnashramadharma* that Ambedkar was bent upon “annihilating”. Despite the evidence scholars have proffered to show that Gandhi in his final years had moved closer to Ambedkar’s position, Ambedkar himself remained unconvinced of any fundamental change in Gandhi’s attitude. Ambedkar’s pro-enlightenment modernism that clashed with Gandhi’s romanticist nostalgia for a pre-modern organisation of human society further complicates the reconciliation process. Guha’s arguments stand somewhere between strategic hopes and historic facts as they assume a position beyond the politics of history and above the politics of identity as well as electoral communal, ethnic and cultural politics. Chatterjee’s project smacks of an appropriation of Ambedkar meant to legitimise postcolonial theory more broadly with its post-modern proclivities that can hardly accommodate the modernist Ambedkar. After this partial refutation of the three positions on reconciliation—while at the same time acknowledging the need to be aware of the harmonising traits in the two leaders—Aakash Singh suggests that we resist appropriation and be content to bring Gandhi and Ambedkar into a constellation—a concept he borrows from Hent de Vries through Peter Losonczy—where one’s thoughts can be enriched in the light of the other and evaluated in novel ways.

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