

GANDHI, ROY AND JP

Gandhism? Or Other Alternatives?

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The two *volumes under review are an important contribution to the current debate over ways and means of empowering Indian people. They recall the thoughts and plans of three important political ideologues of the past who worked in this direction in their own respective ways. The editors have served the twin useful purpose of (i) documenting the basic ideological texts of these three leaders (e.g. Gandhi's 'Hind Swaraj' of 1909; M N Roy's 'New Humanism : A Manifesto' of 1947; and J P Narayan's 'Total Revolution: Why and How?' of 1975), and (ii) providing critiques of their ideologies and programmes by both contemporary and later day observers. Although there were differences in approach to politics, society and economy in the thinking of these three, there were also several points of convergence in their basic humanitarian concerns for the Indian people, which justify their being brought together in this compilation. Moreover, some of the ideas and programmes that they threw up are still worth considering in today's circumstances.

The first volume is devoted to Gandhi, his notions of an alternative model of development (as enunciated in 'Hind Swaraj' and later writings), and their evaluation by his various critics ranging from his contemporary M N Roy (who was disparaging of his obscurantist views in an article written soon after his assassination in 1948) to his present day devotee, the environmentalist Vandana Shiva (who finds humanity's hope in Gandhi's spinning wheel, in her article written in 2004). The volume is a fairly representative example of the latest trend to reassess and often revive—Gandhi's programme of socio-political change. This trend has emerged against the backdrop of the collapse of the old socialist state system (in the Soviet Union and China) which at one time offered an alternative to the capitalist monopoly rule, and the present rise of a new generation of capitalist neo-colonial political rulers who are monopolizing the global system. While gleefully announcing the death of socialism, these proponents of a neo-liberal global order under market economy, are also putting pressure on sovereign states to abandon any programme of re-constructing society along egalitarian lines that they might be undertaking. It is in this historical context that certain sections of civil society, liberal humanist intellectuals, and even some disillusioned communists, are seeking answers in Gandhi's ideology and programme of action. There is an inclination among these circles to rediscover Gandhi and reformulate an alternative model of development (different from both the capitalist and socialist systems) based among other things on (i) Gandhi's opposition to a pattern of industrial modernization that kills the human soul; (ii) his ecology-friendly views and attempts to reconstruct society without destroying the environment; (iii) his favouring of decentralization of power among the underprivileged; (iv) his professed aim of uplifting the socio-economic status of the dalits and opposing the Hindu-Muslim divide, for building up a unified Indian nation; and above all these, (v) his stress on non-violence as the only means of achieving these goals. The contributors to this volume (who include present day well-known academics from Indian institutions like T K Oommen, Bidyut Chakrabarty, Anil Dutta Mishra among others, as well as

political scientists from Western universities like Bhikhu Parekh, Anthony J Parel and Ronald J Terchek), take up these particular views of Gandhi's to reassess their relevance to contemporary India.

Now, no one in his senses (except the present rulers of India—who are yet to come to their senses!) would surely disagree with the first four propositions, as long as they are not tied down to some of Gandhi's personal fads and requirements that he made a part of his political praxis (like insistence on non-vegetarian food habits, ban on beef consumption, sexual abstinence, demanding obedience to his authoritarian commands, etc—and above all, his propagation of the repulsive Sanatani Hindu religious tenets some of which violate the rights of individuals, women in particular). There is a problem with his last proposition—his insistence on non-violent mode of 'satyagraha' as the sole tactics for achieving the four objectives. In his self-righteous and almost superstitious belief in the omnipotence of nonviolence as a cure for all problems, Gandhi went to the horrendous extent of advising Jews in Germany to submit to their massacre by Hitler in 1938, saying: "The calculated violence of Hitler may even result in a general massacre of the Jews ...(But) even the massacre ...could be turned into a day of thanksgiving and joy that Jehovah had wrought deliverance of the race even at the hands of the tyrant... It is a joyful sleep to be followed by a waking that would be all the more refreshing for the long sleep." (Cited from Gandhi's collected works in an extremely illuminating critique of the Congress led nationalist movement, entitled : *Indian National Congress : How Indian ? How National?* published by Rajani X Desai, Mumbai, in 1988). Even after news of the genocide of Jews started leaking out from Germany, on May 26, 1940, in a letter to the British Viceroy in India, Gandhi advised the British Cabinet to "sue for peace", since "I do not believe Herr Hitler is as bad as he is portrayed." (Quoted from G D Birla's autobiography 'In the Shadow of the Mahatma', cited by Suniti Kumar Ghosh's 'The Indian Bourgeoisie', p. 221). It is surprising therefore to find Thomas Pantham (a former professor of Baroda University), while lauding Gandhi's theory and programme of 'satyagraha' in an otherwise interesting article in this volume, totally skipping over this obnoxious role that Gandhi played in pursuing his fanatical belief in non-violence. Gandhi is not known to have publicly regretted these utterances of his even after the full revelations of the atrocities by Hitler, at the end of his defeat in World War-II.

Among the contributors, M N Roy and his wife Evelyn from the past, and Bhikhu Parekh from the present, offer a more critical and less starry-eyed analysis of Gandhi's views and work. M N Roy's essay 'Morality and Political Practice: Marx and Gandhi,' should be read by today's generation of neo-Gandhians both in India and abroad. Written soon after Gandhi's assassination, Roy predicted that his martyrdom might "elevate him to the high pedestal of the Messiah of morality in politics," but he questioned whether Gandhism "allows individual freedom, rational thinking, and cherishes the ideal of cosmopolitanism." Conceding that Marxian dialectics had failed to change society, he warned against the acceptance of the "Gandhi cult" as an alternative, which was "not only sweeping India, but finding an echo in other parts of the world." He made a very prescient observation: "...the disgust and disillusionment caused by the moral callousness of dialectical Materialism should not lead to an uncritical acceptance of Messianic doctrines...calling upon mankind to turn its back upon modern civilization with its scientific mode of thought." Today, while justly resisting the enslavement of people by corporate industrialization, destruction of environment by private profiteering, and struggling for the empowerment of masses through decentralization of power, it is better to remember Roy's warning and not fall in the trap of an atavistic Gandhism. Bhikhu Parekh (in his essay 'Critique of Modern Civilization') gives far more perceptive

analysis of the deficiencies in Gandhi's thought which were pointed out by his earlier contemporaries like M N Roy. Locating Gandhi in the contemporary complex historical situation, Parekh explained his inadequacies: "Since Gandhi viewed it (modern civilization) as an undifferentiated whole, he was unable to distinguish and analyse the complex pattern of relationship between its different components such as capitalism, imperialism, industrialization...unable to see that industrialization need not be accompanied by either capitalism or the egoistic view of man...his inadequate understanding of modern civilization limited his intellectual options and compelled him to reject far more than he needed to." As Parekh rightly points out, Gandhi, while opposing industrialization, "neither appreciated the economic aspirations of his countrymen and the dynamics of the economic reality unfolding before him, nor offered a viable alternative."

The second volume examines the alternatives, as suggested by two eminent politicians—M N Roy and Jayprakash Narayan—by reproducing some of the basic texts written by the two, and their critique by today's political scientists. Both started as believers in Marxism, and then departed from it towards their respective directions—Roy developing his philosophy of Radical Humanism, and Jayprakash following the path of Democratic Socialism. Roy's essays reflect his post-Marxian phase of Radical Humanism and the relevance of his People's Plan, drafted in 1943, which stressed agricultural development and health, education and housing facilities as the foundation of the people's state. Among the present day contributors to this volume, Sibnarayan Ray (the veteran colleague and biographer of Roy's) and Dennis Dalton (a professor from Columbia University) dwell on history—the first on Roy's role in the international Communist movement in the 1920-30 period, and the second on his interaction with Gandhi in India in the later period (when Roy, departing from his earlier denunciation of Gandhi, stated: "Practice of the precept of purifying politics with truth and non-violence alone will immortalize the memory of the Mahatma)."

The theoretical and philosophical aspects of Roy's works are dealt with by Philip Spratt, R L Nigam, R M Pal (from among Roy's direct disciples) and M Shiviah and Aditya Nigam from the later generation. The second section is devoted to Jayprakash Narayan—or JP as he was popularly known. It pursues the same style of reproducing his texts first, followed by contributions by critics who trace his historical departure from Marxian philosophy and politics, and assess his later theories and major changes in his political position. Dr Bimal Prasad, a former professor in Jawaharlal Nehru University, and associated with JP for many years, discusses at length JP's suggestion to move from parliamentary to participatory democracy—a partyless democracy in which the panchayats and gram sabhas should play an important role. The famous human rights champion, the late Justice V M Tarkunde (who along with JP founded the People's Union of Civil Liberties in 1976), and Sebastia L Raj, S J, who runs a Jesuit NGO, discuss JP's concept of 'Total Revolution' (formulated in the mid-1970s in the course of his political campaign against corruption in politics and injustice in social and economic spheres) which envisaged a system of co-operative economy and decentralization of power as an alternative.

The focus of most of the essays in these two volumes is on the areas of congruence with, rather than divergence between, the ideas and practices of Gandhi, Roy and Jayprakash. While it is easier to fit JP into the Gandhian paradigm (as he more or less remained consistent in his belief in the principle of non-violence and the Gandhian ideals of class harmony like *Sarvodaya*), M N Roy is a rather intractable candidate for such incorporation in the Gandhian framework (since even after his later softening of attitude towards Gandhi he till the end remained a firm believer in rationalism and scientific

understanding of the reality. But that apart, what is missing in the compilation is an analysis of the reasons for the failure of both Roy and JP to carry out successfully their respective alternative programmes of socio-political change. The late Sibnarayan Ray, in his monumental work on M N Roy's life and politics, had dispassionately examined the causes for Roy's failures in Indian politics. Relevant extracts from his book could have been included in this volume. As for JP's 'Total Revolution', there could have been an essay on the factors that led to the degeneration of his followers into the same pit of corruption against which JP fought.

But despite these minor shortcomings, R M Pal (who had been closely associated with the Radical Humanist movement and was close to Roy himself) and Meera Verma, (a political scientist connected with the Delhi University) should be congratulated on bringing out these two volumes consisting of the basic texts of three major political ideologues and critical interrogations of their thoughts by contemporary political scientists. They will be of immense value to both the general readers and academics, as well as activists engaged in programmes of empowering the people. □□□

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