

Gandhi's constructive programme – the other side of civil resistance

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Introduction

Gandhi was a special figure in the history of movements for social transformation, and as such has been the subject of countless studies – most recently by activist-scholars and students of civil resistance seeking to identify the key lessons that can be applied to more contemporary nonviolent movements for peace and justice. As such they have tended to focus on the large-scale satyagraha campaigns initiated by Gandhi in the Indian freedom struggle, such as the Salt March of 1930 that inaugurated a mass civil disobedience campaign and the 1942 'Quit India' campaign. Less attention has been paid to exploring the significance and contemporary relevance of the other major dimension of Gandhi's approach to transformation – constructive action to lay the foundations of new ways of living (what has been called by more recent generations of activists as pre-figurative politics).

Gandhi believed there should be two integral dimensions of any campaign to transform systems of oppression and injustice. There was the front-stage satyagraha of active nonviolent resistance, but there was also the constructive work to create alternatives to the systems and practices that were in need of change. Indeed, for Gandhi the constructive work was far more important than the active 'political satyagraha' in the struggle for emancipation and independence (*Swaraj*). As he advised his co-workers in 1944, through the constructive programme 'you can make the villages feel self-reliant, self-sufficient and free so that they can stand up for their own rights. If you make a real success of the constructive programme, you will win *Swaraj* for India without civil disobedience.'¹

Constructive action as foundation of the new society

Gandhi's understanding of *Swaraj* was far deeper and broader than political independence from Britain. Self-rule for Gandhi was premised on a fundamental moral-psychological transformation that each person had to experience for themselves – it could not be granted by some external agency. As he wrote in *Hind Swaraj*, 'It is *Swaraj* when we learn to rule ourselves ... But such *Swaraj* has to be experienced by each one himself.' From his perspective, to the extent that people individually and collectively practised self-rule and self-reliance, then they would make British rule irrelevant. As such

¹ Quoted in G. Ostergaard, *The gentle anarchists: A study of the leaders of the Sarvodaya movement for nonviolent revolution in India*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971, p. 3.

there was no distinction between means and ends insofar as he contended that, 'the attempt to win *Swaraj* was *Swaraj* itself.'

In this we can see how Gandhi in effect held his fellow-citizens responsible for their own subjugation. The way to achieve the necessary individual and collective transformation that would make *Swaraj* a reality was for people to transcend the practices that prevented them from achieving their potential as free human beings. And it was in his constructive programme that he began to explore the types of changes necessary.

His vision of the constructive programme embraced many overlapping dimensions. They included the development of village-based industries as one of the foundations for economic self-reliance, the use of local resources and the spinning of locally grown cotton for the production of hand-woven cloth (khadi), the promotion of community cohesion through the eradication of untouchability and the promotion of economic equality, the improvement in the status of women and the pursuit of communal unity between Hindus and Muslims.²

At its heart the constructive programme functioned as a series of experiments in self-rule, and as such constituted the necessary preparation for *Swaraj*/independence. As with so many other aspects of his life Gandhi was continually experimenting and developing his ideas on the changes necessary to throw off the hegemonic domination of the British Raj, and it was in his ashrams that they were most fully put into practice. As Judith Brown has noted, the ashrams or intentional communities which housed his most devoted co-workers, 'were places akin to laboratories where he could attempt to solve in microcosm problems that affected India on a much larger scale.'³ The ashrams also provided a training ground from which cadres of workers went out to develop a wider network of constructive initiatives, acting in the capacity of community development workers and animateurs throughout the countryside. As Krishnalal Shridharani, who participated in the Salt March, observed, the ashram graduates became 'the nuclei of the economic and spiritual regeneration of India's countryside.'⁴

² Khadi was a central element in Gandhian economics. Not only did it provide employment and meet a basic need for clothing, also symbolised i) the values of economic freedom and equality, ii) the swadeshi mentality of self-reliance, iii) the weakening of the city's traditional exploitation of the countryside, iv) the transcendence of the traditional division between mental and manual labour, and v) the decentralisation of production and distribution.

³ Judith Brown, in J. Brown & A. Parel, eds., *The Cambridge companion to Gandhi*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 55.

⁴ K. Shridharanai, *War without violence: A study of Gandhi's method and its accomplishments*, London: Victor Gollanz, 1939. P. 150. Accessible at <http://tinyurl.com/kgwraxm> (21.04.2017)

Exploring the relationship between *satyagraha* and constructive action

It should be clear from the above that a central theme of Gandhi's approach to social transformation was a kind of life-style politics – the creation of spaces within which individuals and communities might attempt to bring about the changes necessary for them to 'live the future now'. However, Gandhi was aware that there were inevitable institutionalised 'blockages' that would be encountered in the struggle for change. In such circumstances it was necessary to consider political action to try to overcome the barriers. He urged people to use all the constitutional space available in the pursuit of the necessary changes, but once these had been exhausted then it became necessary to consider other forms of pressure, including civil disobedience and forms of nonviolent resistance/confrontation (*satyagraha*).

For Gandhi civil resistance was a nonviolent alternative to armed struggle, and just as engagement in armed revolt required training, so it was with civil resistance – and the training ground for developing the discipline and commitment necessary for sustained civil resistance was the sphere of constructive work. Indeed, he was convinced that any attempt to launch a large-scale civil disobedience campaign would be likely to deteriorate into violent confrontations once people's passions were aroused, unless the bulk of the participants had been trained and disciplined for nonviolent resistance – and he believed that the key medium for this training was involvement in different forms of constructive action. As he wrote in *Constructive Programme*, 'Training for military revolt means learning the use of arms ending perhaps in the atomic bomb. For civil disobedience it means the constructive programme.'⁵

He did not believe that small-scale local level *satyagraha* required trained participants, so long as there was a cadre of disciplined activists to lead and coordinate the action. But, as he wrote in 1941,

... when Civil Disobedience is itself devised for the attainment of Independence, previous preparation is necessary, and it has to be backed by the visible and conscious effort of those who are engaged in the battle. ... Civil Disobedience in terms

⁵ M. Gandhi, *Constructive programme: Its meaning and place*, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing, 1941, p. 4.

David Hardiman has pointed out that the discipline required for large-scale nonviolent resistance could be acquired without involvement in the constructive programme: 'For example the Sikh Akalis in the early 1920s demonstrated extraordinary levels of nonviolence made possible through religious faith and a military style discipline. ... There were no significant Gandhian-style constructive activities in their villages at this time. The nationalist movement led by Gandhi demanded nonviolence at that time, but this could be taken up and expressed in different ways by different groups without formal Gandhian training.' (Personal communication, 11.05.2017)

of Independence without the cooperation of the millions by way of constructive effort is mere bravado and worse than useless.⁶

So how was involvement in the constructive programme necessary for a sustained and large scale civil resistance movement?

i) *A popular movement requires the participation of the people*

In a recent study of the popular unarmed Palestinian resistance to occupation, carried out by Marwan Darweish and I, one of the activists we interviewed in 2015 observed that what the Palestinians called 'popular resistance' was no longer popular, insofar as the local people were no longer prepared to participate. Why should they risk injury, imprisonment or a large fine by participating in protest actions that no longer seemed effective in terms of achieving tangible results?⁷

A key feature of the constructive programme was that it created the opportunity for everyday people, particularly the peasantry, to play an active and significant role in the liberation movement. As Gandhi noted in a letter to Nehru following the Civil Disobedience movement of 1934-5.

With civil resistance as the background we cannot possibly do without the constructive activities such as communal unity, removal of untouchability and universalization of the spinning-wheel and khaddar. I am as strong as ever about these. We must recognize that whilst the Congressmen can be counted by hundreds of thousands, civil resisters imprisoned have never amounted to more than one lakh (100,000) at the outside. I feel that there is something radically wrong if paralysis has overtaken the remaining lakhs. There is nothing to be ashamed of in an open confession by those who for any reason whatsoever are unable to join the civil resisters' ranks. *They are also serving the cause of the country and bringing it nearer to the goal who are engaged in any of the constructive activities I have named and several other kindred activities I can add to the list.*⁸

ii) *Maintaining involvement during 'passive' phases of movement*

In his analysis of the Indian liberation movement Bhipan Chandra, using Gramsci's terminology, likened it to a protracted war of position, a struggle to undermine the hegemonic influence of the Raj

⁶ *Constructive programme* (1941), p. 35.

⁷ See M. Darweish & A. Rigby, *Popular protest in Palestine: The uncertain future of unarmed resistance*, London: Pluto Press, 2015, pp. 97-99.

⁸ *Collected works of Mahatma Gandhi*, v. 55, p. 429. (Emphasis added) Accessible at <http://tinyurl.com/kj5fqxa> (07.05.2017)

in all walks of life.⁹ This was the battle of ideas, the sustained struggle to get increasing numbers of people aware of the ways their acquiescence sustained British rule, and hence the extent of their power to challenge and undermine the colonial power by thinking and acting differently. According to Chandra,

... it was the law-breaking mass movements of the post-1918 period which basically performed the task among the mass of the Indian people. The basic objective of these movements was to destroy the notion that British rule could not be challenged, to create among the people fearlessness and courage and the capacity to fight and made sacrifices, and to inculcate the notion that no people could be ruled without their consent.¹⁰

But no movement can sustain extended periods of mass mobilisation without exhausting its followers and 'burning out' its cadres. So, given the prolonged nature of the struggle periods of intense mobilisation and contestation were interspersed with longer 'passive' periods when ideological work was carried out. A key medium for this was the constructive programme, which helped fill the political space left vacant by the withdrawal from civil disobedience, thereby enabling people to sustain a sense of activism and provide a medium for continued involvement in the movement during the relatively quiet phases, whilst at the same time providing something of a 'safe haven' for the cadres where they could withdraw from the front-line struggle in order to recuperate and recharge their batteries.¹¹ (Chandra 1989 p. 510).

iii) Developing the self-discipline of satyagrahis

As noted above one of Gandhi's ongoing concerns was the propensity to violence of those engaged in confrontational struggle that was intended to be nonviolent.¹² To maintain the commitment to nonviolence in the face of an opponent prepared to use violence required a significant degree of self-discipline on the part of the satyagrahis. Gandhi believed that the experience of working in the

⁹ The Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci used the terms 'War of Position' and 'War of Manoeuvre' to indicate two different phases in the class struggle. The war of manoeuvre referred to the phase of open conflict between classes, where the outcome is decided by direct clashes between revolutionaries and the State. War of position, on the other hand, referred to the slow, hidden cultural struggle to gain influence and power through swaying people's hearts and minds. See D. Egan, 'Rethinking war of manoeuvre/ war of position: Gramsci and the military metaphor', *Critical Sociology*, v. 40, n. 4, 2014, pp. 521 – 538.

¹⁰ Chandra, p. 508.

¹¹ Chandra, p. 510.

¹² See K. Mantena, 'Another realism: The politics of Gandhian nonviolence', *American Political Science Review*, v. 106, n. 2, May 2012, pp. 455- 470, p. 458.

constructive programme enabled participants to take on as their own the world-view and values on which it was based, particularly the importance of self-reliance. This, he felt, was a necessary preparation whereby people could develop the self-discipline and emotional control necessary for them to engage in nonviolent confrontational resistance without resorting to violence.¹³

iv) Graduates of the constructive programme as the steel-frame of the movement.

Given Gandhi's preoccupation with maintaining a nonviolent discipline during civil disobedience and other forms of confrontational resistance, he placed considerable emphasis not only on the self-discipline of the activists, but also the importance of trained cadres with the capacity to direct and control the rank-and-file activists during their contentious encounters with opponents. Once again, the bulk of his lieutenants were graduates of many years of community organising as part of the constructive programme. As Bipan Chandra noted:

As a whole, constructive work was a major channel for the recruitment of the soldiers of freedom and their political training - as also the choosing and testing of their 'officers' and leaders. Constructive workers were to act as the steelframe of the nationalist movement in its active satyagraha phase. It was therefore not accidental that *khadi bhandar* workers, students, teachers of national schools and colleges, and Gandhian ashrams' inmates served as the backbone of the civil disobedience movements both as organizers and as active *Satyagrahis*.¹⁴

Resistance and reconstruction

As noted above, in his Satyagraha campaigns Gandhi focused on attempts to remove obstacles that were blocking the progress of constructive work. As such, he concentrated on issues that were of immediate relevance to the concerns of the Indian masses which were also deeply symbolic of the injustices of the British colonial rule. In targeting a particular abuse, however, he also sought to incorporate into the struggle a constructive dimension – the creation of an alternative. The clearest

¹³ This analysis owes much to Bob Overy whose doctoral study of Gandhi as a political organiser is an invaluable source of insight. See B. Overy, *Gandhi as a political organiser: An analysis of local and national campaigns in India, 1915 – 1922*, unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Bradford, UK, 1982, p. 110. Accessible at <http://tinyurl.com/kf7bc4q> (08.05.2017).

¹⁴ B. Chandra, *India's struggle for independence*, New Delhi: Penguin, 1989, p. 246. Another related function of the constructive programme was that it made the urban-based and upper caste cadres familiar with the conditions of the villages and went some way towards bridging the gulf between the leadership and the peasantry.

examples of this can be found in the India-wide civil disobedience campaign launched in 1930. A key element of that campaign was the refusal to pay the Salt Tax imposed by the British, but alongside this activists were also urged to make their own salt. In a similar vein, during this phase of the movement the boycotting of foreign cloth was prioritised. But as part of this campaign, alongside the symbolic bonfires of imported fabrics, there was also the encouragement of people to spin their own cotton, weave their own cloth. What is evident here is a strong pre-figurative dimension to the struggle, with the incorporation into the protest actions of attempts to construct the types of relationships sought for in the future society – highlighting once again the centrality of the means-end continuum within the Gandhian praxis of nonviolent transformation

Conclusion: Lessons for contemporary nonviolent activists

Any resistance movement occurs within its own particular context, and few would claim that the India freedom struggle presented a template that should be mirrored by contemporary movements for justice and emancipation. But I would like to conclude this review of Gandhi's approach to constructive action with a few reflections regarding what I consider to be aspects of his legacy that continue to have relevance for today.

i) The importance of incorporating everyday acts of resistance and solidarity into the struggle.

The majority of members of any protest movement would appear to be unwilling to risk imprisonment or physical injury for the sake of the cause. The cost is too high for many – particularly those of a certain age, income bracket and family circumstances.¹⁵ Hence the importance of finding ways of resistance that can be incorporated into our everyday lives and which do not carry any great cost for movement followers and solidarity activists, but which can have a significant cumulative impact on the opponent or target of the actions. Simple activities like consumer boycotts fall within that category of action that is open to anyone wanting to express their solidarity with a particular cause, thereby strengthening a movement and broadening its participatory base. This is one of the key lessons to take from Gandhi's constructive programme and the way in which it created space for different kinds of participation within the overall liberation struggle.

ii) The importance of local action in creating a culture of creative resistance

As noted earlier in this chapter Gandhi sought a fundamental transformation of Indian society, based on a profound change in the culture of individuals and their communities. His constructive programme was an attempt to experiment with different ways of everyday living that would embody

¹⁵ I am not afraid to acknowledge my status as a bourgeois academic (retired)!

his core values of nonviolence whilst addressing the key challenges facing Indian society. His primary focus was on bringing about changes in the living conditions (and world-view) of people in the communities they lived rather than organising to take over state power..

This remains an important lesson. As David Hardiman has pointed out, much of the more recent writings on civil resistance have had a 'statist' orientation, their focus has been on the ways and means nonviolent movements might erode the pillars of state power in order that a new regime might take control and use state power to transform the society. As Hardiman has pointed out:

Capturing state power and transforming a society through the work of a constitutional government that is responsible to an electorate is regarded as the panacea. It celebrates a form of popular coup-d'état while downplaying the fact that all too often the interest-groups that gain office by such means start to misappropriate resources for themselves and govern in corrupt and repressive ways. Without ongoing resistance that builds new institutions from below, there is no genuine democracy – at least not in the sense that radical critics of constitutional democracy (such as Gandhi) have understood it.

From this perspective, what matters most is the ongoing process of nonviolent struggle, rather than any superficial 'victory'. In this, creating a fair and egalitarian society can never be brought about by capturing only the higher echelons of power; it is rather something that has to be continually recreated through people addressing the various problems that confront them in assertive ways, which may include protest.¹⁶

¹⁶ D. Hardiman, *Nonviolent resistance in India 1916 – 1947*, New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, Occasional paper 61 (new series), 2014, p. 40. Accessible at <http://tinyurl.com/lgq7oyx> (08.05.2017)