

GANDHI'S CONSTRUCTIVE POLITICS: A RESEARCH NOTE

Tanushree Singh* and Akshara Anirjita**

M.K. Gandhi (1869-1948) was a complex product of his times — the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century India, the United Kingdom, and South Africa, rather the world at large. An Indian nationalist par excellence, he was also an unparalleled pacifist and citizen of the world. He was a traditionalist (e.g. support for the Hindu *varna* system though not of the caste system), modernist (e.g. an Indian nationalist), and postmodernist (e.g. his concern for generativity and sustainability of the limited resources of nature) – all rolled into one.

Gandhi has often been considered a philosophical anarchist; he was certainly a man believing in the civil society much more than in the state. Of course, he had his own visions of both the civil society and the state, very different from how these terms are commonly understood in everyday life. Putting the recurrent two phases of activities, both in South Africa and in India, in a coherent theoretical perspective, we postulate that his every *satyagraha* was followed by a politically quiescent phase before mounting another *satyagraha*, during which he undertook social work. During these phases, he addressed social evils and sought to reform them to the best of his abilities, time, and energy. It was during one of these phases, in fact, between the Salt *Satyagraha* of 1931 and the Quit India Movement of 1942, that Gandhi wrote his *Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place*, in 1941 and revised it in 1945. His vision of State was never coherently written about, except in his reflections on both the society and the State in the *Hind Swaraj*. His 1941 tract is entirely devoted to the reconstruction of the society on his utopian ideas with comprehensive social reforms.

* Research Scholar, Centre of Gandhian Thought and Peace Studies, Central University of Gujarat, Gandhinagar

** MPA at NYU School of Public Service, New York University, New York

One often stumbles upon Gandhi's quote, 'My real politics is constructive work.' A major part of his life was indeed spent in transforming society and not politics. A basic premise underlying the thought was that real power lies not with the parliament or with the law makers but with the people. If they are on the right path, there is no way that the country can go wrong. He focused on a number of areas that needed transformation, the main being:

1. Communal unity: It pained him to see the contentions among Hindus and Muslims and hence the call for communal unity. He wished for everyone to see each other as their brethren. It was significant for him that this mutual love and respect comes from the heart, not for political gains but for the love of each other.
2. Removal of untouchability: He often claimed, if *shastras* uphold practices as dishonourable as untouchability then they are not *shastras*. Gandhi considered untouchability to be a sin and a satanic act which would eventually become the reason of Hinduism's fall.
3. Prohibition: Liquor and other drugs always disgusted Gandhi. He asked women and students for their help to fight against the evil. The idea was to drive the addicts away from liquor with their love and care. The Congressmen also had a part to play. He advised them to set up recreation centres that have cheap refreshments and games. The idea behind such prohibition was self-purification.
4. Khadi: Not only did *khadi* discourage the use of foreign goods, it also, according to Gandhi, inculcated an idea of equality, self-governance, and self-reliance.
5. Other village industries: These could not exist without *khadi* hence making it an essential pre-requisite. Village industries like tanning, soap-making, oil-pressing, paper-making, etc. were significant in making the villages self-sufficient and attaining *swaraj*.
6. Village sanitation: the condition of the villages was met with revulsion. Gandhi often described the villages as being so filthy that you are forced to stuff your nose and shut your eyes. Cleanliness, he advocated, was next to godliness. He urged the villagers to keep their surroundings clean without being dependant on the scavengers.
7. Basic education: Gandhi's idea of education aimed at an overall development of the child, of the mind and the body alike which would in addition, keep the child rooted.

8. Adult education: The villagers barely have any idea of the roots of foreign rule and are unaware that they themselves have allowed its strengthening. They must be given political education, both by words of mouth and literary. He wanted the teachers in the Congress to come up with a course framework for the purpose.
9. Women: Women were long suppressed by men, the society, and the laws that bound them. Gandhi believed they have equal rights and must be given appropriate opportunities to change their own destiny. Instead of treating them as objects, they must be considered as comrades.
10. Education in health and hygiene: He gives utmost importance to a healthy mind coupled with a healthy body. Diseases can be fought with and death rates can be brought down if one keeps their minds and bodies in a good shape.
11. Provincial languages: Mother tongues, he believed, were majorly ignored, as much as people stammering while trying to express their thoughts. The road to *swaraj* becomes even more tough if one fails to understand the process. For this, they need to know both their national and provincial languages well.
12. National language: Each Indian must know how to read and write Hindi, the national language of India. He criticised the Congressmen for having failed in ensuring the same and not being able to break the spell that English had cast on us.
13. Economic equality: If a society is not equal economically, a violent uprising is inevitable. With this idea in mind, Gandhi came up with the concepts of trusteeship and bread-labour. It shocked him to see the contrast between Delhi's palaces and slums. He disagreed with the bulk of wealth being concentrated in a few hands and thus, wanted it to level down.
14. Kisans: Attaining *swaraj*, Gandhi believes, needs a number of hands at work and *kisans* comprise the largest population. Hence, they are a significant lot for him. The Congress should comprise them but it does not. Their power of non-violence can take India to heights but they need to be made aware of this power.
15. Labour: He uses the Ahmedabad Labour Union model to explain what a union must look like. The Ahmedabad Union was non-violent in its measures; was not involved in party politics; had their own schools, hospitals, printing press, living quarters, *khadi* depot, etc.

16. *Adivasis*: He gives importance to the service of the *adivasis*, they might be a few in number but this does not in any way take away the credit they deserve.
17. Lepers: He was disappointed to see how the lepers in India were neglected. The only institution that cared for them was near Wardha, and was inspired by Vinoba Bhave, a prominent disciple of Gandhi. In Gandhi's belief, to get independence, it was essential to ensure that the poor and lepers were adequately cared for.
18. Students: He gave a few suggestions for the future of the nation. These are: Indian nationals must not be attracted by violence; should not be involved in party politics or strikes. It is not their *dharma*; they should give at least an hour a day to spinning; they must be *khadi* users; they must always ensure that they do not impose *Vande Mataram* or the National flag on anyone; and must do their own scavenging and cleaning.

If *khadi*, itself, symbolised the economic future of a self-sufficient India, the wheel that produced this *khadi* is emblematic of Gandhi's constructive programme. Gandhi believed the 'master key' to non-violent Independence was economic equality, in that it dismantled the structural violence of poverty and attacked the internal threat of concentrated wealth accumulation to the nation. The constructive programmes were also the tenet of the '*Satyagraha*' movement that most obviously reveal the 'practical orientation' and 'transformational realism' of Gandhian politics, that teleologically works towards 'progressive social and political reform', as opposed to the merely moral, idealistic or ethical.

It was in South Africa, that Gandhi initially developed his 'combination of intense spirituality and canny pragmatism' that contributed to his political leadership in India. It was in the late 1880s and early 20th century that Gandhi began to organise acts of civil disobedience and protests against discriminatory policies passed against Indian migrants and indentured labour in apartheid South Africa. While Gandhi has been criticised for his lack of action against racial hierarchies pervasive in an apartheid society, his civil disobedience for the cause of Indians in South Africa achieved certain Relief Acts and taught him the possible strategic advantage of both non-violent movements and of religious unity amongst Indians. It was in South Africa that Gandhi initially condemned indentured labor as 'an evil thing', began disseminating the principles of *Satyagraha* in his newspaper the '*Indian Opinion*', and decried the caste system as a

'tyrannical' system that he saw it as an 'embrace of falsehood'. These were the foundations of what he would later call his 'constructive programme'.

For Gandhi, constructive work served as an alternative to the traditional Indian society and the hierarchies within it that he had qualms with. The inclusion of the masses was also an incontrovertible initial step in realising any meaningful civil disobedience movement.

When he came back to India after his much-stretched stay in South Africa, the problems that he witnessed in his beloved country were far beyond merely political. True, the colonial rule was at the forefront and a layman's eye and understanding were not enough to look beyond it. Gandhi was one of the very few who realised that it is not only the British who were the issue but the Indians themselves were the root of many hardships that they faced. He had a keen eye for self-introspection which many lacked. He was very open about what he liked and disliked about both the foreigners and his own countrymen, forming a very neutral stance for both the lots.

Gandhi's idea of freeing India was to take the path of non-violence and truth, principals that he held on to dearly throughout his life. Unlike, Machiavelli, the 16th century Italian philosopher, who was of the idea that the ends justify the means, for Gandhi both means and ends were of utmost importance and could not lack in either of the principles that he stood for. His beliefs become even more evident when we look back and examine the incidents that happened around him. The violence in 1922 at Chauri Chaura ended with Gandhi going on a five-day fast as he took the blame on himself and withdrew the movement he had launched. It also made him realise that Indians were yet to fully grasp his ideas.

Reading Gandhi himself and writings on him, one cannot ignore an insinuation about him being rather hypocritical about many of his notions, specially his ideas on untouchability. For instance, despite carrying the baton for the upliftment of the *Dalits*, he was often regarded as their enemy. He strongly believed that untouchability is a sin and must be done away with in order to attain *Swaraj*. At the same time, he rejected the idea of inter-dining and inter-marriage; did not accept the food offered to him by the untouchables and instead asked them to cook for him in his house. Nevertheless, on the contrary, he was of the belief that once they bathed, coming in contact with them was not a problem at all but before that, it was a matter of hygiene. He explained it further by mentioning how mothers do the cleaning for their child but are never treated the way the caste Hindus treat the untouchables. He had no intentions of getting rid of the varna system because it served the purpose of

decision of labour and inculcating a sense of duty in the people. However, every member of the said system must be treated equally. He considered the job of the scavengers to be the most essential one because their job ensures the well-being of the entire society and this was the fundamental idea behind his fight for their equality.

The Modi administration has reinvented Gandhi as a champion of cleanliness and rural toilets via the '*Swaccha Bharat Abhiyaan*'. While village sanitation was definitely an important tenet of Gandhi's politics, Modi's emphasis on this factor has been accompanied by a complete 'invisibilisation' of Gandhi's devotion to the principles of nonviolence and unity. Modi also touts the right wing Hindu supremacist V.D. Savarkar as his 'ideological mentor'. Modi is also a proponent of the same Hindu nationalism that has always stood in stark and hostile contrast to Gandhian ethos all the while coopting Gandhi's image in speeches and international op eds. In *Constructive Politics: Its Meaning and Place* written by Gandhi, himself, the first chapter is titled 'Communal Unity'. Just as any mass movement is impossible without the inclusion of all members of society, the goals of constructive politics cannot be achieved unless each of its formative tenets are adhered to. In other words, any embrace of rural cleanliness and sanitation is futile without a dedication to religious harmony, a denunciation of communal nationalism and a devotion to economic and caste equality.

References

- Biswas, S. (2018). *Gandhi's Approach to Caste and Untouchability: A Reappraisal*, *Social Scientist*, 46(9–10 (544–545)), 71-90. doi:10.2307/26611325
- Government of India. Ministry of Law and Justice, 2019, *The Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019*, Number 47 of 2019, The Gazette of India.
- Government of India. 1955, *The Citizenship Act, 1955*, Number 23, The Gazette of India.
- Gandhi, M.K. *Constructive Programme Its Meaning and Place*, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1941, first edition.
- Gandhi, M.K. *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1958.
- <https://www.gandhiashramsevagram.org/voice-of-truth/gandhiji-on-khadi-and-hand-spinning.php> (Accessed: 21.10.2020)
- <https://www.ias.edu/sites/default/files/sss/Mantena%20Another%20Realism.pdf> (Accessed: 21.10.2020)
- <https://mettacenter.org/nonviolence/constructive-programme/> (Accessed: 25.10.2020)
- https://www.mkgandhi.org/swadeshi_khadi/whatiskhadi.htm (Accessed: 30.10.2020)

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/10/22/gandhi-for-the-post-truth-age> (Accessed: 5.11.2020)

<https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/gandhi-and-south-africa/> (Accessed: 6.11.2020)

<https://thewire.in/communalism/narendra-modi-amit-shah-mahatma-gandhi-cao-muslims-minorities> (Accessed: 10.11.2020)