

## GANDHI - A REVOLUTIONARY?

Dr.A. Raghu Kumar  
Advocate

The very idea that Gandhi was a revolutionary in terms of Marxist description appears, at the outset, to be unthinkable. A preacher and practitioner of non-violence, an eternal seeker of Truth as God, an apostle of peace and an enigmatic opponent of modern civilization of the West Model, can he be understood as a revolutionary, on par with and in the great lineage of Marx and Lenin? Any Marxist trained mind would abhor the very thought and may also pooh-poo such propositions as foolish and absurd. Even the Right wing intellectuals may ridicule such hypothesis as the figment of imagination. The pen picture of Gandhiji by almost all his friends and foes of his time, and even many later academics has always been that of a sober Gandhi, lovable or detestable as the case may be, but by no means a revolutionary.

Around three decades back, I read Lenin's article - "*Leo Tolstoy as the Mirror of the Russian Revolution*" which took a critical look at Tolstoy in a historical setting, as an admixture of a great artist and a genius "*who has not only drawn incomparable pictures of Russian life but has made first-class contributions to world literature,*" and "*a landlord obsessed with Christ*". "*On the one hand, merciless criticism of capitalist exploitation, exposure of government outrages, the farcical courts and the state administration, and unmasking of the profound contradictions between the growth of wealth and achievements of civilization and the growth of poverty, degradation and misery among the working masses. On the other, the crackpot preaching of submission, "resist not evil" with violence. On the one hand, the most sober realism, the tearing away of all and sundry masks; on the other, the preaching of one of the most odious things on earth, namely, religion, the striving to replace officially appointed priests by priests who will serve from moral conviction...*" Lenin, with all Tolstoy's credentials and failures, considers him as a mirror of Russian revolution. When I had read this article, I entertained a doubt as a young man as to why Indian Marxists did fail to make such a critical analysis of Gandhi and his ideas, instead of hurling abuse and ridicule at him. After all, the canvas of Gandhi and his actions were larger in scope, and he was instrumental in pitting himself in a gigantic task of anti-colonial struggle, though with all infirmities and idiosyncrasies, a mass leader par excellence and, a longtime source of guidance for a political outfit consisting of all shades of thinking from extreme left to extreme right.

My search for a different analysis of Mahatma Gandhi, from Marx point of view, has almost ended with this finding "*Revolutionary Gandhi*", by Pannalal Dasgupta, a revolutionary Marxist of yesteryears, leader of the Revolutionary Communist Party. "*Revolutionary Gandhi*", was originally written in Bengali as "Gandhi Gabeshana". The Bengali manuscript was written by 1954-55, when Pannalal was undergoing a prison term in the Alipore Central Jail, and was actually brought out in print in 1986. It was translated into English by K.V. Subrahmonyan in 1990s. Though the English translation was complete by 1999, it could see the light of the day when it was published by Earth Care Books, Kolkata only in 2011.

"Indian Communists have never tried properly to understand Gandhiji", says Pannalal. "So, I have tried to acquaint people with the two most important phenomena and ideologies of our times, Gandhism and Leninism. I have explained Gandhism in the light of

Marxism and also analyzed Marxian thought and action in the Gandhian light”,<sup>1</sup> declares the author. The book ends with a warning of Mahatma<sup>2</sup> *“Note down these words of an old man past the age of three score and ten; in the times to come people will not judge us by any creed we profess or the label we wear or the slogan that we shout but our work, industry, sacrifice, honesty and purity of character. They will want to know what we have actually done for them. But if you don’t listen, if taking advantage of the prevailing misery and discontent of the people, you set about to accentuate and exploit it for party ends, it will recoil upon your head and even God will not forgive you for your betrayal of the people”*.

Two major objectives of the book are indicated at the end, in **“Epilogue”**: “My purpose has been to show Gandhi in a new light to the Indian leftists and to present the historical Gandhi to the so-called diehard Gandhians”.<sup>3</sup> “I look upon Gandhi, Marx, Lenin and other men of the age as forming a powerful giant telescope and introscope, if I may use that word to mean an instrument which shows what goes on with in my mind.” In fact, the work is also a critique of three other works of that time, which the author considers just and necessary to offer, and those three works were Pyarelal’s “Mahatama: Last Phase”, Prof. Hiren Mukherjee’s “Gandhiji” and E.M.S. Namboodripad’s “Mahatma and the Ism”. It also offers critique of the views of Maulana Azad and C.R. Das and also compares the view points of Gandhi and Ravindranath Tagore, and Gandhi and Subhas Chandra Bose. It also deals with various aspects of Gandhism viz., Truth, God, Religion, Ahimsa, Satyagraha, Constructive Program, Hindu Muslim Unity, Charkha, Cottage industry, Swadeshi, Economics and Ethics, Nai Talim (New Education), Harijans, Adivasis and Workers, Trusteeship etc. In the modern sense of academic writing it may be an omnibus work, but it was the older method of making a comprehensive assessment of philosophy, from various angles, something like a source book for future students to pursue further study in detail on each subject.

For a person to evolve into a revolutionary, he needs to be, first and foremost, a social scientist. Scientific thinking is the basic claim of Marxism. Can Gandhi be described as a scientist or a social scientist? Yes, says Pannalal. For a person to be considered as a scientist, he has to be truthful to the inquiry and shall discard anything which proves the hypothesis false. While returning from England, at the conclusion of the discussions for the Gandhi-Irwin Pact, Gandhiji, talking to some well-known French journalists, made some remarks of profound significance. He said that he had at one time thought **God was Truth**, but had to change his mind, for he knew now, that **Truth was God**. “Truth has to be inquired into again and again constantly, for no truth wears the same face at all times”.<sup>4</sup> “Seldom do we come across an individual with such passion for inquiry”.<sup>5</sup> “Gandhiji would rather be happy to be a beggar holding on to an atom of truth than a king with a mountain of falsehood”. The search for truth is the main aim of science and Pannalal made a serious attempt to establish such a consistent truth seeker as nothing but a scientist in its strictest sense. An inquiry has been made into Gandhi’s method on that premise in the first Chapter of the work **“Gandhi and Truth”**. Gandhi wanted to show us that “a truth, which needed a false prop to stay safe, was not a complete, whole truth. Besides, if truth had to be defended by sheer physical force, deceit, falsehood or secrecy then the act would be no different from our common practice of defending with all our might something which is far from the truth, something which is untrue but is in our self-interest”<sup>6</sup>. Quoting from G.N. Dhawan<sup>7</sup> where

---

<sup>1</sup> P. ix, Forward to the Bengali First Edition, Revolutionary Gandhi, Pannalal Dasgupta, Earth Care Books, Kolkata, 2011, Translated by K.V. Subrahmanyam

<sup>2</sup> P 477 quoted from Pyarelal’s Last Phase, Vol.II p.255

<sup>3</sup> P. 443, ibid

<sup>4</sup> P.4, ibid

<sup>5</sup> P.5 ibid

<sup>6</sup> P.6 ibid

Gandhi said: “Truth rules out prejudice, evasion, secrecy and deception as well as exaggeration, suppression or modification of reality. It requires that we should never be afraid of confessing our mistakes or retracing our steps”. Thus Pannalal Babu bases his whole work on the premise that Gandhiji was a foremost scientist, dispelling the common notion he was only a mystic, and a person relying on intuition rather than reason.

How does a Marxist understand a spiritual Gandhi? In search of an answer to this most complex question, while assessing Gandhiji as a sufficiently tempered scientist, the author examines the very nature of religion. Religion, he contends, manifests itself in diverse forms in human life. It ranges from the knowledge of good and evil, the question of sacred and the profane, the ideas of justice and injustice, the standards of beauty and ugliness, the inquiry into truth and untruth, right and wrong, to ideas of vice and virtue, spiritual merit and demerit, conduct and behavior, joy and happiness, arts, literature, architecture, and so on. Ideas about all kinds of social behavior have evolved under the shadow of religion. “Out of a variety of spiritual practitioners, it seems that Gandhiji’s was the only known instance of a spiritual aspirant wanting to see God face to face through politics and service to the country”. “The call of the Gita took Sri Aurobindo away from politics and sent him into total seclusion, and the same Gita inspired revolutionaries in India to wage armed struggle. And it is the Gita that Gandhiji called the non-violent yoga of action and adopted it as his path towards the realization of God.....”<sup>8</sup> Gandhiji has drawn much inspiration from the concept of “*Sthitaprajna*” or “abidance in the self”, which can be considered as a more secular religious understanding.

When once Mr. Montagu asked Gandhi, “How have you, a social reformer, found your way into this crowd?”, Gandhi replied: “I could not be leading a religious life unless I identified myself with the whole of mankind, and I would not do so unless I took part in politics. The whole gamut of man’s activities today constitutes an indivisible whole. You cannot divide social, economic, political and purely religious work into water-tight compartments. I do not know any religion apart from human activities, which they would otherwise lack, reducing life into an image of ‘sound and fury’ signifying nothing”<sup>9</sup>.

“His prayer meetings were more in the nature of political meetings....” and “during those days of communal frenzy, none but Gandhiji took any worthwhile steps to extinguish the flames”. “Gandhiji interacted with atheists as well. People of all schools of thought went to him and held dialogue with him”<sup>10</sup>. The author recalls one such conversation of Gandhi with Goparaju Ramachandra Rao (Gora), which was later published by Gora as “An Atheist with Gandhi” (Navajivan Press). In one of such conversations Bapu replied to Gora. “We are seekers after truth. We change whenever we find ourselves in the wrong side ... There is no harm as long as you are not fanatical. Whether you are in the right, I am in the right, results will prove. Then I may go your way or you may come in my way; or both of us may go a third way...”<sup>11</sup>. Thus the author contends that the ideas of Gandhi on religion are truly secular, and contrary to the many popular views on religion, and offer new insights into it.

On non-violence “Gandhiji said that he had an innate and natural attraction for truth from his early years, **Ahimsa** or **non-violence** was not an innate trait for him”. But according to Pannalal, Gandhi himself was unable to formulate a clear definition of non-violence, but

---

<sup>7</sup> P.12., from G.N.Dhawan, the Political Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi, p.55

<sup>8</sup> p.15 ibid

<sup>9</sup> p.17-18, quoted from Pyarelal’s Last Phase

<sup>10</sup> p.26-27 ibid

<sup>11</sup> p.33 ibid

we may try and formulate his ideas by letting the nature of his non-violence emerge from his work and writings<sup>12</sup>. As a Marxist, the author considers that “history is as if a chronicle of wars, civil wars, class wars, and similar unnatural events, and it does not care to note the natural, peaceful periods of human life<sup>13</sup>. However, he notes that “we cannot conclude that there is no area of peace and love in the world, in human society and in the lives of families, simply because history is reticent about man’s peace and eloquent about his conflicts”. Gandhiji’s non-violence is not just absence of killing. Gandhi recognized that in the progress of nations, both evolution and revolution have their own role. He said: “Nations have progressed both by evolution and revolution. The one is as necessary as the other.” During a fast in 1932 Gandhi is said to have noted that “those who have to bring about a radical change in human conditions and surroundings cannot do it except by raising a ferment in society. There are only two methods of doing this – violent and non-violent”. Thus, Gandhiji, also anticipated revolutionary changes, but the means of achieving the same for him was only non-violent. His revolutionary fervor was not a bit less intense than that of the votaries of armed revolution, though their paths and means were different<sup>14</sup>. “It was manly enough to defend one’s property, honour or religion at the point of the sword. It was manlier and nobler to defend them without seeking to injure the wrong-doers. But it was unmanly, unnatural and dishonorable to forsake the post of duty, and in order to save their own skin to leave property, honour and religion to the mercy of wrong-doers”, Gandhi wrote in *Young India* of 15<sup>th</sup> Oct, 1925<sup>15</sup>. “It is better to be violent, if there is violence in our breasts, than to put on the cloak of non-violence to cover impotence. There is hope for violent man to become non-violent; there is no such hope for the impotent”<sup>16</sup>.

Concluding the examination of Gandhi’s perplexing ideas on non-violence, the author contends that “in brief, the application of non-violence and satyagraha in each case had not been easy and smooth, and in his (Gandhiji’s) experiments with and exploration of this path, Gandhiji had to keep probing and questioning himself until his final days. He kept asking himself time and again at Naokhali whether at all the non-violence of the brave was possible. His quest was incomplete, for on the last lap of his life’s journey, he could not make the country strong through the non-violence of the brave...”<sup>17</sup>.

While evaluating the concept of satyagraha and its execution in practical field, the author declares his objective of explaining Gandhi: “Anybody who wants to understand Gandhiji will have to reckon with two facts. First, Gandhiji’s historical role, and second his personal and independent ideology. Gandhiji was not merely the embodiment of non-violence; he also symbolized the national struggle against imperialism. He was the representative of India in a special era, and he also had a special responsibility with regard to non-violence. In his historical role he provided leadership to the nation and his endeavor was to guide history along a certain direction...”<sup>18</sup>. While Gandhi was more inclined to invoke non-violence and satyagraha as his modes of struggle, he was never willing to be included among the pacifists, even though many pacifists tried to persuade him to lend his name to their movement. He knew that peace lovers and pacifists could never fulfill people’s desire for freedom and emancipation. He, therefore, wanted a war, but one which would be free from violence, horror, cruelty and cowardice of wars. The war of Gandhi was called

---

<sup>12</sup> pp.38-39 ibid

<sup>13</sup> p.40 ibid

<sup>14</sup> p.44 ibid

<sup>15</sup> p.57 ibid

<sup>16</sup> p.57 ibid, from *Harijan*, 21<sup>st</sup> Oct, 1939

<sup>17</sup> p.78 ibid

<sup>18</sup> p.80 ibid

‘satyagraha’<sup>19</sup>. “Non-cooperation is not a passive state but it is an intensely active state – more active than physical resistance. Passive resistance is a misnomer.”<sup>20</sup>

The need for arms is not an eternal truth. What is eternal is the need for class struggle. It is not an unchangeable belief of Marxism-Leninism that class struggle will finally take place only by recourse to arms in all countries and at all times. The recourse to arms would depend on the actual conditions, and Lenin mentioned this too. It has been accepted at the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Russian Communist Party also that it is possible to usher in socialism in many countries even without the use of arms and without a civil war and that all efforts should be aimed in that direction.<sup>21</sup> There is no fundamental contradiction between the spirit behind Lenin’s views and Gandhiji’s non-violent struggle. Pannalal while accepting the dictum of Mao Tse-tung that revolution flows through the barrel of the gun, contends that this gun-toting is not valid for all countries and for all times. Statements like Mao’s may make one think that revolution and the gun are interdependent and necessary, that one is the concomitant of the other. Such tall talk, according to him, can lead to an anti-social ideology, giving a boost to the morale of hoodlums. Struggle is certainly necessary, he accepts, but to assert that there can be no struggle without guns should be shunned.<sup>22</sup>

Nirmal Bose<sup>23</sup> wrote: “It is just here that the method of satyagraha steps in as a possible and effective substitute for war. It does not propose to do away with conflicts; but it raises the quality of those very conflicts by brining into operation a spirit of love and a sense of human brotherhood. **Satyagraha is not a substitute for war, it is war itself**, without of course many of its ugly features and guided by a purpose nobler than we associate with destruction. It is an intensely heroic and chivalrous form of war” (emphasis supplied). Thus the author states that the need for arms is not an eternal truth, but what is eternal is the need for class struggle. It is not an unchangeable belief of Marxism –Leninism that class struggles will finally take place only by recourse to arms in all counties and at all times.

Gandhi’s non-violence, according to Pannalal Babu, is not merely a political tool or an ad hoc strategy. This non-violence is at the same time, the goal, the path and the provision for the path. It endows the individual’s life with wholeness and aims at the molding of a complete human being. In its eyes, man is not merely a means but an end in himself. This non-violence is not a mere political tool; it is the sustainer of man, it is man’s life principle, and hence the formation of man’s character is its special primary focus. Hence, the non-violent man’s democratic politics can prove to be as tremendously different – from the constitutional politics of the opportunistic, fortune-hunting man – as heaven is different from hell.<sup>24</sup>

Two of the best topics well articulated in this work have been – “Constructive Programme” and “Economics and Ethics”. The leftists’ belief that the masses cannot be rallied and organized except through struggles is a mere illusion, claims the author after examining the constructive program of Gandhi. As a result of this belief that people can be organized only through struggles, says Pannalal, they saw Gandhi’s many-sided constructive program as nothing more than a reformist movement. Gandhiji was even more realistic and pragmatic than the Marxists in the field of action. He showed in no small measure the importance of the economic basis of political action, whereas the leftists and various Marxist

---

<sup>19</sup> pp.92-93 ibid

<sup>20</sup> p.96 from Young India, 25<sup>th</sup> Aug 1920

<sup>21</sup> p.97 ibid

<sup>22</sup> p.98 ibid

<sup>23</sup> p.93 from Nirmal Bose, Studies in Gandhism, p-120

<sup>24</sup> p.112 ibid

parties believed in educating the masses in politics solely through political means. The constructive program of Gandhiji, he says, has an economic foundation. It was the sum total of the constructive work which finally gave sustenance and strength to the freedom movement. According to Pannalal, innumerable workers and promising young men have wasted their ideals, dreams and lives in the so-called revolutionary parties” and he blames for this miserable state of affairs, more specifically in Bengal, the ultra-leftist politics which is devoid of roots, mass contact and constructive action.<sup>25</sup> However, the author also notes with all sincerity that “constructive program could not awaken or enthuse political workers in a big way” and “people could not adequately appreciate the value of Gandhiji’s contribution in this respect”. In his analysis constructive work is not something dazzling and there is very little excitement in it to attract younger persons.

It is in the same breath, he considers the Charkha, Cottage Industry and Swadeshi. Quoting from N.K. Bose,<sup>26</sup> where Gandhiji said; “You cannot build non-violence on factory civilization, but it can be built on self-contained villages, even Hitler was so mired, he cannot devastate seven hundred thousand non-violent villages. He would himself become non-violent in the process. Rural economy as I have conceived it eschews exploitation altogether and exploitation is the essence of violence. You have therefore to be rural minded before you can be non-violent.” The author examines the idea of charkha and cottage industry and says harmony and progress are possible only through the reconciliation and synthesis of mutually opposite trends. Marx and Engels, according to him, have exposed the face of the machine-culture and industrialization of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in all its ugliness, and Gandhi has showed the miserable condition of the human habitations, both India and abroad, which resulted from the centralized industrialization of the capitalist kind.<sup>27</sup> The specific understanding of Gandhiji in respect of these ideas has been that he too visualized electricity, ship-building, iron works, machine-making, and the like side by side with village handicrafts. The traditional Europe economist considers industrial cities to be dependent upon villages for supplies whereas Gandhiji wanted to reverse the process, i.e., the cities to be supply sources for villages. The author suggests that socialism would be richer in many respects by accepting Gandhiji, and Gandhism too would enrich itself by absorbing socialism. Cooperation would benefit both ideals as conflict can harm both.<sup>28</sup>

One of the major considerations of the author has been that Gandhiji attempted to reconcile economics and ethics. One of the main charges leveled by economists at Gandhiji is that he did not accept the independence of economic laws and created confusion by bringing ethics into economics. “Marx pointed out this blind operation of economic laws within capitalism and said that so long as capitalism survived, society could not exercise any direct and conscious control over its economics, whereas in socialism, economics could be regulated consciously and in a planned manner. Even under socialism, the objective laws and forces of economics continue to operate and remain independent but the internal anarchy is resolved and they become free from any conflict with the conscious endeavors of man”.<sup>29</sup> Gandhi believed in the importance of objective and scientific forces but even greater for him were also the ideas of wisdom and dharma. In his view, morality and religion were integral parts of everyday life. In a lecture before Muir Central College of Economic Society of Allahabad, he said: “I venture to think that the scriptures of the world are far safer and

---

<sup>25</sup> p.155 ibid

<sup>26</sup> p.197 ibid, from N.K.Bose who quoted from Harijan, 4<sup>th</sup> Nov, 1939

<sup>27</sup> p.201 ibid

<sup>28</sup> p.221 ibid

<sup>29</sup> pp.223-224 ibid

sounder treatises on the laws of economics than many of the modern text books”.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, it is not that there is no ethical content in Marx and Engels economic theories. According to Pannalal, with the end of capitalism and imperialism and, with the advent of socialism and the exploitation-free society, what Gandhi said about morality and conscience will no longer seem merely imaginative, utopian and impractical. Ethics will therefore rapidly permeate economics. Hence, though Gandhi’s ethical and moral demands might sound unrealistic, they do not prove to be so in practice in socialist systems.

Another important topic of serious concern for Gandhi has always been “Hindu-Muslim Unity”. In fact Gandhi’s concepts of religion and inter-religious faith have been highly advanced by his time and age; and even today we may need to appreciate this area with fresh evidence of increasing religious conflicts. By providing leadership to the Khilafat Movement, the Indian firmament had been filled with the cry of “Hindu-Muslim bhai bhai”. India, oppressed and torn into pieces on religious lines for long, at last found in Gandhiji, a new method of uniting society. However, this kind of unity did not last long. The moment Gandhiji called off the non-co-operation movement in the wake of the Chauri Chaura episode in 1922, the whole country suffered a shock. With the rise of Kamal Pasha in Turkey, the Khilafat Movement lost its meaning and significance. In the meanwhile, the Muslims of India began to drift away from the national struggle. The distinction between nationalist Muslims on the one hand and those belonging to the pro-government Muslim League on the other was becoming sharper. The views of Sir Syed Ahmed began to exercise a strong influence over the Muslims, and the educated Muslim elite was slowly drifting away from casting its lot with Gandhi, into a policy of cooperation with the British. On the whole, the Muslims at no time thereafter accepted Gandhiji as their own. In concluding the debate over Hindu-Muslim Unity, and Gandhiji’s contribution to it, the author says that although there was a conservative element in Gandhiji, yet we have seen that he could move with the times and that, in many cases, he proved himself to be more radical than the revolutionaries and that he had the capacity to assess the historical value of every action and accordingly to adopt or reject it.

Nai Talim (new education) of Gandhian pedagogy, much neglected by many Gandhian Scholars, has occupied a significant stage in the discussion of Pannalal Babu. The first and the foremost observation of the author has been that Gandhiji liberated manual labour from its dismal associations; more specifically in his scheme of proper education. “Trace the source of every coin that finds its way into your pocket, and you will realize the truth of what I write,” Gandhi said.<sup>31</sup> Gandhiji named his new method of education through manual labour “*Nai Talim*”. Judging by results the contribution of the ‘groves of academia’ (the system introduced by the British) to our enlightenment is highly disappointing, not in one but in most aspects of life. The knowledge that they impart in various fields of education has been very shallow and has had no enduring impact on the lives of people. Learning has lost its intimate contract with real life and work. “If the farmer’s son is sent to school, he not only unlearns cultivation, but also starts looking down upon agriculture and neglects his parents”.<sup>32</sup> The reason for this state of affairs is that education lacks an economic basis and a social significance. Gandhiji showed us, according to the writer, that education should be provided through some kind of physical work and behind such a system of education lies a far-reaching philosophical rationale. Gandhiji said: “Our education has got to be revolutionized. The brain must be educated through the hand.....”.<sup>33</sup> (Harijan 18<sup>th</sup> Feb,

---

<sup>30</sup> p.227 ibid

<sup>31</sup> p.255 ibid

<sup>32</sup> p.257 ibid

<sup>33</sup> Harijan 18<sup>th</sup> Feb, 1939

1939). While quoting extensively from Marx, Engels, Sydney and Beatrice Webb, Emerson, etc., the author contends that: We can find in human history fragments and hints which bear out the truth of this kind of thinking. It was Gandhiji, however, who gave in concrete shape, experimented with it in his life and endeavored to introduce it into the whole country.

Another great contribution of this work has been providing answers to certain contentious issues between Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore and, Gandhi and Subhash Bose. Both these areas can be said to be highly illuminating though brief. All Indians whose world-view was influenced by western culture and education – socialists, communists and many other groups of people voiced a uniform objection to Gandhi that he was a revivalist. They also objected to his models of constructive program, satyagraha, non-cooperation, and swadeshi etc., as contrary to the universal goals of civilization and cooperation. Gandhi faced these attacks from almost all ‘progressives’. Tagore<sup>34</sup> considered ‘charkha’ movement would only make ‘coolies’ out of the people and it was but a proof of Gandhiji’s aversion to science. “People would go on plodding at the charkha, and not progress in human knowledge. Science has emancipated innumerable sudras from their sudra status”. Gandhiji<sup>35</sup> replied in emphatic terms to the charge of Tagore: “... To a people famishing and idle, the only acceptable form in which God can dare appear is work and promise of food as wages. God created man to work for his food and said that those who ate without work were thieves....”.

“The ideal of one world or human unity cannot be imposed from above. It could only be brought about if existing national and class contradictions and other social inequalities were resolved. Those who call themselves Marxists should have been the first to realize this. But the Marxists of this country were so self-deluded that they thought nothing of brandishing expression like “frog-in-the-well” and ‘bourgeois nationalism’ to the anti-imperialist national struggle that Gandhi inspired and led. ... If the Marxists could commit such a blunder, why should not Rabindranath, poet and dreamer that he was.....”<sup>36</sup> Gandhiji has no love for revivalism, and Rabindranath never suspected or believed that Gandhiji had any. However, he thought that there was a predilection for the traditional way among Gandhians or Gandhiji’s followers. Gandhiji himself was aware of such a trend, and lest in his name wrong things should be done, he often cautioned people. “.... I must not attempt to revive ancient practices if they were inconsistent with, call if you will modern life, as it must be lived.....”<sup>37</sup>

Gandhi–Bose differences have led to lot of political controversy, especially in the recent past. Bose was tried to be owned or appropriated by both the left and the right. Being a contemporary and a direct witness to the debate, Pannalalji tried to put the facts straight with utmost respect and sincerity to both. He comes out with eleven points of convergence and divergence between them most succinctly.<sup>38</sup> These differences were basically on the ideological as well as struggle tactics. These differences appear in their most sharpened forms between February 1939 and January 1941. Bose was more inclined that Gandhi shall give an ultimatum to the British government during the early stages of the World War-II, which was not accepted by Gandhi. Gandhi felt that a dangerous atmosphere of violence was prevalent in the country, and any decision for final assault at that juncture would lead to disastrous effects. Moreover, he was also doubtful of the preparedness of satyagrahees at that time. Communal frenzy was all pervasive due to divisive politics and hate campaign of both

---

<sup>34</sup> p.271, *ibid* from Rabindranath Tagore’s *Rachanavali*, Vihabharati Edition vol.24, pp.405-06

<sup>35</sup> p.275 *ibid* from *Great Sentinel*, *Young India*, 13<sup>th</sup> Oct, 1921 quoted in *Mahatma Gandhi* by Romain Rolland, P.111

<sup>36</sup> pp.276-277 *ibid*

<sup>37</sup> p.289 *ibid*

<sup>38</sup> pp.294-314 *ibid*

the British and Muslim League, which was another factor running through the mind of Bapu. In fact, even Subhas Bose was not a believer in violent revolutions. He was a complete believer in Gandhian leadership. In his analysis of the strained relations of Gandhi and Subhas, more than anything else, the author blames the Pant Resolution, during the second term of the Congress Presidentship of Subhas Bose, which mandated the President seeking Mahatma's approval before nominating new members to CWC, as the major reason for the rift.

There are several controversies and contradictions on the issue of Gandhiji's role in respect of the upliftment of dalits, adivasis and workers. But one thing needs to be said that Gandhiji at one point declared that he would not step into Hindu temples so long as they denied entry to the Harijans (the description Gandhi invoked for Dalits during his struggle) and other suppressed classes. He kept this vow till his last day, although he remained a devout Hindu throughout his life and acknowledged the need for temples. The Muslim League and the Ambedkarites carried on the propaganda that Gandhi's Harijan movement was but a clever political ploy aimed at winning wider support. Even the leftists were, according to Pannalal, openly critical of the Harijan movement. The Left parties believed that the Hindu-Muslim divide as well as the Harijan problem would disappear if there were no religions at all. To them, the movements for securing entry for Harijans into temples or for bringing about Hindu-Muslim unity, will only help perpetuate man's bondage to religion and were thus reactionary.<sup>39</sup>

After discussing various stands on this issue of dalits, Pannalal considers that in fact it is Gandhi who elevated caste problem into class-struggle. By looking at the problem as not of caste, but of high and low, the exploiter and the exploited, he contends that Gandhi projected the problem more as a problem relating to the class struggle.<sup>40</sup> Pannalal contends that "Gandhiji also put into practice the fundamental ideals of communism and socialism in a way that the communists or socialists of his time could only envy". "In his outlook as well as his personal life, Gandhiji attained the level of the truly classless human being. "Gandhiji may not have been a communist, but he could certainly have been a worthy member of a classless society."<sup>41</sup>

This particular part of the book, on "Harijans, Adivasis and Workers" offers a new and rich insights into Gandhi's actions towards these issues. He elevates Gandhi to a better communist than many communists. Few quotes from Pyarelal's Last Phase, and some other sources, was cited by the author to fortify his proposition. The one was Gandhiji reply to a question at a public meeting in January 1946 at Medinipur regarding his views on class struggle<sup>42</sup> where he said that class struggle there had been always, it could be ended if the capitalists voluntarily renounced their rule and became labourers. The other was to realize that labour was real capital, in fact, the maker of capital. On another occasion it appears Gandhi said<sup>43</sup> "It is a most dangerous thing to make political use of labour until labourers understand the political condition of the country and are prepared for the common good. ...".

Another most controversial subject of Gandhian ideas or theories has always been "Trusteeship". This almost goes against the grain of many western social or political philosophers and also their followers in India. The basic question that lingers in the minds of any socio-political philosopher since Hobbes has been: "Whether human being is naturally a

---

<sup>39</sup> pp.315-317 ibid

<sup>40</sup> p.325 ibid

<sup>41</sup> p.329 ibid

<sup>42</sup> p.331 ibid

<sup>43</sup> p.332 ibid from N.K.Bose, Selections from Gandhi, p.177

social being?” “Whether human beings are good or selfish by nature?” Both Marx and Gandhi consider human beings as basically social beings. For Marx it’s the alienation of human being from nature that forms one of the bases of his social theory construction. For Gandhi also the alienation of man forms the basis, but totally in a different way. He considers western civilization and the models of production and development, distribution and organizing the society as degrading and inhuman. From the above consideration of Gandhi flows the idea of “Trusteeship”. His concept of “Trusteeship”, as many of his other concepts, remains undeveloped further, and thus lacks sufficient philosophical explanation as an economic theory.

But, Pannalal Dasgupta, though a Marxist makes a major attempt in reconciling this contradiction between the Marxist tradition and the Gandhian thought. Probably it can be considered as a major contribution of Pannalal towards understanding the idea of ‘trusteeship’ from a Marxist view. “As far the communists and socialists, they wanted people to believe that trusteeship was just another of Gandhiji’s strategies in trying to perpetuate capitalism and the Zamindari system.<sup>44</sup> But according to Gandhi, land owners and other moneyed people could keep their property but they should not view it as their own or use it as they wished. He postulated that they should consider themselves as the custodians or trustees of the place or money they owned and they could take out of the property only as much as was due to them as its caretakers. Gandhiji himself was not consistent till his last days in his interpretation of the concept and he often spoke about it from different angles.

It was Gandhiji’s firm faith in the basic goodness of man that led him to evolve the trusteeship doctrine. In 1930 on the eve of salt Satyagraha, he expressed his ideas on the capitalists’ interests in very unequivocal language. “The greatest obstacle in the path of non-violence is the presence in our midst of the indigenous interests that have sprung up from British rule, the interests of the moneyed men, speculators, scrip-holders, land-holders, factory owners, and the like. All these do not always realize that they are living on the blood of the masses, and when they do, they become as callous to British principals whose tools and agents they are.”<sup>45</sup> “I would be very happy indeed if the people concerned behaved as trustees, but if they fail, I believe we shall have to deprive them of their possessions through the State with the minimum exercise of violence.”<sup>46</sup> “...I desire to end capitalism, almost, if not quite, as much as the most advanced socialist or even communist. But our methods differ, our language differ. My theory of ‘Trusteeship’ is makeshift, certainly no camouflage.”<sup>47</sup> “My fundamental difference with socialists is well-known. I believe in the conversion of human nature and in striving for it. They do not believe in this. But let me tell you that we are coming nearer to one another.”<sup>48</sup> “Communism of the Russian type, that is communism which is imposed on a people, would be repugnant to India....”<sup>49</sup>

Both Communists or Socialists, and Gandhi are equally concerned with human nature, alienation and how to resolve the class contradictions, which was the consequence of the advent of capitalism. But the allegation of communists or socialist about the integrity or sincerity of Gandhi may not be correct, according to Pannalal. Gandhi being firmly rooted in the Indian concept of spirituality considers non-possession or voluntary relinquishment of property or ownership can be invoked in human beings. Therefore, says Pannalal in

---

<sup>44</sup> p.335 ibid

<sup>45</sup> p.337 ibid quoted from N.K.Bose who in turn quoted from Young India, 6<sup>th</sup> Feb 1930

<sup>46</sup> p.339 ibid quoted in N.K.Bose studies in Gandhism

<sup>47</sup> p.339 ibid quoted from Harijan, 16<sup>th</sup> Dec, 1939

<sup>48</sup> p.342 ibid quoted from N.K.Bose, studies in Gandhism, p.88

<sup>49</sup> p.345 ibid quoted from R.K.Prabhu (Ed), India of my dreams, p.98

conclusion, that in this socialist era of the world, it is not impossible for non-possession to become a universal trait.

How did Gandhi understand the role of women in the society? Indian women liberation activists never considered Gandhi's ideas in this regard as progressive or useful, though in his life time, he could bring in most women into the freedom struggle, probably more intensely than any other political leader in the world politics and women could work along with him more comfortably. His two-fold view of women in the traditional way and as a companion in struggles or in modern society offers most controversial reading at the outset. Commenting on the position of women in society Gandhi said: "A society cannot rise above the level of its womenfolk."<sup>50</sup> "... Many of our movements stop halfway because of the conditions of our women...." However, he differs with the western liberal ideas on this subject. "He believed that men and women played complementary roles. His views regarding the man-woman quotient were very similar to Tolstoy's. Professor Nirmal Bose has given many insights into this aspect of Gandhi's personality in his book "Last Days with Gandhi". He says that in some ways Gandhi's personality was exactly like that of women and that he acquired this trait through conscious experiment and effort. Manubehn Gandhi, Gandhiji's grand-niece, even chose for her book on Gandhiji the title "Bapu - My Mother."

One of the most typical statement of Gandhi on the subject matter of 'socialism' has been what he said in Harijan, 6<sup>th</sup> July 1947: "Socialism begins with the first convert, if there is one such; you can add zero to one and the first zero will count for ten and every addition will count for ten times the previous number. If, however, the beginning is a zero, in other words, no one makes the beginning; multiplicity of zeroes will also prove zero value. Time and paper occupied in writing zeros will be so much waste".<sup>51</sup> The socialists and communists persist in their belief that there is no need to reform the lives of individuals, and if the society is reformed it could take care of the lives of its individual members. The major purpose of Pannalal Dasgupta's work has been to contextualize Gandhi in a historical purpose in terms of Marxist ideology and also to question certain narratives of Gandhians in placing him beyond time and, as something as eternal. Pannalalji considers that 'The Indian Marxists failed to fully learn their lessons from the Russian Revolution. They took the Russian Revolution to be more of an exception than a rule. They neither tried to understand the meaning of all the new ideas that had come into Marxism as a consequence of that revolution nor did they have any notion of the possibilities of developing those ideas. As a result of this blinkered view, they could not conceive any form of revolution other than the one leading to proletarian dictatorship. For them, any revolution which did not have the leadership of the communists was no revolution at all, even though it may include the working classes. "Caught in this narrow outlook, they remained aloof to the vast movement.... Saw the freedom struggle of colonial and semi-colonial countries as pro-bourgeois".<sup>52</sup>

While quoting from various correspondence between Marx and Engels and, Marx and others, especially the letter Marx wrote to Meyer and Vogt, which was further developed by Lenin, where Marx said: "After occupying myself with the Irish question for many years, I have come to the conclusion that the decisive blow against English ruling classes (and it will be decisive for the workers' movement all over the world) cannot be in England but only in Ireland".<sup>53</sup> For Pannalal, the meaning of this new line of thought, (also according to the secret circular of the General Council of the International Working Men's Association he cited), was that the revolution had to be triggered off in England only through the freedom

---

<sup>50</sup> p.359 ibid quoted from B.Kumarappa, Capitalism, Socialism or Villagism

<sup>51</sup> p.376, Ibid

<sup>52</sup> p.395 ibid

<sup>53</sup> p.397 ibid

struggles in her colonies. “Firstly, the working class was not the only revolutionary class (as claimed in the Communist Manifesto). Secondly, the liberation of England’s colonies was the chief condition for the emancipation of England’s working class. Again quoting Stalin’s caution “... what is right for one historical situation may prove to be wrong in another historical situation”<sup>54</sup> and of Mao’s, Pannalal argues that Gandhi’s historical role was profoundly revolutionary from the Marxist point of view.

After thirty years of writing in Bengali, when sending the manuscript for printing Pannalal added “Notes” to the chapter on “Gandhi and History”, where he observes with hindsight that ‘the limitations of ideals and ideologies, like freedom, democracy and socialism, which have inspired humanity during the past three hundred years are being experienced at every step in all spheres of action. ...Hence there arises the necessity to re-examine Marxism, Leninism, Mao’s thoughts and Gandhism, for the virtually blocked path of revolution has to be reopened for its onward march and a way have to be found to inspire faith once again in the hearts of men’.<sup>55</sup>

The concluding chapter of the book “Gandhism” considers Gandhi as a votary of both God and Truth – concepts which the modern intellectual would often regard as offending and mutually contradictory. “Gandhiji tried to equate science and philosophy by defining Truth as God.” Pannalal writes that Gandhi was a many faceted personality-an experimenter of truth, a great pilgrim and a supreme leader. If Marxism has made a great contribution towards laying the foundation of that (socialist) culture from the point of view of economics and state craft, Gandhi’s contribution in the domains of morality and public life will make their foundation considerably more natural and elegant. In Gandhi, we find a leader and a prophet rolled into one. “Men like Gandhiji do not appear often on the earth. No single individual or group can fill his place. It is only mankind in its entirety, which is capable of being a true successor to a person like Gandhiji. “Deluded as we leftists were,” he says, “we shut our eyes to our own history and tradition. Consequently we lost focus on our goal, became self-complacent and engaged ourselves in imitating others”.<sup>56</sup>

In “Epilogue” he says, “my purpose has been to show Gandhi in a new light to the Indian leftists and to present the historical Gandhi to the so-called diehard Gandhians. I look upon Gandhi, Marx, Lenin and other men of the age as forming a powerful giant telescope and introscope, if I may use that word to mean an instrument which shows what goes on within my mind. The epilogue indicates the purpose of the work as a critique of the works of Gandhians, and as well of the Left, and ends saying ‘when they review Gandhiji’s life and struggle they do not make the least effort to understand the gradual painful evolution of a very ordinary, peace-loving man of liberal temperament into an anti-imperialist fighter. On the contrary, they dig up a weak spot or a drawback and blow it out of proportion in order to show up all his work in poor light. “The sum and substance of my discussion in the foregoing paragraphs is that in their attempt to prove Gandhiji a bourgeois leader by means of a labored fallacious thesis, the Communists came up against an even greater obstacle on their way. In their concern to keep up consistency, they have had to ignore actual events or distort them. They have been at great pains to fit the whole history into the straight-jacket of a petty thesis; little knowing that it will all be in vain”.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> p.400 ibid from Works of Stalin, vol.7, PP.226-7

<sup>55</sup> p.422 ibid

<sup>56</sup> p.440 ibid

<sup>57</sup> p.475 ibid

Pannalal Dasgupta's "**Revolutionary Gandhi**" is a rare piece of writing in the Marxist-Leninist tradition, which has appreciated Gandhi as a part of the dialectical movement of current history. It attempts to clear the Indian Marxist air filled with nothing but ridicule and abuse on Gandhi, and also endeavors at placing Gandhi in a historical setting of anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggles of many Asia-African countries of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Pannalal dispels myriad of Marxist's doubts on Gandhi's Non-violence, Satyagraha and Constructive Programs. As a an eternal truth seeker, and a person who was always ready to discard any of his opinions or ideas, even those held by him quite preciously, at the instance of impeccable proof or convincing argument, Mahatma Gandhi is the first and foremost social scientist, contends Pannalal. Even on the most problematic issues such as God, religion, ethics and morals etc., Pannalal, though a believer in Marxist-Leninist path, considers Gandhi on par with or as above many so called secularists, and presents Gandhi's ideas in a fresh and modern milieu.

By appropriately placing Gandhi's ideas vis-à-vis Rabindranath Tagore, and Subhas Bose, Pannalal argues that Gandhi was more correct, if not absolutely correct, on the methods and strategies of conducting the freedom struggle, while simultaneously appreciating the counter narratives of Tagore and Subhas. During past several decades heated arguments have filled the political space on Gandhi's role and ideas on the issues such as dalits, women and workers which were also ably countered by Pannalal and consequently it may offer new insights into these areas. By redefining the ideas on class, class war and the employment of armed struggles in resolving class contradictions, through Gandhi's inputs, Pannalal invites all of us to relook our theory and practice. On an overall assessment of the work of Pannalal, we may say that Gandhism is shown in a progressive setting both in terms of history, and Gandhi as an individual in the course of history, and also as continuum of the progressive tradition initiated by Marx and Lenin. It's rare more so, because it has come from the Marxist-Leninist activist of yesteryears, and a contemporary of Gandhi. In the end, it urges both the Gandhians, and the Leftists for fresh dialogue, and to re-appreciate the areas of congruence and difference, for the progressive purpose of both and also in the interests of people's struggles for a more socialist state of affairs.

Dr. A. Raghu Kumar  
Advocate

Mobile: 9441015709  
9000064165

Email: [avadhanamraghukumar@gmail.com](mailto:avadhanamraghukumar@gmail.com)