

THE CENTRAL TEACHING OF GANDHIJI : AN OUTLINE

The outline presented here assumes (i) that social philosophy is a part of philosophy, (ii) that a man may have a philosophy although he is primarily a man of action. It may also be mentioned that the presentation lacks the sophistication in the modern philosophical idiom which is expected in an item to be placed before present day students and teachers of philosophy. Nevertheless, I trust its main purport will be readily grasped. I may also add that even in social philosophy, as a man of action, Gandhiji directly offered decisions rather than arguments and logic in the formal sense had not much value for him.

Gandhiji's real contribution, to my mind, is in the field of social thought and action, and the following propositions outline its main points : (i) While the human being is full of imperfections and limitations, basically he is decent and would and does respond to reason, persuasion and affection. (ii) The norms of behaviour and value in social and individual spheres are identical. (iii) The only end which the human being can set to himself sensibly is Sarvodaya—or the all-sided well being and progress of all human beings, specially of the down-trodden. (iv) The fact that the history of mankind reveals a series of conflicts, need not be taken as contradicting the above account of human nature and social life, for history is also being made and there are signs that mankind is realizing the futility of the use of force or fraud. (v) Progress towards realizing the Sarvodaya Society could be seen to be in no sense impracticable if both in individual and social life we cultivate simplicity and decentralization. Simplicity is consistent with the utilization of scientific discoveries for providing amenities to vast masses of people and decentralization does not dispense with a national or even a world-state. (vi) With this view of human nature it follows that the use of force, or dishonesty in any sphere is unreasonable and ought to be avoided. The emphasis on purity of means arises out of this. (vii) Gandhi also indicates the need for an individual to discipline his body and mind in order to make it an adequate instrument to fulfil the characteristic objectives of human life.

As regards action, Gandhi thought basically of the common man and advocated self help in the fullest sense. His political (and

social) programme consisted of two strains – one – non-cooperation of such degree as possible, and the other constructive activity – which included items like Khādi, Basic Education, Village self-sufficiency, Communal harmony, Removal of untouchability and Trusteeship.

Together, his contribution in regard to human and social life seems to me to constitute a new step in regard to human advance and the developments of modern science and technology make it imperative for us all to adopt the direction it suggests.

Gandhi's outstanding achievement is due to the fact that he never spared himself, never neglected details and never gave up his convictions. He was in a very profound sense a born fighter and was ceaselessly active. He achieved that combination of universal love with strict and austere discipline, of the concrete with the abstract – of shrewdness with daring vision which is the mark of extraordinary greatness and is the pre-requisite of outstanding achievement.

I have not, in this short contribution, dealt with what may be called the logical assumptions or metaphysical belief of Gandhiji. For what it is worth, I may state that he has not given any serious thought to the question in a theoretical sense or made any significant contribution to it. This is not to say that the position he takes is altogether invalid or has no substance or truth, but only that Gandhi is here only making use of what is more or less common and conventional heritage. His use of words like Truth and God is basically related to his social and human philosophy and not to ontology or logic. On the other hand, while it is true that Gandhiji did not make a special contribution to metaphysics or religion, it is wrong, as some do, to ignore the religious foundation of all he thought or did or to suggest that his achievement is marred or handicapped by his religious approach. Many eminent Gandhians prefer the term spirituality, but that term is itself ambiguous and may mean little in itself. Gandhi has indeed achieved in the field of social reform and awakening more than any secularist; also with regard to religion he deepened and concretized the religious approach by emphasising that service to God meant service to man.

Gandhi understood his role in life as that of a man of God, the motive force of whose activities was essentially religion and even

more specifically moral. I have sometimes wondered whether the effort, sincere and intense as it was, was not to some extent artificial and egocentric in a sense in which true spirituality would not be. As one comes to think of it, all stupendous and objective achievement probably has this characteristic and perhaps it is indeed true in a way that the greatest amongst us are bound to remain unknown or unrecognised.

There is another point to be noted in this connection. Gandhi being a man of action with vision, allowed or tolerated compromises although never accepting them as necessary. While this explains his practical success it also, in a sense, vitiates it, as achieved through means of doubtful purity. It is true that Gandhi said this was due to his imperfections and was also right in maintaining that one should always aim at and speak of the highest. But this, at lower levels, opens up a sphere for duplicity which is a dangerous element. Many of Gandhi's professed followers illustrate how dangerous it can be.

No man of action in history expounded and tried to propagate these ideas so clearly and persistently as Gandhi did and these teachings well understood seem to provide the best answer to the problems which are facing the world today. In building up our nation we could not possibly have a better guide. It is in no sense turning back on science and technology but rather suggests how to make the wisest use of them. Gandhi's roles as a man of religion and as a patriot are also important and he has made characteristic contributions in these fields but his achievements here are neither unique nor without serious blemishes. As a result of my study of Gandhi's life and activities and his utterances and in the context of what I said above here are a few observations and points for discussion : (i) Gandhi's extraordinary, moral and spiritual development bears the mark of his initial limitations and his environment (field of action) and is artificial and egocentric in a sense which impairs perfect spirituality. This probably is the cost which has to be paid for impressive and objective achievements. (ii) That Gandhi's teachings are superior to his personality to a greater extent than is the case with many other great men, some of whom are greater than their teachings and achievements. (iii) Gandhi's position regarding the relation of ends and means, and his claim that politics is a proper field of action for a saint are not valid except in a very

special sense and that they do not contradict the position of a person like Tilak which Gandhi deliberately contested. (iv) That, by and large, Gandhi's teaching seems at least today to have made very little impact on national policies and action either official or non-official and that even the best of Gandhians have not, since Gandhi's passing away, shown the courage, the spirit of sacrifice and the sense of conviction which one associates with Gandhi. (v) Neither Gandhi's message of constructive self-reliant activity nor his insistence on the removal of injustice and untruth has been substantially heeded even by persons who admittedly and professedly are genuine Gandhians. (vi) As a result, Independence, which could have meant so much more for the common man and should have truly *made* the nation, has encouraged indifference, idleness and a lack of sense of responsibility which do not augur well for the future of the country.

During the course of most discussions on Gandhi certain basic points of criticism about Gandhiji's approach and achievement are made. What follows is a brief summary of these points and the replies which could be made to them.

Points of Criticism

(1) The notion of Sarvodaya is a good slogan but understood concretely is found to be self-inconsistent. (2) The peace which Gandhi seems to seek is with justice, and freedom. (3) The landlord and the tenant each is right in his own way and a conflict is, therefore, inevitable. (4) Jinnah was as sincere as Gandhi and there isn't anything to choose between them. (5) Since men differ in intellectual and moral equipment and in the context of their existence the talk of equality of treatment or identity of convictions and views is unreal. (6) To say that we are not bound by history is to ignore proved determination in events. (7) The common man is no good judge of things, specially in the complex life of today. (8) Pursuit of simplicity will reduce men to a hand-mouth existence worthy of animals.

My reply to these points is briefly as follows : (i) Sarvodaya is *not* a slogan; it is an attempt to hold fast to an important characteristic of man and the plea which Gandhi makes is that we should so arrange our affairs as to make this truth about ourselves prevail in the practical situations of life; (ii) Gandhi

never sought peace which was inconsistent with honour, justice and freedom and as a matter of fact, lasting peace is necessarily related to justice and freedom; (iii) The natural inequality between men regarding intellectual capacity etc. is strictly irrelevant to the moral equality which Gandhi believes in and wished to work for. Nor is even intellectual inequality so great as most city-bred conventional academicians are prone to believe; (iv) No conflict is necessary between landlord and tenant to the extent each of them is right and realizes the truth that together they have to make best use of the land and fruitfully share in the goods it produces. This applies also to other spheres of life; (v) It is not correct to say that Jinnah was as sincere as Gandhi. Admittedly, Jinnah took a deliberate pose; only under the circumstances it was effective. Events have actually proved and are proving that even if it is true that Gandhi did not succeed, there was truth in what he said and the acceptance of that alone will set matters right; (vi) The notion that the common man is not a good judge is invalid. Even recent Indian history shows that basically the common man is a sound judge of the situation (so vitiated by appalling leadership) and is decent. He has also proved that he can rise to the occasion in crisis. As a matter of fact, the only hope on the Indian horizon is that the common man is still not unresponsive to good sense, and character; (vii) History is certainly useful and must not be ignored. But any careful study of history itself shows that history is constantly being made and that is done by attending to aspects of man and nature which have been neglected—one such aspect is the essential reasonableness of man. Men of genius, moral prophets and great men of action have always done this; (viii) Simplicity means the refusal to pursue material amenities and goods for their own sake and endlessly. It does not mean turning one's back on the proper use of scientific technology for the deliverance of man from abject dependence on nature. It only gives a much needed warning against thoughtless greed.

Finally, I may say that the kind of approach in the queries raised has its origin in a deep, if perhaps unconscious, resistance to anything out of the way and unpreparedness to think for oneself and take risks which the achievement of truth needs.