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Author(s): Vasant Kumar Bawa

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Gandhi in the 21st Century

Search for an Alternative Development Model

Vasant Kumar Bawa

Gandhi's espousal of ecologically sustainable and employment-oriented development is all the more significant today as fossil fuel-driven industrialisation and insatiable consumerism engender crisis in resources on a global scale.

THE Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology (CCMB) one of the 'temples of modern India' inspired by Jawaharlal Nehru's concern for the promotion of the scientific temper in India, was the scene of a two-day seminar in which serving and retired technocrats, scientists, bureaucrats, and others concerned with the future of the Indian polity, economy and society discussed the prospects of adapting the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi in order to tackle some of the major problems facing the country today, at the instance of the Shanthi Foundation, Hyderabad. India does not fall in the mould of the highly industrialised countries, and hence the attempt to imitate the economic model of these countries is likely to fail. Even the export-led growth of the Asian tigers cannot be adopted by India, many participants felt, because of the massive problems of unemployment, and the population explosion which continues unabated today. The director of the CCMB, D Balasubramaniam, made a perceptive remark at the inaugural session that Gandhi had much to say on technology, but little on science. (Perhaps he could have added that Nehru had had a lot to say on science, but had not applied his mind adequately to the adverse consequences of technology, as Gandhi had).

Ever since the publication of *Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (New York, 1972), the world has been haunted by the spectre of environmental disaster and the depletion of natural resources. The very next year E F Schumacher published his collection of essays, *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered* (Vintage Books, London). These two works have had a substantial effect on the subconscious of all thinking people, although the day-to-day pressures of politics and economic growth may have given greater importance to the work of scholars like Herman Kahn, who co-authored a book *The Next Two Hundred Years*, published in 1976. Many of us now feel that industrialisation based on insatiable consumerism as an indicator of growth and quality of life has become a threat to the world's environment. It contributes greatly to the continuance of the greenhouse effect, global warming and the depletion of the ozone layer. The obsession with the acquisition of wealth has led to the global

trade in armaments and narcotics, and is destroying the natural habitat of the lion, the tiger, and other wild animals. This is endangering not only world peace, but the survival of mankind, and of the earth itself.

It is a remarkable tribute to the perspicacity of M K Gandhi, a young, inexperienced lawyer from Porbander in Gujarat, working in South Africa before the first world war, that in *Hind Swaraj*, his major critique of western civilisation as it had then developed, he had expressed the view that the western way of life would not be sustainable. He came to this conclusion after a study of western anti-industrial writers like Thoreau, Ruskin, and Tolstoy. Gandhi corresponded with the latter, and set up the Phoenix Ashram and Tolstoy Farm in South Africa, based on the ideas that he had then developed. In his recent book, *Mahatma Gandhi: An Apostle of Applied Human Ecology*, (Tata Energy Research Institute, New Delhi, 1996), T N Khoshoo, who was the first secretary of the Indian ministry of environment, quotes N Radhakrishnan who pointed out that Gandhi had successfully demonstrated that "each member of this community could live in harmony with nature. The community life Gandhi was developing consisted of manual labour, tree planting, agriculture, simple life, and crafts". These could not be described as 'utopian ideals', Radhakrishnan continued. "The running and recurrent principle of the community life was to live according to the rhythm of nature and in harmony with what nature offers" (p 10). It was because of his experience of dealing with environmental and development issues that Gandhi, when asked if he would like to have the same standard of living for India's teeming millions as was prevalent in England, remarked, "It took Britain half the resources of the planet to achieve this prosperity. How many planets will India require?" At another time, he remarked, "The earth provides enough for every man's needs but not for every man's greed" (pp 6-7). This concern is entirely in line with that of the world's environmentalists and others in the modern world who organised the Rio summit on environment and development in 1992, and who are carrying on a vigorous debate on the question today.

During the first 10 years after his return to India in 1918, Gandhi was preoccupied

largely with political issues and the freedom movement, including the Rowlatt act satyagraha, the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre, and the Khilafat movement and its aftermath. But in 1928 he invited the western-trained chartered accountant and economist, J C Kumarappa, to the Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad. Almost immediately, Kumarappa decided to give up his westernised lifestyle and to become a full-time Gandhian economic analyst and social worker. He founded the Khadi and Village Industries Association, which after independence was converted into the Khadi and Village Industries Commission, with its headquarters in Mumbai. T Krishnamurthy of the J C Kumarappa Memorial Trust, Bangalore, described the conceptual framework of J C Kumarappa and his early work in a paper entitled 'The Economics of Peace'.

M Ramakrishna, former deputy governor of the Reserve Bank of India, spoke about the enquiry he had conducted into the work of the Khadi and Village Industries Commission in 1985. He felt the old Gandhians had prevented the adoption of innovations for a long time. Khadi had received a boost during the 1960s, but there was a decline from the mid-1960s till 1978. It was pointed out during the discussion that after the Ramakrishna report, a high power committee headed by P V Narasimha Rao had introduced new subsidies for silk, khadi, woollens, cotton and polyvastra. Amount of Rs 10,000 crore has been allotted and production is to be doubled by the end of the Eighth Plan. This shows that, in spite of globalisation, some in the Congress Party are aware of the employment potential of khadi and village industries. Whether the amounts allotted are being wisely spent, however, requires critical analysis. The dialogue on the relevance of Gandhi in the new dispensation must therefore continue.

D K Oza, formerly of the Tamil Nadu government, has devoted himself to the Gandhian movement in recent years. He pointed out the continued relevance of the constructive programme drafted by Gandhi in 1940, and suggested minor changes to it. He pleaded for the re-publication of the writings of Gandhi with new introductions, pointing out that the rural areas were almost in the same state of backwardness they were in under the British rule. He also wanted steps to be taken for a dialogue of Gandhians with Marxists, who could work together to oppose religious bigotry, the intrusion of multinationals, and the criminal nexus among certain groups who run India today.

The CPI leader, K L Mahindra, accepted the suggestion for a dialogue, pointing out that both Marx and Gandhi wanted people's welfare, although their ideologies were different. He stated that Gandhi had not opposed the armed struggle in Telengana (in which Mahindra was an active participant), although he did not support it either. Mahindra

felt that today, except for 25 crores of people in India, the rest are outside the global market. Thus, there is great scope for Marxists and Gandhians to work together to provide employment to the rural people, oppose corruption and women's exploitation. Gandhi was clearly opposed to consumerism, as he wanted ministers to get a salary of Rs 500 per month, and peons Rs 50 per month. Mahindra felt that a proper mix of handicrafts, agriculture and technology is called for in the present context. We have to strive for self-reliance, as distinct from self-sufficiency, which is not possible, he argued.

The ideological and social framework of the Gandhian ideology in the present context was explained by D Gopalaswamy of the Gandhi Centre, Visakhapatnam, and the Gandhian social worker and reformer, Lavanam, whose father, Gora, had been close to Gandhi. An economist, Prabha Panth of Osmania University, spoke about the religious, ecological and economic aspects of the crisis of modern humanism. She suggested that the ecological and long-term impact of different forms of production and consumption should be reflected in the tax and subsidy policies of governments. For instance, bicycles and cycle-rickshaws could be subsidised, while taxing fossil-fuel driven vehicles. Secondly, research should be directed on eco-friendly lines. A switch in the technology base has to take place from fossil fuels to solar energy, from synthetics to cotton and biodegradable fabrics, and from inorganic to organic fertilisers. Moreover, "eco-friendly entrepreneurship, ecological management and ecological research must be integrated at the post-secondary stage, in order to supply the human inputs for the above measures".

While Gandhian ideology faces the challenge of globalisation, the seminar participants were able to point out some of the lessons of the Nehru era, when some Gandhian institutions were adapted to the post-independence scenario. H W Butt, who had headed the Extension Education Institute of the ministry of agriculture at Nilokheri from 1959 to 1970 for training the faculty of agricultural universities, home science colleges, principals of gram sevak training centres and the like, spoke about the village work initiated by Gandhi and some of the reasons why it did not fulfil its objectives in the post-independence period. During discussion, a brief reference was made to the Bhoodan movement of Vinoba Bhave, which spread from Telengana all over India, and received official patronage, but suffered from major organisational defects. The concept of trusteeship also came in for discussion, and is likely to form the subject of a later seminar of the Shanthi Foundation.

In the early 1960s, Jayaprakash Narayan invited to India the British economist, Schumacher, whose early essay, 'Buddhist Economics' had praised the Burmese for limiting their wants. Schumacher's visits to India gave an impetus to efforts already


under way in the Planning Research and Action Institute, Lucknow, when Sucheta Kripalani was chief minister of Uttar Pradesh. A former director of the PRAI, Anand Sarup, could not attend the seminar, but sent his paper which was presented by the present writer. It highlighted the crucial role played by M K Garg of the PRAI, who pioneered many viable small-scale technologies, such as the pit method of leather tanning, standardised gobar gas plants, white-ware pottery, crystalline sugar, and small-scale cement plants. It is important that these products, as well as many newer ones like solar cookers, should be re-examined, revived and absorbed into the commercial market stream of small industry today, instead of surviving as isolated pockets in government institutes. Subsidies may be required initially, but ultimately the product must sell on its own merits in the market economy.

Anil K Rajvanshi of the Nimbkar Agricultural Research Institute, Phaltan, Maharashtra, presented an important paper on a decentralised energy model, which he has practised for several years in Phaltan. He compared sustainability with a chair, which must have four legs, viz, energy-related, economic, environmental, and socio-cultural aspects. His article, 'Energy Self-Sufficient Talukas, a Solution to National Energy Crisis', was published in the *EPW*, (December 23, 1995). R Rajamani, former secretary to the environment ministry of the government of India, presented an original proposal on eco-tourism, which he proposes to develop at future meetings of the Shanthi Foundation. A S Rao, founder-managing director of ECIL, urged a "determined pursuit of self-reliance in development", and pointed out that 'doles' like two-rupee rice cannot replace the concept of full employment. Arif Waqif, an economist who has helped to promote SAARC through several technical-support institutions, pointed out that the new economic trends in the west

were not leading to an equitable society. There was talk of the 'new poor' in the west today. Spain had doubled its GDP in 10 years from 1982, without creating a single additional job.

The final statement of the seminar, which was developed from a draft by P V Sheno, director, Institute of Social and Economic Change, Bangalore, expressed the view of the participants that the principles on which Gandhi built his political and social thought were: (i) peace and non-violence, (ii) universal brotherhood and harmony from the individual and the family to the country and the world, (iii) working towards a society that is not exploitative of nature and human beings, (iv) rationality, and adaptability to change in conditions, and (v) simple living and high thinking. The following means were recommended for adoption to fulfil the above Gandhian principles, which those present fully accepted: (1) social reforms, women's education and empowerment; (2) a balance between industrial and agricultural activities and rural and urban development; (3) trusteeship for managing of natural and productive resources; (4) adoption of such technologies as are employment-friendly, eco-friendly and market-friendly; (5) opposing unbridled exploitation of natural and productive resources which promotes consumerism; and (6) adoption of an energy strategy that is decentralised, ecologically viable and non-exploitative.

The dialogue among the participants is to be continued in Hyderabad, and generally in southern and western India, from where most of the participants came. The next meeting will probably be in Bangalore in October, where it is hoped that access to the work of field institutions like ASTRA of the Indian Institute of Science, and the J C Kumarappa Memorial Trust will be available. It is proposed to publish the proceedings of these seminars in summary form.

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