

Mahatma Gandhi's Concept of Internationalism

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Abstract

Gandhiji's philosophy of nationalism was not based upon race-hatred and chauvinistic feelings. It was the stroke of his genius that blended nationalism with internationalism. His patriotism transcended geographical frontiers and was conterminous with humanity. He knew that one must be a good nationalist in order to become a true internationalist. He explained in his writings that there could be no genuine international co-operation without national independence. He was ardent advocate of international collaboration and co-operation. In war, Gandhiji saw the most crucial unsolved problem of the international relations. For him, generally speaking, war was 'unrighteous' because it contradicted the principles of ahimsa and the higher law of dharma. Also he knew that the basis of imperialism, Nazism and Fascism was rooted in violence and that there was no qualitative difference among these systems; even if there was no a difference, the difference was only in degree. Gandhiji's internationalism, as we will see, grew with time. This is particularly evident in his concepts of war and peace.

Keywords: Nationalism, Internationalism, Collaboration and Co-operation, Concept of Power and War, Pacifism, Imperialism, View of United Nations

Introduction

It is fashionable, in academic as well as popular circles, to interpret Gandhiji chiefly in terms of his nationalist politics—to assess the strategy/tactics/objectives/success/failure of the nationwide movements led by Gandhiji. Louis Fischer termed him as 'the most forceful Indian exponent' of 'the urge towards nationhood'.¹

Buddhadeva Bhattaarcharya described him as the exponent of 'serious politics' that inaugurated the era of mass nationalism in India.² But behind the persona of a hardcore nationalist stood the man who, notwithstanding his nationalism, also thought of the world—who had his own brand of internationalism. He did not preach jingo nationalism. Gandhiji tried to lead India away from the path of narrow and exclusivist nationalism into a recognition of her duty as member of the international fraternity of nations based on interdependence as a recognized principal of public life.

After 1915, intimate contact with the suffering millions of India made Gandhiji a staunch opponent of foreign slavery and an ardent nationalist. But most remarkable thing that one finds is that his philosophy of nationalism was not based upon race-hatred and chauvinistic feelings. It was the stroke of his genius that

blended nationalism with internationalism. His patriotism transcended geographical frontiers and was conterminous with humanity. He wrote: "I want the freedom of my country so that other countries may learn something from free country, so that the resources of my country might be utilized for the benefit of mankind."³

For Gandhiji, there was no antithesis between nationalism and internationalism.⁴ He did not preach abstract internationalism. He knew that one must be a good nationalist in order to become a true internationalist. He explained in his writings that there could be no genuine international co-operation without national independence. Gandhiji said, "It impossible for one to be internationalist without being a nationalist. Internationalism is possible only when nationalism becomes a fact, i.e., when peoples belonging to different countries have organized themselves and are able to act as one man. It is not nationalism that is evil; it is narrowness, selfishness, exclusiveness which is the bane of modern nations which is evil. Each wants to profit at the expense of, and rises on the ruins of, the other. Indian nationalism has struck a different path. It wants to organize itself or to find full self-expression for the benefit and service of humanity at large. ...God having cast my lot in the midst of the people of India, I should be untrue to my maker if I failed to service them. If I do not know how to serve them I shall never know how humanity. And I cannot possibly go wrong so long as I do

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not harm other nations in the act of serving my country. ”⁵

Gandhiji was ardent advocate of international collaboration and co-operation. In 1924, he wrote: “The better mind of the world desires today not absolutely independent states warring one against another, but a federation of friendly interdependent states. The consummation of that event may be far off. I want make no grand claim for our country. But I see nothing grand or impossible about our expressing our readiness for universal interdependence rather than independence. I desire the ability to be totally independent without asserting the independence.”⁶

Gandhiji discussed the reason why Svadesi, which he called “the acme of universal service”,⁷ implied preference for the nearest and the immediate. One may refer From Yeravda Mandir for clearer exposition of the doctrine of Svadesi. Svadesi recognized the scientific limitation of human capacity for service.⁸ Thus understood, Svadesi serves the cause of international brotherhood. His fundamental religious belief that all are equal before God explains to an extent why he adhered to the concept of human brotherhood as opposed to national exclusivist. In the memorable article, ‘The Doctrine of The Sword’, Gandhiji wrote: My religion has no geographical limits. If I have a living faith in it, it will transcend my love for India herself.”⁹

Besides his deep religious convictions and seminal humanism, the advanced thought currents and objective forces helped to mould Gandhiji's ideas about internationalism.¹⁰ His idea of internationalism was not to be viewed merely as a projection of his ‘advaita faith’; it was certainly there, but the political aspects should not be lost sight of. We find him recognizing the essential political bearing of the problem of internationalism and world order. It was of his genius that he could integrate his philosophical faith with political acumen.

Gandhiji's native sense of realism enabled to discover the genuine internationalism. The goal being the establishment of world brotherhood, he realized that slaves had no place in that fraternity. As early as 1909, he could assert: “Slaves ourselves, it would be a mere pretension to think of freeing others.”¹¹ As practical politician, he did not think it worthwhile to mouth fashionable phrases of internationalism, but he moved in the direction of an international order of free nations by working for the establishment of a free and democratic India. It was his earnest belief that India could further the interests of internationalism only by freeing herself from the shackles of bondage. That is why he devoted almost all his energy and time for the attainment of freedom of his country.

In war, Gandhiji saw the most crucial unsolved problem of the international relations. For him, generally speaking, war was ‘unrighteous’ because it contradicted the principles of ahimsa and the higher law of dharma. However, like many of his key-concepts, his opinion on ‘war and peace’ also varied due to different philosophical

and situational considerations. Paul F. Power has argued that between ‘peace’ and ‘truth’ Gandhiji always preferred ‘truth’ as the ‘ultimate good’. On the other hand, the demands of his nationalism upon his idealism also led to inconsistencies. “For these reasons his opinions about the character of war sometimes differ from those of western pacifists who hold that in every respect war is the absence of justice.”¹²

In power's opinion, “Gandhiji's ideas about war cut-across unqualified pacifism, conditional pacifism and patriotic realism.”¹³ However, we can slightly re-arrange his argument by saying that although in the normal times ‘unqualified’ pacifism has been his ideal, but this ‘ideal’ was often conditioned by the compulsions of difficult times. Here let it be clear that by ‘difficult times’ we mean the ‘war-times’ which brought about conflicts and crises in Gandhiji's mind-sometimes due to his notions of ‘justice’ (for the oppressed/victimized people) and ‘duty’ (for the empire) and sometimes due to the compulsions of nationalist politics.¹⁴

From temporal point of view, one can find Gandhiji's ideal of ‘unqualified’ pacifism in his writing and comments during the period 1909-14; in his comments about western democracies immediately after First World War and during the early years of the Second World War. At other times, this uncompromising attitude had been modified by various compulsions. Here we must not forget that the above division only highlights the dominant trends of his thought at particular times. It does not claim that Gandhiji was absolutely consistent with his unqualified/qualified pacifism even within a particular frame of time.

Much before First World War Gandhiji registered his aversion against war and modern civilization—which, according to him, was the ‘origin of modern wars.’ He virtually declared war on the idea of war. The following lines written by Gandhiji in 1910 sound like a charter of faith against war: “War with all its glorifications of brute force is essentially a degrading thing. It demoralizes those who are trained for it. It outrages every beautiful canon of morality. Its path of glory is foul with passions of lust and red with blood of murder. This is not the pathway to our goal.”¹⁵

During the First World War Gandhiji had placed moratorium, so to say, on his criticism of imperialism. But 1920 onwards full-throated denunciation of British imperialism marked his political career.

Gandhiji held that imperialism had its origin in man's covetousness or greed. This belief might have been due to the influence of the Upanisadic tradition that he inherited. The parallel is to be found in Tagore who held that greed was the seed of all that polluted the sense of human unity. Dr. F. Power observes in this connection: “As to Gandhi's economic interpretation of imperialism emphasizing the greed of men, such an analysis overlooks the motivating factors of prestige and adventure which have been significant in the history of western colonialism. It should be noted also that Gandhi's

economic critique of imperialism is non-Marxist in origins tracing back to the influences of Naoroji, Ruskin, Gokhale and Tolstoy. He seldom indicted capitalism as such for sustaining imperialism as have Marxists drawing from Lenin's *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*.¹⁶

Gandhiji knew that the basis of imperialism, Nazism and Fascism was rooted in violence and that there was no qualitative difference among these systems; even if there was no a difference, the difference was only in degree. But as he said in 1939, his sympathies were wholly with the allies¹⁷ which did not mean endorsement, in any shape or form, of the doctrine of the sword for the defense of even proven right. His attitude in relation to the Second World War speaks of the evolving pattern of his pacifism.

Gandhiji was equally unhappy with the newly formed United Nations. He was rather suspicious about the UN's ability 'to maintain world peace, but he did not suggest any particular changes.'¹⁸ His pessimism in this respect was perhaps caused by absence of national India from the founding conference of the UN. However, at time of its inception, Gandhiji was more enthusiastic about the need for a new general international organization. He specifically urged the statesmen at San Francisco to end colonialism and war to impose generous peace treaties, to create a small police (in the absence of universal belief in violence) and to establish economic justice and a world federation.¹⁹

With the American atom bombing on Hiroshima and Nagasaki the Second World War came to an end. Once again Gandhiji reaffirmed his belief in unqualified pacifism, because 'war knows no law except that of might'. But it would be incorrect to conclude that in Gandhiji's last years he followed a consistent line of religious pacifism. During the Indo-Pakistan conflict immediately after independence he did not maintain a morally neutralist position. He remarked at his prayer meeting (26.09.1947) in New Delhi that although he had always been an opponent of all warfare, war would be the only alternative left to government for securing justice from Pakistan, which persistently refused to see its proven error and continued to minimize it.²⁰

According above discussion Buddhadeva Bhattacharyya suggested "the two Gandhis—the idealist philosopher and the realist politician."²¹ Other sides Paul F. Power has described him as a 'weak internationalist' for his alleged distrust towards international organizations, had stressed on the 'non-duality' between the means (non-violent means) and the end (establishment of a peaceful world order) in the world affairs.²² But this is not to be taken as a fixed or absolute point of view .Gandhiji's internationalism, as we will see, grew with time. This is particularly evident in his concepts of war and peace.

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