

## Alternatives: Interrogating Gandhi's Narratives

by Gajendra Kumar

*Who can deny that much that passes for science and art to-day destroys the soul instead of uplifting it: and instead of evoking the best in us, panders to our basest passions.*

M.K. Gandhi, *Young India*  
23 January 1933.

It is only when the modern-day scientists, industrialists, environmentalists, activists and states(wo)men realized to their great horror and dismay that the unbridled growth of science and technology will lead the world to inevitable disaster and doom that they started gravitating toward alternative discourses of "development" and "progress". From the *Vedas* (for example, the *Atharvaveda*, *Bhoomi Sukta*-12.1-12.63, which foregrounds a global environmentalism), the Buddhist and the Jain scriptures, *The Bible* (e.g. "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the Earth") to the visions of spiritual activists like Thoreau, Ruskin, Carlyle, Leo Tolstoy, Spengler, Gandhi and the later-day activists such as Sunder Lal Bahuguna, Chandiprasad Bhatt, Medha Patkar and Arundhati Roy, there seems to be an uninterrupted series of discourse—though largely ridiculed and suppressed by the high priests of reason, science and technology—of humane development and environment-friendly progress. And one cannot find a more bellicose, though non-violent, critic of modernity or western civilization than Gandhi whose narratives constitute a chain of discursive protest against a materialist, consumerist civilization which predate the fashionable critiques of Foucault and party. For example, Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* (1909) may easily be read as a resistance-narrative that cautioned humanity against the maddening march of materialist society (Eastern or Western) and unethical,

instrumental rationality, much, much before the protagonists of post-modernism and anti-reason took over and started peddling their esoteric yet fashionable academic theories.

Re-claiming Gandhi in different domains of theory and practice is a new development in India as the claimants have now exhausted all possible alternatives to resist modernity or its variant post-modernity. Thus Gandhi provides alternatives to culture-critics like Bhikhu Parekh, Ashis Nandy, U.R. Ananthamurthy, Nirmal Verma, Makarand Paranjape and Sudhir Kumar and others whose interpretations of Gandhi's narratives lead to the Gandhian theory of literature.

That is why S.B. Kumar's book under review is important, its inadequacies notwithstanding. First of all, there is a sense of *deja vu* when one opens this book—as there are heaps of tracts and texts on Gandhian critique of western civilization. What, however, makes this book relevant is the zeal and sincerity with which Kumar presents his theses. In the first six chapters of the book, author maps out the tropes of different constituents of environment such as soil erosion, air and water pollution, depletion of forests, threatened wildlife, energy-crises and dangers of a nuclear holocaust, mindless industrialization and urbanization, consumerism, monstrous technology, psyche of modern man and the urgent need for decentralization, and then, tries to re-situate Gandhi in these contexts. In the last chapter, Kumar highlights the contemporary relevance of Gandhi to the project of saving and preserving the planet Earth. Kumar attempts to establish Gandhi as a human ecologist and environmentalist. He finds the powerful echoes of Gandhian praxis

*Environmental Problems & Gandhian Solutions:  
The Only Ray of Hope To The Present  
Ailing World*

by S.B. Kumar

Deep & Deep, New Delhi  
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in the magnacarta of environment-activism, that is, The Stockholm Declaration (1972):

The natural resources of the Earth, including air, water, land flora and fauna are especially representative samples of natural eco-system, must be safeguarded for the benefit of present and future generation through careful planning and management, as appropriate. . . . The man and his environment must be spared against the nuclear weapons and all other means of mass destruction

Gandhi could easily anticipate this inherent MAD (mutually assured destruction) syndrome the modern civilization was suffering from. He identified the causes of satanic "western civilization" as self-indulgence and desire and discoursed on how machine-based civilisation contains the pathogens of want and greed. True civilization, he insisted, lies in self-restraint, and not in the multiplication of wants. Gandhi underlined the dangers of insan industrialism and terrifying technology and chalked out the agenda of environmentalism:

Man must recognize the necessity of cooperating with natural. He must temper his demands and use and conserve the natural living resources of this earth in a manner that alone can provide for the continuation of his civilization (p.15.).

This pathology of modern civilization, which destroys environment and the entire ecological systems, is rooted in the evil of human greed and avarice—that find a congenial "environment" for cancerous growth in the industrial/consumerist societies. The virus of consumerism is now eating into the vitals

(advanced capitalist) countries, that are singularly responsible for exploiting, polluting and endangering our environment to the greatest possible extent, are now facing Gandhian *satyagrah* or non-violent opposition from different NGO's and pressure-groups (like Green Peace Movement). The non-violent demonstrations during the Seattle-Conference, the *satyagrah* offered by activists like Chandi Prasad Bhatt, Sundarlal Bahuguna, Medha Patkar, Arundhati Roy and a host of others bear ample testimony to the relevance and efficacy of Gandhian model of development at present. Moreover, in Gandhian discourse, the purity of means is as important as the desirability of ends. Technology, if it becomes an impure means, will bring about an impure end,

that is, disaster in other words. If one contemplates the famous Gandhian talisman before taking any step related to 'development' and 'progress', most of the issues related to the environment will be solved:

Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test: Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen, and ask yourself if the step you are contemplating is going to be of any use to him? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to Swaraj for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? Then, you will find your doubts and your self-melting away.

Sheel Bhadra Kumar's book is a timely reminder to the policy-makers of the developed and the underdeveloped worlds, though it is sometimes tautological and trite in its treatment of Gandhi's greatness. What one misses most in the book is the narration of so many small movements launched by the people all over the world in general, and in India in particular against the designs of multinational capitalism that, like Frankenstein's monster, poses a grave danger to its own creators first and the rest of humanity afterwards. Having said thus, it cannot be denied that such Gandhian discourses as these should be promoted and encouraged as most of them are written against the grain.

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### *Recent Publications of the Institute*

*Secular and Pluralistic Elements in the Idea of State in Early India* by Sibesh Bhattacharya, 2002 pp. 193 Rs. 250  
ISBN: 81-7986-025-6.

This book presents a comprehensive and critical account of the views of early Indian thinkers on the nature of political domain pertaining to the crucial issues of secularism and pluralism. The theme has been situated within the prevalent cultural and intellectual milieu and the analysis has been focused on some of the most tangled questions. The issues like those of state formation, the relations between the transcendental and sacred on the one hand and the worldly and political on the other, the historical evolution of the science of politics, etc., cover some of the focused areas. The historical context within which the discipline of politics has its genesis and growth and how that context influenced the outlook of the political thinkers have been clarified. Linkages between the existential diversity of the body politic and the compulsions of political power, pressures of elite groups, etc., have received special attention. How the perception of these linkages influenced the crystallization of the views on the role and functions of state has also been analyzed. The approaches of various schools of thought, particularly the

*arthasastra* and *dharmasastra*, to these questions have been examined in some detail and both the divergence and convergence of attitude between them have been elucidated. The book will certainly help a better understanding of some of the most urgent concerns of contemporary India.

*Political Order: The Vedic Perspective* by Ramashray Roy, 2002 pp. vii +345 Rs. 350 ISBN: 81-7986-029-9.

India with a very ancient background of Vedic as well as non-Vedic traditions has pleaded for a political order whose central sustaining idea has been the concept of *dharm* in its ultimate all-engrossing metaphor of integration. The Vedic concept of man, society and nature as divine has been responsible for the development of the idea of social order subsuming the political order as the central integrating force for unity, stability and development in an integrated manner.

This book is a modest attempt to initiate the process of probing deeply into the complex structure of the Vedic ideas with a view to presenting a correct perspective on political order from the Vedic point of view. How far this ancient ideology would be applicable to modern system of political order is a matter of research.