

MR. GANDHI'S IDEAS ON DEVELOPMENT<sup>1</sup>

by

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In the last and perhaps greatest period of Mr. Gandhi's life, after Independence had been achieved, his main pre-occupation was with the struggle against communalism and with the protection of minorities. He still found time, however, to interest himself in a wide range of economic and social questions.

In this Gandhi Centenary Year some articles in the British and American press have suggested that although Mr. Gandhi's leadership and tactics in the Independence movement were successful, his teaching on economic and social questions has had little influence in the twenty years since his death. They illustrate this by referring to a decline of enthusiasm in India for such causes as spinning, prohibition and pacifism.

This kind of precise attempt to assess and dismiss the influence of a prophet who sometimes spoke in parables does not make much sense. Mr. Gandhi indeed once had occasion to write (alas, to the author of this article), "Your letter makes you out to be a literalist .... but that is a limitation which Protestant England labours under. I have not been able, in spite of hard thinking for years, to fathom the mystery".

Spinning symbolized the importance, in the tradition of Ruskin and Tolstoi, of everyone doing some manual labour. The point was emphasized in Mr. Gandhi's ashram in a number of other daily activities. The decline of hand spinning has little intrinsic significance if the message of the dignity of labour has had an effect.

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<sup>1</sup>These impressions are based on articles in "HARIJAN" in the last year of Mr. Gandhi's life and on the writer's conversations and correspondence with him.

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As for Prohibition, its main basis was economic; the wage earner spent on drink the money which should have fed his family. Mr. Gandhi was prepared to discuss exemption of brandy for medicinal purposes, and even stout, which his landlady when he was a student had recommended as a protection against London fog. He once asked the writer as an "expert" (for, as Agatha Harrison observed, he was a "great tease") to prepare him a paper on the case for such exemptions; "only do not", he wrote, "drive me into a liquor den!"

Even the picture of an India turning from Gandhi's pacifism to rearmament is facile. Whilst non-violence was a philosophy, Gandhi did not regard Poland as contravening it in resisting Hitler, nor did he disapprove when Indian troops were sent into Kashmir in 1947.

The perspective may become more real if we try to see to what extent Mr. Gandhi's ideas have seemed relevant to the problems of under-developed countries more generally over the past twenty years and not merely in the Indian context.

He was keenly interested in health and nutrition. He advised village workers not to take the easy way of making friends by distributing free medicines, but to concentrate on preventive measures and sanitation. He believed in the efficacy of indigenous nature cures. He himself delighted in demonstrating to visitors a very simple and inexpensive system of flush sanitation which he had devised. This kind of approach to village health, reversing the previous process, by which expensive Western urban-based curative services had been given highest priority, has been urged by WHO in the developing countries in recent years.

His approach to education is not dissimilar to that which heretics like Balogh and Dumont were to take up in Africa in the late fifties and which was to become orthodox by the late sixties. He was unenthusiastic about study abroad and about English language universities with Western literary curricula. He wanted all education from primary to higher levels to be undertaken in the provincial languages and the curriculum to be related to the rural

environment. He supported co-education at all levels. "Suppose some accidents do happen," he said in this connection to a worried Education Minister, "we should not be frightened. They would happen anywhere".

He urged simplicity and economy in government. He would have liked, he said, India to have as its Prime Minister a peasant who knew no English, with Nehru as his secretary. He chided members of parliament on their weakness for embossed notepaper, and the public in general for riding in trains without buying tickets.

Above all he was concerned at India's dependence on foreign imports of food, and was confident that self-sufficiency was possible if proper techniques were adopted. In "HARIJAN" in the last year of his life there are articles on compost manure and on cultivation of winter vegetables. There is also a continuing uneasiness at the effects of controls which create black markets, and the government is urged to run its own food stores.

Crime he regarded as a problem of mental health and considered that criminals should be treated as patients. Long before the Pope, he held prayer meetings in the jail of the capital city.

Mr. Gandhi called his autobiography "The Story of my Experiments with Truth". Right up until his death in his late seventies the experiments continued. If his ideas sometimes appeared to his visitors to be cranky, he was delighted to defend them. "Never," he said, "take anything as Gospel Truth, even from a Mahatma", Margaret Sanger even moved him a little in the direction of birth-control. Though this was only to the extent of admitting the ineffective rhythm method, it is possible that he might have admitted other methods had he lived longer. It is because his ideas on social questions were not static that their study remains rewarding.

It is strange that, as far as can be ascertained, there is no complete set of "HARIJAN" in any public or university library in Britain. Published every two or three weeks from his ashram on home-made paper, it contained vivid accounts of Mr. Gandhi's conversations with his visitors on a wide variety of political economic

and social questions, recorded by his Secretaries, Mahadev Desai and Pyrelal, in a succinct but lively style. The British readership was probably never large. From the Friends House archives it appears that Agatha Harrison's copy made quite a long round, including Sir Stafford Cripps. Wartime mails, too, were erratic. But it should not be difficult now for complete sets to be reproduced from Indian sources. A commemorative postage stamp is no doubt an impressive tribute from a government which imprisoned him so often, but it would be sad if the centenary year did not also result in a wider access to, and understanding of, Mr. Gandhi's ideas by students of development.