

8. Gandhi ✓

## GANDHIAN THOUGHT VIS-À-VIS INDIGENOUS IDEOLOGY

### SOME REFLECTIONS FOR AN INTEGRAL HUMANISM IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

**Joseph Marianus Kujur**

*"As long as there is violence which threatens the very future of the human race, the relevance of Gandhi would continue. He would remain relevant till this danger of total annihilation of the human race is removed."*

J. P. Narayan

Two considerations that need attention at the outset of this paper in the light of the above title are: one, Gandhi did not have a direct contact with the indigenous people, nor is there any specific treatment of their problems in his writings; and, two, there is seemingly a dialectical relation between the Gandhian thought and indigenous ideology.

#### 1. GANDHI'S FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH TRIBES

Gandhiji came face to face with the natives of South Africa belonging to various tribes, namely, the Zulus, the Bachuanas, the Basutos and the Swazis, etc., for the first time. He was shocked to see the plight of about five million natives politically controlled by a meagre 2.5 million Europeans. Gandhi was a witness to the discrimination of the blacks first by the Dutch when they started their colony in South Africa in the middle of the 17th century, and later by the British who overpowered the former in

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the first half of the 19th century. The basis of the discrimination of the local Negroes was 'color'. Their dignity as human beings took a back seat as the Negroes were looked upon as pre-scientific, pre-logical, incapable of any rational thinking. The attitude of the white was that of superiority and ethnocentrism. The rights and privileges of the blacks were insignificant for the white minority. This was apparently the first encounter of Gandhi with the indigenous population who had lost their right of self-assertion. In the context of India we have enough and more sources to show Gandhi's involvement with the low caste whom he called *Jarijans*, meaning 'children of God', but little do we hear about Gandhi's involvement with the aboriginal, the native, the tribal who are the indigenous people of India though the Government vehemently denies the existence of any 'indigenous' people in the country.

## 2. GANDHI'S RELATIONSHIP WITH INDIAN TRIBES: SOME OBSERVATIONS

Once Gandhi was asked why he paid little attention to the tribals, he said, "I have entrusted that part of our work to A. V. Thakkar"<sup>1</sup>. Thakkar was a social worker, who had headed the fact-finding mission to report on the allegation of police brutality in Gujarat. He was sympathetic to Congress without actually being part of it. He was a friend of the poor, the untouchable and the aborigine. The disinterested response of Gandhi regarding tribals is mysterious.

Gandhi also had an impact on the Tana Bhagat movement in Chotanagpur in the sense that the puritanical ideas of Gandhi penetrated the movement and the Oraon Tana Bhagats who were fighting the British for their socio-economic cause, now initiated another element of 'purification' in their sect. Hence, there was another division in the Oraon tribe itself on the basis of purity-pollu-

tion. Isn't Gandhi responsible for the division? Should he not be held accountable for the Hinduisation of the tribals?

The moral values Gandhi stood for were different from those of the tribals. Gandhi was stern in his dealings with those with moral lapses and his normal remedy was immediate expulsion from his *ashram*, always with a possibility of a return after real penitence. That may have been one of the reasons why Verrier Elwin was disillusioned with Gandhi.

To say that Gandhi was sympathetic to the tribals will be an exaggeration. In fact, Elwin, though a foreigner, was a real friend of the tribals. No doubt, he has been accused of exploiting tribal women and marrying them for his professional interests as an anthropologist. Nevertheless, if anyone had real love for the tribals of India, it was Elwin and not Gandhi. According to Guha, the Congress and politicians, to Elwin's dismay, would pay little attention to the necessities of the original inhabitants of their country.

It is said that it was Gandhi who gave the term 'adivasi' to the indigenous people. As far as the Oraons of Bihar are concerned Gandhi played a significant role either for the better or for the worse. Tribals, especially, the Oraons, Mundas and Kharias of Chotanagpur were uniting themselves against the atrocities by the British and their unjust laws that were alienating them from their land, society and culture. Rallies organized in Ranchi to oppose the British Government were highly successful. It is alleged that the Congress under the leadership of the then President of the Party Dr. Rajendra Prasad brought in division among the non-Christian tribals and the converts. The non-Christian tribals were allured by the Congress Party to merge with it.

Guha makes some interesting observations about the political developments affecting the tribals in the pre-in-

dependent India. Congress came to power in the elections of 1937. In the same year the 'Raj Gond' movement started. In August 1937, Elwin visited Gandhi at his new *ashram* at Wardha to acquaint him of the aboriginals' plight. But the latter "did not appear to think that the original inhabitants of India deserved any special consideration." Hence, Elwin thought that the Congress only wished to use tribals as cannon-fodder in their political campaigns and to convert them all to vegetarianism, abstinence and settled cultivation - the plough being the symbol of the Congress-Hindu culture sweeping the tribal areas.<sup>2</sup>

In spite of the fact that Gandhi was relatively passive towards the tribal cause if one tries to look into the Gandhian philosophy and indigenous ideology, one cannot but be amazed by the values, ethos and the spirit that are common in the two. The effort here is to point out how well intertwined they are. The question of the relevance of Gandhi in the present scenario, leave alone the next millennium, has indeed been problematic. Given the rampant corruption, indiscriminate violence and loss of the sense of respect and reverence for human life and dignity, for some it is quite normal to assert that the Gandhian model of humanism is outdated. There was a time during the British rule in India when Gandhian model of truth and non-violence offered a solution to the existent problems of the day. Times are much different now than ever before. Gone are the good old days. Hence, on the threshold of the 21st century when there is an atmosphere of suspicion, insecurity and apprehension everywhere, it is quite appropriate to ask whether Gandhian thought has any significant contribution to make in bringing in harmony, peace and prosperity in the third millennium, the values very much upheld and cherished by the indigenous community not only in India but also in many other countries all over the world.

The present Paper attempts to explore objectively the dialectics between Gandhian Thought and Indigenous Ideology for a meaningful inculcation of integral and holistic humanism in the next millennium.

### 3. FAITH: THE BASIS FOR ACTION

Kumar and Kumar<sup>3</sup> treat the Gandhian faith in its full contours, which resonates so well with the belief system of the tribes especially in the tribal belt of Bihar. Gandhi like the tribals is a theist. He firmly believes in one God and does not believe in a pantheon of deities. Tribes of Bihar are also basically monotheists, but they also believe in the existence of spirits - some benevolent by nature, others malevolent. They have to be appeased from time to time. Gandhi does not accept God's existence on any scriptural or revelatory authority. For Gandhi, God exists because of his personal faith in Him. According to the tribal world view, the Supreme Being does exist very concretely in their midst. It is He who created them and taught them the art of cultivation for self sustenance. The experience of the Supreme Being is encapsulated in their Genesis myth which is narrated at every important social activity of the tribe. In the Gandhian cosmology, the orderly world does exist. For him, the higher order is that of the Divine. The natural order is subordinate to the Divine order. Tribals believe in the hierarchy of beings. There are realms of the natural and the supernatural. Whereas in the natural world there is an egalitarian society, in the world of the supernatural, there is a hierarchy of beings. The Supreme Being is all goodness, the most beneficent one. He can never be wrong. The spirits, on the other hand, are subordinated to Him and depend on human beings for their sustenance.

In Gandhi's philosophy, the divine order is a moral order which is intrinsically and intuitively realized by every human being. This moral awareness is the basis of

human's awareness of God's existence, whose power sustains the moral order. This notion of the moral order among the tribes is also a foundation of their social order. It is Gandhi's conviction that the practice of moral living is only possible for the individual in relation to other human beings. For Gandhi, such cooperation can be based only on genuine love. *Ahimsa* or non-violence is the basic law of love, which according to Gandhi, should govern all human affairs and all their interpersonal relations. Tribes have very much the same ideology. Their belief-system nurtures and nourishes their pattern of behaviour. Religion thus becomes a way of life for them. Morality is part and parcel of their social framework. All the activities of a good tribesman are governed by his faith in one Supreme Being who is interested in the welfare of the whole mankind. That is why *Singbonga*, the Great God of the Munda tribe, sent messengers to the Asur, the iron smelters, to stop working on their bellows night and day as it was causing pollution in the entire universe. But when they refused to pay heed to the messengers, as a last resort, He destroyed them, in order to maintain the world order (a popular 'myth of the origin of the evil spirits' in the Munda tribe).

#### 4. GANDHI'S SARVODAYA AND TRIBES' PARTICIPATORY MODEL FOR THE COMMUNITY WELFARE

*Sarvodaya* means 'development of all'. Tribal society has evolved a socio-cultural mechanism to take care of the entire tribe. *Gola Dhan*, for instance, is a system of 'grain-bank', contributed by each family. In times of crises, people take loan from the 'grain-bank' and later return it at a low interest rate. Similarly, the tribal villages have a system of *madait* or *sangat* which literally mean 'co-operation'. In case a poor family needs the help of others, the whole village decides to work for it without any remuneration.

The recent trends of planned change have seen many developmental programmes not only in India but also in other developing countries. What is particularly interesting is that one of the reasons for the failure of various models of change like modernisation, is the insensitivity of the policy-makers and the implementation of the policies in the local cultures. It was Gandhi, the visionary, who first understood the setbacks of a model where power and power-relations were centralized. Gandhi was a charismatic leader who believed in change not only externally but also internally. In fact he insisted on the inner change of heart in order to effect an exterior change. According to Midatala Rani, "Gandhi's idea of social change may be described as the ideological combination of two schools of thought, namely, 'pacifism' and 'social revolution.' Elements of these two traditions converge to produce 'non-violent revolution.'"<sup>4</sup> Gandhi's concept of change for the betterment of human life and society is free from violence of all kinds. His concept of social revolution is non-violent. His concept of development is *Sarvodaya* through *Antyodaya*, implying the welfare of all through the weakest of the society.<sup>5</sup> The principle of *Sarvodaya* is illustrated in Gandhi's translation of Ruskin's book *Unto this Last*.<sup>6</sup> *Sarvodaya* as a strategy of development emphasizes harmony and ethical virtues of life rather than class struggle or domination. The concept of *Sarvodaya* upholds the moral and human values in economic and social reconstruction. Agriculture is considered by Gandhi to be the most appropriate basis of livelihood planning. Principles of cooperation and collective endeavour are central to the society. Education, moral uprightness, non-violence, simplicity, self-restrained life-style, etc., are the values to effect development of the *Antyodaya*, which is the development of the weakest in society.<sup>7</sup> The Gandhian model of development as a strategy emphasises '*aparigraha*' or non-acquisition in excess of need.' "Trusteeship" implies that

the property belongs to all and the holder manages it and takes care of it only as a socially responsible trustee.<sup>8</sup> The idea of communal holding of property and their participatory management comes very close to the tribal notion of property. Gandhi also advocated anthropo-centred appropriate technology for development. The dream of Gandhi is of decentralization of power to the village or locality, based on surplus human labour, small machine and appropriate technology.<sup>9</sup> The Gandhian model also emphasises decentralisation of socio-economic and political systems starting from the village to the highest level. Consensus is what Gandhi emphasises to avoid unnecessary confrontation, division and tyranny in the village.<sup>10</sup> The tribal notion of common holding of land and their attitude to the land expresses their solidarity for their tribe. Hence, the tribal worldview has a scope for the human-divine interaction in very concrete terms even in the holding of property. The village *panchayat* (elders of the village) works on the basis of communal brotherhood, equality and consensus. There is no question of domination whatsoever. When the *panchayat* is in progress, the *sarpanch* (the President of the elders) is only the president of the meeting; he does not take any decision on his own. He only articulates what the *panchayat* decides. There is consensus in all matters; there is no room for power struggle.

##### 5. STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE AND THE GANDHIAN AHIMSA

The second millennium is marked by violence - violence of all kinds, at all levels. In this century we have seen enough of the violence perpetrated by the state. We have also witnessed the terrorist violence, secessionist-insurgency, ethnic conflicts and caste wars. The phenomenon of violence has been universal. We have heard of the stripping of the women of the lower castes or of mi-

nority communities; we have also heard of the rape of the nuns, forced drinking of the human urine by the stripped nun, naked parading of the priest in the streets of Bihar, cold-blooded murder of priests; caste conflicts of Jehanabad claiming hundreds of lives; and naxalite attacks on their adversaries. Outside India we have experienced the blood bath in the LTTE attacks. Wars, be it in Croatia, Iraq, Kuwait, East Timor or Kargil, have claimed thousands of lives. Yet, the arms race among various countries goes on. Nuclear experiments continue with a renewed vigour under the pretext of national security. The exploitation, oppression and dehumanization of the tribals continue unabated. Gandhi seems dead; so does his ideology. To some, Gandhi had never been so irrelevant in the past as he is now. Gandhi, they say, has no solution for the present crises. The traditional tribal values of tolerance, harmony, equality, sharing, humility, honesty, simplicity and symbiosis with nature are being looked upon as irrelevant today not only by the non-tribals but also by the tribals. The real solution lies in 'tit for tat', in 'eye for an eye'. "Might is right" is the slogan of the day. To the serious people concerned about society, Gandhi is the prophet of the millennium because he can be relevant only in relation to violence, untruth, corruption and domination. His message makes one's life meaningful only in the struggle to rid the world of the process of dehumanisation of the weaker sections of the society. Gandhi is concerned about the structural violence which is perpetuated from one generation to another. According to Dashrath Singh, Gandhi's perception of structural violence was in terms of economics, politics, social systems and in the education-system.<sup>11</sup> Evil, according to Gandhi, was a by-product of social structure. Therefore Gandhi "hated capitalism, not the capitalist; racialism, not the white English men and women; untouchability, not the untouchables; modern civilization, not the western

people living in it. He very clearly saw the evil or violence present in the social structure itself.<sup>12</sup> For Gandhi, economics hurting the moral well-being of any individual or a nation was immoral and therefore sinful.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, for him, a political structure bereft of religion and morality cannot bring about dignity, inner freedom and justice to the citizens.<sup>14</sup> Like economic and political systems, Gandhi also saw violence in social systems of India as well as of the world. He was convinced that all societies were held together by non-violence in the same way as the earth is by the law of gravitation.<sup>15</sup> His ideal of social organisation was family. His paradigm of society was in the pattern of family *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* - the idea that the whole world is one big family. To be precise, in such a network of systems, every unit of society is "governed by the principle of interdependence, complementarity, cooperation, dedication towards duty, and enjoys same respect, social status, and importance."<sup>16</sup> Tribal values resonate with the Gandhian thought in the process of making this world a better place to live in. The reverence for life that the tribals have can be seen in their myths, ritual practices, and in their entire belief system.

## 6. PARADIGM OF INDIGENOUS EQUALITY AND GANDHIAN PROMOTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

A closer look at the Gandhian life and works automatically takes us into the realm of the Gandhian philosophy of being. What left a lasting mark in Gandhi's life was the suffering of the natives, the workers, the traders, the clerks - who were robbed of their human dignity in South Africa. Even before the promulgation of the Indian Constitution underlining the fundamental rights to her citizens, the right to dignity, equality and justice were promoted by Gandhi. In fact, it was precisely this cause that cost him his life. In a tribal society, egalitarianism is one of the most cherished values. Everybody in the tribe has equal status irrespective of his or her political clout

or economic strength. In the Genesis myths of the Oraon, Kharia and Munda tribes, 'pride' and 'disobedience' are said to be the greatest offences. If one is proud, one is sure to disobey or violate the law of the tribe, they argue. Any offence against the tribe is considered an offence against the Supreme Being Himself, which results in *chikilan* or ostracism from the tribe. This excommunication is not for the sake of punishment but from the point of view of reconstruction, reparation or reconciliation. Thus the Gandhian model of reconciliation, forgiveness, hatred for the sin and not the sinner, etc., makes a lot of sense in a tribal context. Every body in the tribe is equal and is treated equally. Welfare of the tribe is of prime concern. It does not mean that an individual is made a scapegoat. The law of the tribe is to uphold the dignity of each individual, to facilitate the peaceful and harmonious co-existence of the members of the tribe. The freedom of each individual is with responsibility toward one another, the value so much cherished by Gandhi himself as Dennis Dalton emphasising on the Gandhian *sutras* or formulas, draws a link among Gandhi's key ideas of freedom (*Swaraj*), duty (*Dharma*), non-violent action (*Satyagraha*), and self-reliance (*Swadeshi*).<sup>17</sup>

## 7. CONVERGENCE OF THE GANDHIAN THOUGHT AND INDIGENOUS QUEST FOR TRUTH

Though Gandhi has not been a crusader for the cause of the tribals we do find in his philosophy a space for indigenous-Gandhian discourse. Jain influence of non-violence and his application of the philosophy of God, world and man is operational in the daily life of the tribals. All life - plant, animal and human - is created by God according to the tribals, which is close to the Gandhian vision of reality visualizing a non-violent society. And in such a society Gandhi envisages decentralization of power and

village life which would arouse a sense of cooperation and fellow feeling. In such a society dignity of labour is maintained and the use of machine does not replace human labour. Every tribal's cherished dream 'equality' both economic and social, finds a central place in the Gandhian philosophy. Economic equality is the key to non-violence. Humans are all equal. Land is given to them by the Supreme Being; they are only stewards. Hence, the land can neither be sold nor misused. Gandhi's idea that man should free himself to serve society is nothing new to the tribals. Their life is an epitome of service and communitarianism. Here Gandhi's position that 'caste system was to maintain the social order' can be seen as a justification. Man-woman equality is yet another area of commonality between Gandhi and the indigenous people. Gandhi believed in an intimate relation between man and nature.

Times have changed down the decades. Old values have acquired new meanings, new interpretations, often to suit the convenience of the interpreters. Writing off some great personality's credibility under the pretext of its irrelevance is nothing new. Complacency makes the matter worse. It is difficult, no doubt, to follow the *Mahatma*, 'the great soul' but not impossible. The tribal quest for truth is concretized in their signs and symbols, feasts and festivals, rites and rituals, and in the sacraments of their daily life. If Gandhi could do it why not others? If the tribals can live a harmonious and an integrated life why not others? Gandhi was not a Mahatma by birth. He earned this title because of his magnanimity. In his early days as a student in India and later in South Africa, he was very much vulnerable to temptations like any other human beings, but he developed the moral strength to resist them. He had to struggle, but he did it. He proved that his spirit was stronger than his flesh. This precisely is the solution to all the problems in the world. In their struggle for survival tribals have been able to evolve a

mechanism to brave the challenges of violence, untruth, evil and death with fortitude, hard work, truth, benevolence and respect for life. The problem lies within oneself and not outside. It has its impact on the outside reality. Gandhi by finding solution to the inner realms of the being drives home the point that only inner freedom can lead one to the ultimate truth and nothing else. The prerequisite for inner freedom is openness and disposition of heart which leads one away from arrogance, pride and disobedience - the vices most abhorred in a tribal society as well. If the kings, rulers and the powers-that-be realize the importance of the Gandhian spiritual depth for the welfare of the world family *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, there is no reason why there should not be peace, justice and prosperity in the world. Jayaprakash Narayan, a great Indian leader, rightly said, "As long as there is the violence which threatens the very future of the human race, the relevance of Gandhi would continue. He would remain relevant till this danger of total annihilation of the human race is removed."<sup>18</sup> Henry Skolimowski opines that the problem during Gandhi's time, namely, casteism, corruption, violence, exploitation, misery, degradation and poverty, etc., have continued to this day. He calls for a second Gandhian revolution, "a revolution of consciousness, based on high moral values" and a clear realization as to what the true destiny of man is; a revolution "based on simplifying our life-styles, on cutting on consumption as a precondition of our peace with the poor, of our peace with nature, and of our peace with and within ourselves."<sup>19</sup> It will not be an exaggeration if we say that Gandhi is a bridge to the twenty first century as a spiritualist; *Satyagrahi* (non-violent) and a *Swadeshi* (self-reliant) par excellence.<sup>20</sup>

## NOTES

1. As quoted in Ramchandra Guha, *Saving the Civilized: Verrier Elwin, His Tribals, and India*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999) p. 53.
2. Elwin to H. C. Greenfold, Divisional Commissioner, Jabalpur, 15th Nov. 1937, Jabalpur Collectorate Records; as quoted by Guha, 1998, p. 108.
3. Kumar, Raj & Kumar, Vijendra, (ed.), *Mahatma Gandhi: Life, Ideology and thoughts, A Vision for 21st Century*, (Jaipur: Mangal Deep Publications, 1999) pp. 131-32.
4. *Gandhi Marg*, Vol. 20, No. 2, July-Sept. 1998, pp. 211-12
5. *Ibid.*, p. 213.
6. As treated by Midatala Rani in "Sarvodaya as a development Strategy," *Ibid.*, pp. 214-15.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, p. 215.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. "Gandhi and the Concept of Structural Violence," *Ibid.*, pp. 197-209.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, p. 201.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 203.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 204.
17. "Gandhi on Freedom, Rights, and responsibility," *Ibid.*
18. Sinha, M.P., ed., *Contemporary Relevance of Gandhi*, (Bombay: Nachiketa Publications Limited, 1970) p. 3.
19. "Need for a second Gandhian Revolution," *Gandhi Marg*, Vol. 20, No. 1, April-June 1998, pp. 81-85.
20. Romesh Diwan, "Gandhi, the US, and the World: A Bridge to the Twenty First Century," *Gandhi Marg*, Vol. 20, No. 3. Oct.-Dec. 1998.