

Gandhi's Vision and Values

"Excerpted from Gandhi's Vision and Values - The Moral Quest for Change in Indian Agriculture"

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"Today 50 years after the assassination of Gandhi and more than eight decades after the publication of *Hind Swaraj* many concerned Indians, from India's heterogeneous citizenry, are slowly and intentionally calling for the acceptance of the concepts explained in his pamphlet as an alternative development model. In particular, the moral values which Gandhi practically illustrated in his community-oriented experiments in agriculture are persistently advanced as profound and credible answers to the ever-intensifying crisis now confronting India.

As India prepares for the third millennium and celebrates 50 years of independence from the British *raj*, its much neglected Gandhian economic thought and praxis demand an exhaustive re-examination. *Swaraj* as Gandhi repeatedly clarified, however, is not only political. 'Real home-rule [*swaraj*],' as Gandhi asserted 'is self-rule or self-control.' Therefore, Indians acting in the pursuit of true *swaraj* will have to cultivate and nurture their spiritual selves in a self-disciplined manner. It is only with this Gandhian understanding of *swaraj* that the real dangers of division and dependency -- arising from communal forces, corrupt local and national leaders, international financial institutions, and multinational corporations -- can be resolutely confronted. In fact, the main and practical contention of this work is that the six ethical and moral principles -- *swadeshi*, *aparigraha*, bread

labor, trusteeship, non-exploitation, and equality-together with the concept of *swaraj* have contemporary relevance and need uncompromising integration into Indian planning. As a point of departure, I have examined the implications of my suggestion only in relation to the agricultural sector. The Gandhian vision which I have portrayed is a means to rejuvenate the entire nation and all its other important sectors. Therefore, programs for social change and planning exercises in agriculture, on macro- or micro-levels, must be grounded in these moral values.

An awareness of Gandhi's philosophy in national planning and transformation of an agricultural society has not been totally absent in India during the post-independence years. As I have demonstrated- especially through exploration of current experiments and writings of Indian economists and planners-the contrary holds true. In fact, it is the volunteer-based, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), for the most part, which are assiduously working in a variety of areas to steer the people towards implementing, albeit selective aspects, Gandhi's *Constructive Programme* on a micro-level basis. Therefore, in different pockets of the vast nation people, particularly the poor and marginalized, are not only accepting Gandhian methods in their lives and economic activities, but gradually converting government officials and agencies to follow their lead. This, though an important and significant step, is clearly insufficient when the dimensions of the crisis are considered.

The inadequacy of the response is located in serious and distressing trends towards massive industrialization and mindless consumerism, in urban areas and towns, resulting in high unemployment and diversion of scarce resources. Together with these tendencies there is the more harmful disregard of moral and ethical principles. Here Gandhi's vision encounters its toughest challenge. Since its central tenets are based on voluntary effort and individual/community reflection and action it may appear that Gandhi's adherents cannot do much to remedy matters. This clearly is not so.

The adoption of *satyagraha* ('The way to it [*swaraj*] is through *satyagraha*') and nonviolent noncooperation will oblige the elected political representatives to honestly execute the wishes of the poor and oppressed millions in the rural areas and effectively stop those programs which are not in the interests of the entire polity. In situations where the representatives

do not act according to the wishes of the people, Gandhi said 'we can protest and teach people to resist and make it clear to the Government that it cannot look us in this manner.' The path-breaking work undertaken in Ahmedabad, Ralegan Siddhi, and Seed provides substantial, though differing, examples by which Gandhi's vision for social change can certainly be set in motion in the India of the twenty-first century.²

In addition, the gap between awareness and action on a mass scale in India can be bridged by the people directly addressing the important question of who benefits from individual/collective apathy and action. As a valid basis for social change in the interests of the entire community there is enough to be learnt from the selfless dedication of Ela Bhatt, Baburao Hazare, and the villagers of Seed.

What is crucial to recognize, as Gandhi repeatedly asserted in *Hind Swaraj*, is that adoption of either modernity or tradition has to enhance both the spiritual and the material well-being of the individual and society. Gandhi's philosophy and experiments in agriculture cannot be construed simply as a return to tradition, which they are in a very crude sense. Gandhi's vision for free India, even the struggle for independence, explicitly depended on whether it brought 'bread to the mouths of the people ... for the poor bread is their God.' In fact, if India could adopt Gandhi's six moral principles and as a result only bring bread to all of its disempowered multitudes, then that in itself is true *swaraj*. That the present course of planning, as my critique of India's various Five Year Plans indicates, has enslaved and oppressed millions of poor Indians, especially in the agrarian sector, is a truism. A fundamental moral change has to be effected.

What India needs in its agricultural sector, as Gandhi envisaged in his *Constructive Programme*, are millions of *lok sevaks* selflessly devoting themselves, together with the village community, to the singular tasks of tapping the vast reservoir of human power to raise crops which will primarily feed the peasant, his/her family, and the village. In time this will make them self-sufficient and provide gainful employment to all. As a consequence, cultivators and peasants will be motivated to increase selectively the productivity of impoverished soils through adoption of scientific methods, and ensuring that critical agricultural output keeps ahead of population increase. Once this balance is achieved, then local self-help work projects will feed, clothe, and educate every child, woman and man.

Simultaneously, local initiatives can foster the production of goods in cottage industries for primary consumption based on the principles of need and consequently exchange. In such a positive and caring environment resolution of disputes through harmonious reconciliation of competing interests and appeals to the rich and elite to respond to their *dharma* is possible. These steps will recreate the fervor, which once ignited the nation, for authentic *swaraj*.

The skills and resources for these enterprises exist. Baburao Hazare's inspiring example in the village of Ralegan Siddhi to truthfully take on this responsibility and carry it on in a nonviolent manner is an eloquent testimony to what can be achieved through collective human grit and pragmatism. That simple experiment needs to be repeated in whatever relevant and applicable form, given India's diversity, in the millions of Indian villages.

What is certainly lacking is the political will and integrity on the part of India's elected leaders and the necessary enduring faith so pivotal for such an undertaking. This is why the crisis affecting India in its agricultural sector, and for that matter in other areas of its economy, is not entirely structural. The problem is at its core a crisis in human values. From Gandhi's early efforts in Phoenix to those at Sevagram, he diligently inculcated in his followers certain universal principles. He repeated the same experiments, namely, of creating community-oriented work projects, ensuring that the fundamental needs of the poorest were firmly kept in sight, and providing basic human necessities.

If India can revert to rechanneling its massive human resources towards these endeavors through a commitment to the Gandhian path it can resolve its crisis.

Today in some communities in developed countries there are sustained and solid agricultural programs for use of organic methods; a decreasing dependence on governments for initiatives; decentralization as a basis for local government; cooperatives for mutual sharing of all kinds of resources; and a deep consciousness that the environment is a finite and fragile entity. It may well be that Gandhian ideas find a fertile soil in societies which see the bane of affluence and taste the bitter fruits of inhuman and excessive industrialization.

Whatever the reasons for India's earlier lack of political initiative in adopting Gandhi's ideas and experiments in restructuring Indian agriculture, the choice today is between death and life for the millions of poor people who are caught in this human tragedy. If the examples of SEWA, Ralegan Siddhi, and the village of Seed are any indication of what is happening at the grassroots of Indian society, it is plain that ultimately the poor women, children, and men of this nation can return to the Gandhian message of self-reliance. By forming local, self-governing, and democratic political organizations it is possible to nonviolently resist oppression and exploitation both by the state and market forces. Radically restructuring the usage of the environment is not an empty slogan. Self-imposed curbs on one's wants and production for one's needs can be achieved by discipline and selflessness. Devoting oneself first to cultivate the land for basic nutrition and only secondarily for exchange value is a must. Realization that self-help and bread labor are useful methods to frontally attack the vicious circle of poverty is imperative. Creation of democratic cooperatives for managing and allocating human and non-human resources in the spirit of trusteeship is requisite. All these steps, as I have practically demonstrated, are achievable. They, however, need to be slowly undertaken with utter dedication to empower individuals and communities, through adherence to the spiritual principles of truth and nonviolence, to live ethically and in harmony with themselves and nature. The key to making Gandhi's vision a reality and practising his values is to persistently subvert selfish worldly pursuits with ethical livelihood. This is the immediate struggle every Indian, on an individual and collective basis, has to non-violently and passionately wage.

Notes and References

1. Gandhi, 'Hind Swaraj', Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi 10: 64.
2. Ibid.: 64; Gandhi, Village Swaraj: 92.
3. Gandhi, 'Interview with Nirmal Kumar Bose', quoted in Iyer, Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi 3: 596.