



Mahatma Gandhi : His Views on Man and Machinery

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Abstract Gandhiji was not a visionary but a practical idealist. He was an accurate student of human nature having studied it in all its shades. His intensive tours of India and intimate contact with the people helped him to understand human nature in its right perspective. He was concerned with human nature not only as it was but also it could be trained and moulded. He did not believe that man was all good or an angel. He admitted that every one of us was a mixture of good and evil. The difference was only one of degree. He admitted the animal ancestry of man.

Key words: human nature, My Experiments, transformation of relationships

Introduction

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Popularly known as Mahatma Gandhi, was not a systematic academic thinker. His Political Philosophy did not contain a set of doctrines or dogmas, rules or regulations, injunctions or inhibitions, but it is a way of life. It indicates a new attitude or restates an old one towards life's issues and offers ancient solutions for modern problems. He never claimed that he had any cut and dry views. There was no rigidity about them. His whole life was an unending experiment. Mahatma named his autobiography as 'My Experiments with Truth'. About his own philosophy Gandhiji observed thus in 1936, "there is no such thing as Gandhism and I do not want to leave any sect after me. I do not claim to have originated any new principle or doctrine. I have simply tried in my own way to apply the central truths to our daily life and problems. The opinions I have formed and conclusions I have arrived at are not final. I may change them tomorrow. I have nothing to teach to the world. Truth and non-violence are as old as the hills. All I have done is to try

experiments in both on as vast a scale as I could do. In doing so, I have sometimes erred and learnt by my error. Well, all my philosophy, if it may be called by that pretentious name, is contained in what I have said. You will not call it Gandhism: there is no 'ism' about it". He was essentially a religious minded man, a humanist, and a man of action and intuition. He was a curious amalgam of a mystic and a pragmatist. In his own words he was not a politician masquerading as a religious man, but a religious man who entered politics. Although not a system-builder in the academic sense of the term, Gandhi has expressed many ideas which are highly useful and relevant to the modern age.

Formative Influences on Mahatma Gandhi

Gandhiji was influenced by various factors which moulded his ideas. The most important influence was that of the Gita which he read in 1889 and which remained his constant companion for the rest of his life Gandhiji himself wrote: "when doubts surround me, when disappointments stare me in the face, and



I see not one ray of light on the horizon, I turn to the Bhagavad Gita and find a verse to comfort me, and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming sorrow. My life has been full of external tragedies and if they have not left any visible effect on me, I owe it to the teachings of Bhagavad Gita".

He was also much influenced by the writings of Thoreau, John Ruskin and Tolstoy. From Thoreau's 'Essay on Civil Disobedience' he got much of his inspiration for civil disobedience and the non-payment of taxes. Thoreau's political philosophy was 'maximum cooperation with all people and institutions when they lead towards good and non-cooperation when they promote evil'. John Ruskin's book 'Unto this Last' had also an enormous influence on the life of Gandhi. From this book, Gandhi learnt three lessons: 1) That economy was good which was conducive to the good of all. 2) The work of a lawyer had the same value as that of barber. 3) The life of labourer was the life worth living. From Leo Tolstoy Gandhiji got some inkling into 'Christian anarchism'. Tolstoy's 'The Kingdom of God is within you' contains practically the whole of Gandhi's a non-violent, non co-operation programme in its essentials.

He was also influenced by the Upanishads, New Testament, and by the ancient teachings of Lao- Tse and Confucius and by the Jain and Buddhist writings. According to Rev.J.J.Doke, a personal friend of Gandhi in South Africa, it was the New Testament which awakened Gandhiji to the rightness and value of Satyagraha. A supreme instance of non-violent resistance, Mahatma Gandhi saw in the dying words of Jesus when he said, 'Father forgive them for

they know not what they do'. From Confucius, Gandhi learned the principle of reciprocity, according to which men should not do to others what they would not have done to them.

Gandhiji's attitude towards Man

Gandhiji was not a visionary but a practical idealist. He was an accurate student of human nature having studied it in all its shades. His intensive tours of India and intimate contact with the people helped him to understand human nature in its right perspective. He was concerned with human nature not only as it was but also it could be trained and moulded. He did not believe that man was all good or an angel. He admitted that every one of us was a mixture of good and evil. The difference was only one of degree. He admitted the animal ancestry of man. To quote him, "We were, perhaps, all originally brutes. I am prepared to believe that we have become men by a slow process of evolution from the brute". Even the greatest men of the world had their shortcomings. To quote him, "There is no one without fault not even men of God. They are men of god not because they are faultless but because they know their own faults and are ever ready to correct themselves".

This does not mean that Gandhiji believed that human beings were merely brutes and deprived. Sins and errors were not the true self of man. Man was able to mould himself and consequently Gandhiji had unshakable faith in human nature. Even the worst of the people could be transformed. There was a self-conscious will in man which could be used to revolutionise his life. To quote Gandhiji, "We were born with brute strength but we were born in order to realise God who



dwells in us, That indeed is the privilege of man and it distinguishes him from the brute creation”.

Gandhiji believed in the inherent goodness of human nature. He was convinced that man was by nature going higher. Human nature was in its essence one and every man had the capacity for the highest possible development. To quote him, “The soul is one in all. Its possession is, therefore, the same for everyone”.

It was mainly due to his firm conviction in the goodness of human nature that Gandhiji never condemned the individual but the system and tried to destroy it, if necessary, but always by non-violent methods, and replace it by another kind of system. “A non-violent revolution”, he declared, “is not a programme of ‘seizure of power’, but it is a programme of transformation of relationships”. India’s non-cooperation, as he explained, was neither with the British nation nor with the West; it was non-cooperation with the system the British had established in India, and, he believed, with the ending of the British rule the relations between India and Britain would be transformed into a new level of respect and understanding. His thinking with regard to class contradictions also was similar. “What is needed”, he wrote “is not extinction of landlords and capitalists but a transformation of the existing relationship between them and the masses into something healthier and purer”.

Gandhiji’s Views on Machinery

Gandhiji was not opposed to high science and technology. He wanted it to serve the human needs with a human face, and not

to destroy human values. The benefits of the machine and the production must reach the people. He observes, “How can I be against all machinery when I know that even this body is a most delicate piece of machinery? The spinning-wheel is a machine: a little toothpick is a machine. What I object to is the craze for machinery, not machinery as such. The craze is for what they call labour saving machinery. Men go on ‘saving labour’ till thousands are without work and thrown on the open streets to die of starvation. I want to save time and labour not for a fraction of mankind but for all. I want the concentration of wealth, not in the hands of a few, but in the hands of all. Today, machinery merely helps a few to ride on the backs of millions. The impetus behind it all is not the philanthropy to save labour, but greed. It is against this constitution of things that I am fighting with all my might. The machine should not tend to atrophy the limbs of man..... Factories run by power driven machinery should be nationalized, state controlled. The supreme consideration is man.”

“If we could have electricity in every village home, I should not mind the villagers playing their instruments and tools with the help of electricity. But then the village communities or the State would own power houses, just as the villages have their grazing pastures... The heavy machinery for work of public utility which could be undertaken by human labour has its inevitable place, but all that would be owned by the state and used entirely for the benefit of the people.”

Gandhiji also made a personal use of railways and automobiles and did not seriously object to their use by others. As



far as man-power and mechanical power are concerned, he rightly wanted the immense man-power and cattle power of India to be utilized first before turning to large-scale machinery. Industrialization, he held, might lead to greater production of goods, but not necessarily to greater moral progress. Thus Gandhiji's opposition was not to "tall buildings or large factories or to generation of electricity but to reckless industrialization or development, not technology but its misuse through greed". According to him scarcity of anything in the world is nothing but an 'artificial projection' by the vested interests. The scarcity of the essential commodities as we witness today, is largely due to the mismanagement of natural resources by the respective governments and the greed of the vested interests.

Relevance of Mahatma Gandhi

How relevant is Gandhiji's views on man and machine today? Even after seven decades after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, Gandhiji's ideals and leadership hold an extremely relevant to the contemporary society. He led the greatest mass movement and the most peaceful revolution in human history. That Gandhiji could convert men / women of clay into heroes and inspire the meek and the weak to strive with dignity and self-respect for freedom was one of his lasting contributions. As Romain Rolland has rightly felt, "Mahatma Gandhi has raised up three hundred millions of his follow men, shaken the British Empire and inaugurated in human politics the most powerful movement that the world has seen for nearly two thousand years."

Justifying Mahatma Gandhi's stand on machinery and technology, Philosopher – politician Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan said, it was 'a check against increasing mechanization of life' and that 'in a highly industrialized society men's minds act like machines and not as living organisms' and the spirit of man becomes lost in the wilderness of living'. Radhakrishnan observed that scramble for power and money and craze for machinery would adversely affect 'the grace of life and the dignity of civilization'. As Gandhiji warned long ago 'technology feeds our pleasure centres but is squeezing out our human spirit, intensifying our search for meaning'. For the Mahatma 'the supreme consideration is man'.

Gandhiji adopted the ideas of simplicity and high thinking and became the man of universe for the common man. The message of love and peace, of non-violence and Satyagraha, of the equality of all people, of harmony between all religions was a universal message for all societies and peoples. In view of its relevance, the United Nations has adopted a resolution in 2007 to commemorate 2nd October, Mahatma Gandhi's birthday, as International Day for Non-violence. It is a big tribute to Mahatma and recognition of the relevance of Gandhian Principles and ideas in today's trouble torn world.

The ambition of the 'Father of the Nation' was "to wipe every tear from every eye". The poor and the exploited were Gandhiji's main concern. His goal was the removal of poverty and human misery. The real India – the India of toiling masses and farmers – today desperately needs a Gandhiji to fight communal hatred, poverty, rampant



greed, widespread violence, terrorism, consumptive style of living, the corrupt bureaucrat – politician nexus and the shining India of the rich. Thus the Gandhian model and the Gandhian teaching are still relevant to the present day society. As Nani Palkhivala, the noted Jurist rightly observes, “The Mahatma dealt with problems which are timeless and universal, because they spring from enduring weaknesses of human nature and human society. Since the solutions he found for them were based on eternal verities, his influence and relevance are also timeless and universal”.

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