

On Gandhi's Reflections During His Last Days: Some Socio-Economic and Political Aspects

Anil Nauriya

Introduction

Gandhi often thought aloud as he went along, assimilating new facts and situations. One can almost hear the workings of his mind as it grapples, assimilates, suggests, concludes, revises and re-concludes. In this note I take up a few themes which, though often mentioned in public discourse, are prone to be discussed without reference to Gandhi's evolved thinking or which are sometimes torn out of their context.

On *Hind Swaraj*

Occasionally, when asked whether he still believed in the vision offered in his racy 1909 work, *Indian Home Rule* or *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi would reiterate that he did. Even so, he had warned in the early 1920s, referring to certain propaganda based on *Hind Swaraj* that had been directed at him:

It is a clever caricature permissible in Western warfare. It is only suggestively false. Let me say what I mean. In the first instance, India is not striving to establish 'Gandhi-Raj'. It is in dead earnest to establish swaraj and would gladly and legitimately sacrifice Gandhi for the sake of winning swaraj . . . under swaraj nobody ever dreams, certainly I do not dream, of no railways, no hospitals, no machinery, no army and navy, no laws and no law-courts. On the contrary, there will be railways; only they will not be intended for military or the economic exploitation of India, but they will be used for promoting internal trade and will make the lives of third-class passengers fairly comfortable. . . . Machinery there certainly will be in the shape of the spinning wheel, which is after all a delicate piece of machinery, but I have no doubt that several factories will grow up in India under swaraj intended for the benefit of the people, not as now for draining the masses dry. . . . It is not right therefore to tear some ideas expressed in *Indian Home Rule* from their proper setting, caricature them and put them before the people as if I was preaching these ideas for anybody's acceptance. (*Young India*, 9 March 1922, in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 23, pp. 38–39)

Some of the ideas put down in this note were mentioned in my talks given on the occasion of (i) Sudhir Chandra's lecture, 'Gandhi's Sorrows', organised under the auspices of SAHMAT in New Delhi on 13 October 2018; and (ii) the Conclave on Nehru's Legacy held on 30 March 2019 at the Indian Social Institute, New Delhi.

So the *Hind Swaraj* text, Gandhi clarified early enough, was not on the national agenda. It is also fairly evident that in many respects Gandhi himself had moved or was moving beyond the text of *Hind Swaraj* or had already considerably refined it. The interview he gave to G. Ramachandran on 21 and 22 October 1924 clarifies this aspect of the record. A relevant portion from it is reproduced here at some length:

[R:] Are you against all machinery, Bapuji?

How can I be when I know that even this body is a most delicate piece of machinery? The spinning-wheel itself is a machine; a little tooth-pick is a machine. What I object to, is the *craze* for machinery, not machinery as such. The craze is for what they call labour-saving machinery. Men go on 'saving labour' till thousands are without work and thrown on the open streets to die of starvation. I want to save time and labour, not for a fraction of mankind, but for all. I want the concentration of wealth, not in the hands of a few, but in the hands of all. Today machinery merely helps a few to ride on the backs of millions. The impetus behind it all is not the philanthropy to save labour, but greed. It is against this constitution of things that I am fighting with all my might.

[R:] Then Bapuji, you are fighting not against machinery as such, but against its abuses which are so much in evidence today?

I would unhesitatingly say 'yes'; but I would add that scientific truths and discoveries should first of all cease to be the mere instruments of greed. Then labourers will not be over-worked and machinery instead of becoming a hindrance will be a help. I am aiming, not at eradication of all machinery, but limitations.

[R:] When logically argued out, that would seem to imply that all complicated power-driven machinery should go.

It might have to go, but I must make one thing clear. The supreme consideration is man. The machine should not tend to make atrophied the limbs of man. For instance, I would make intelligent exceptions. Take the case of the Singer Sewing Machine. It is one of the few useful things ever invented, and there is a romance about the device itself.

Singer saw his wife labouring over the tedious process of sewing and seaming with her own hands, and simply out of his love for her, he devised the sewing machine, in order to save her from unnecessary labour. He, however, saved not only her labour but also the labour of everyone who could purchase a sewing machine.

[R:] But, in that case, there would have to be a factory for making these Singer Sewing Machines, and it would have to contain power-driven machinery of ordinary type.

Yes. But I am socialist enough to say that such factories should be nationalized,

On Gandhi's Reflections During His Last Days

Anil Nauriya

or State-controlled. They ought only to be working under the most attractive and ideal conditions, not for profit, but for the benefit of humanity, love taking the place of greed as the motive. It is an alteration in the conditions of labour that I want. This mad rush for wealth must cease, and the labourer must be assured, not only of a living wage, but a daily task that is not a mere drudgery. The machine will, under these conditions, be as much a help to the man working it as to the State, or the man who owns it. The present mad rush will cease, and the labourer will work (as I have said) under attractive and ideal conditions. This is but one of the exceptions I have in mind. The sewing machine had love at its back. The individual is the one supreme consideration. The saving of labour of the individual should be the object, and honest humanitarian considerations, and not greed, the motive. Thus, for instance, I would welcome any day a machine to straighten crooked spindles. Not that blacksmiths will cease to make spindles; they will continue to provide the pindles; but when the spindle gets wrong, every spinner will have a machine of his own to get it straight. Therefore, replace greed by love and everything will come right. (*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 25, pp. 250–52)

On his visit to England in 1931, Gandhi clarified to J.F. Horrabin, Henry Nevinson, H.N. Brailsford and others on 3 December:

Steel industry does not lend itself to hand labour. It is either the irresponsible critic or the enemy that spreads the rumour that I am opposed to machinery. I should have most delicate machinery to make fine surgical instruments. For food and clothing I would be dead against industrialization. (*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 48, p. 385)

And in a discussion which Gandhi had with a socialist in India before 22 June 1935 he said: 'If we could have electricity in every village home, I shall not mind villagers plying their implements and tools with electricity.' He added:

... the village communities or the State would own power-houses, just as they have their grazing pastures. But where there is no electricity and no machinery, what are idle hands to do? Will you give them work, or would you have their owners cut them down for want of work? I would prize every invention of science made for the benefit of all. There is a difference between invention and invention. I should not care for the asphyxiating gases capable of killing masses of men at a time. The heavy machinery for work of public utility which cannot be undertaken by human labour has its inevitable place, but all that would be owned by the State and used entirely for the benefit of the people. I can have no consideration for machinery which is meant either to enrich the few at the expense of the many, or without cause to displace the useful labour of many.

But even you as a socialist would not be in favour of an indiscriminate use of machinery. Take printing-presses. They will go on. Take surgical instruments.

||

How can one make them with one's hands? Heavy machinery would be needed for them.

Speaking to him while spinning on his charkha, Gandhi continued: 'But there is no machinery for the cure of idleness but this. I can work it whilst I am carrying on this conversation with you, and am adding a little to the wealth of the country. This machine no one can oust.' (*Harijan*, 22 June 1935, in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 61, pp. 187–88).

A conversation between Gandhi and some visitors from abroad two years later proceeded like this:

[Visitor]: So, then, you are against this machine age. I see.

[Gandhi]: To say that is to caricature my views. I am not against machinery as such, but I am totally opposed to it when it masters us. (*Harijan*, 27 February 1937)

Yet the formulations in *Hind Swaraj* have stuck to Gandhi and the elaboration, fine-tuning and evolution of his position is frequently ignored. One reason for this is of course Gandhi's own reluctance to acknowledge in so many words his evolution beyond the *Hind Swaraj* position.

For example, in his letter dated 5 October 1945 addressed to Jawaharlal Nehru, Gandhi is clearly in a space beyond the text of *Hind Swaraj*.² Yet he says in the same letter, 'I fully stand by the kind of governance which I have described in *Hind Swaraj*' (*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 81, p. 320; emphasis mine). Even so, he can now envisage a number of things that will have to be organised on a large scale. He mentions railways and communications, and adds about India in the future: 'I do not know what things there will be or will not be' (*ibid.*).

He clarifies, even if his praxis had made that clarification unnecessary, that he stands not for village life and villages as these exist, but for fully aware villagers and improved villages, and for a society from where plague, cholera and smallpox would have been eradicated and 'Men and women will live in freedom, prepared to face the whole world' (*ibid.*). He sets out what was essential for him: 'The sum and substance of what I want to say is that the individual person should have control over the things that are necessary for the sustenance of life' (*ibid.*).

On the face of it, Nehru in his reply dated 9 October 1945 disagreed with the vision set out by Gandhi in his letter of 5 October. But perhaps because of Gandhi's reference to the *governance* envisaged in *Hind Swaraj*, Nehru addressed himself in his letter essentially to *Hind Swaraj* rather than noticing the distance Gandhi had travelled from it even in the letter under reply. Nehru called the picture set out in *Hind Swaraj* 'completely unreal'. He recognised, quite correctly, that Gandhi in his writings and speeches had moved beyond that text: 'In your writings and speeches since then I have found much that seemed to me an advance on that old position and

an appreciation of modern trends.' Moreover, according to Nehru, the Congress had never considered the picture set out in *Hind Swaraj*. Nehru goes on to remind him, '[y]ou yourself have never asked to adopt it except for certain relatively minor aspects of it'. As we have seen above, this last comment by Nehru is in conformity with what Gandhi had himself written in 1922.

Later Gandhi and Nehru had a long meeting and appear to have arrived at a broader measure of agreement. There is a further letter dated 13 November 1945 from Gandhi to Nehru. It is written from Poona and in this letter Gandhi records his satisfaction with the talks he had had the previous day with Nehru. Gandhi writes: 'The talks we had yesterday have given me the impression that there is not much difference in our outlooks or the way we understand things' (*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 82, pp. 71–72). Further talks are envisaged. For the present, however, Gandhi summarises their discussion thus far in four points:

1. The crucial question according to you, is how to ensure man's mental, economic, political and moral development. That is my position too.
2. And in doing so every individual should have equal right and opportunity.
3. From this point of view there should be equality between villages and cities. And therefore their food and drink, their way of life, their dress and their habits should be the same. If such a condition is to be brought about people should produce their own cloth and food and build their own houses. So also they should produce their own water and electricity.
4. Man is not born to live in the jungle; he is born to live in society. If we are to make sure that one person does not ride on another's back, the unit should be an ideal village or a social group which will be self-sufficient, but the members of which will be interdependent. This conception will bring about a change in human relationship all over the world. If I have understood you correctly up to here, I shall take up the second part. (*Ibid.*, p. 72)

There seems to be no written record of their further discussions on the subject but there is no repudiation by Nehru of this summary either.³

It should be recalled that Gandhi favoured industrial education especially for girls. 'I insist on the industrial education of girls. That will make them independent. They will not have to depend on others if they are not married. If married, they can lend a helping hand at home. If widows, they can earn their own living' (*The Hindu*, 30 January 1935, in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 60, p. 125). He wanted such facilities also for Dalits (*Harijan*, 6 July 1934).

The encouragement he gave to village industries is well known.⁴ The insistence on holding Gandhi to a *Hind Swaraj* stereotype however arises widely not only in colonial-imperial narratives, but also in scholarship generally which has invested much in this text not only as a historical fact, which it is, but also in its letter. It is necessary to enter a note of caution here

because this investment is prone to become seamlessly an investment in a postulated Gandhi–Nehru divide and often leads to overshadowing of the Gandhi–Nehru convergences.

The Nonviolent Struggle: Policy or More?

From 1919 onwards Gandhi often lamented that participants in struggles initiated by him had not fully imbibed the discipline of nonviolence. Instances illustrating this are recounted in his article ‘The Crime of Chauri Chaura’ (*Young India*, 16 February 1922, in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, pp. 415–21). Towards the end of his life, Gandhi’s said more than once that people did not truly believe in nonviolence and had adopted it as a policy or method. Narendra Deva in his conversations with Gandhi in 1945 had suggested that a modicum of violence would probably be required to compel the Colonial Power to leave.⁵ A similar attitude is reflected also among many others in the struggle for freedom. Later on in Africa, Nelson Mandela, for example, also dwells on this question, distinguishing between those who had political rights and were not justified in using armed force and others who did not and who could therefore utilise such options if nonviolent methods failed.⁶

Gandhi would often lament, especially in his later years, that it was not true nonviolence that had been adopted in the course of the Indian struggle for freedom.⁷ Regardless of the considerable measure of truth in this, it cannot, however, serve to erase or deny the presence, in the struggle, of thousands who had indeed followed the discipline of nonviolent struggle broadly as indicated by Gandhi. In the midst of all the diverse struggles, countless instances can be cited of this – from the raids on salt pans in Dharasana in 1930 to the incidents in Peshawar in the North West Frontier Province in the same year and those, including even schoolgirls like Kanaklata in Assam in 1942, who were shot down while peacefully protesting during various movements.⁸ And such instances can be multiplied manifold. It is important to keep this record alive and fresh as there was a tendency even in a section of those who had emerged from the Congress fold to make light of their own legacy of courageous nonviolent struggle.⁹

For example, even a former Congress Young Turk like Mohan Dharia once referred to non-violent protest as a ‘safer’ option, thus displaying a surprising amnesia about the freedom movement not only in the rest of India but also in Maharashtra from where he hailed. For instance, Sayed Babu Genu, a mill worker, who, in the course of the Civil Disobedience movement, lay down in nonviolent protest in Bombay in front of vehicles of the Raj and was consequently crushed to death in December 1930 had surely not adopted a ‘safer’ course.¹⁰ Recently, it was a hundred years since the historic protest in Delhi on 30 March 1919 in response to Gandhi’s call against the Rowlatt legislation. Elsewhere in India the protest was observed

On Gandhi's Reflections During His Last Days

Anil Nauriya

on 6 April 1919. The protest on 30 March 1919 / 6 April 1919 became the first all-India *hartal* and protest on a democratic rights issue.

In Delhi the colonial government resorted to firing and other steps and several people were killed for taking part in the historic demonstration. This was the beginning of the firing spree that would culminate in Punjab in mid-April 1919. Here is an incomplete list of those shot dead in Delhi on 30 March 1919: Abdul Ghani, Atam Prakash, Chandra Bhan, Chet Ram, Gopi Nath, Hashmatullah Khan, Mam Raj, Radha Saran, Radhey Shyam, Ram Lal, Ram Saroop, Ram Singh, Chander Mal Rohatgi, Seva Ram and Swattin, son of Abdul Karim.¹¹ The historical legacy of such examples in the struggle for freedom is real and its significance can scarcely be denied.

The eminent writer and critic G. Venkatachalam did not exaggerate when he prefaced his essay on Sofia Khan, then Sofia Somji, a household name in Bombay at the time as the youngest of the 'dictators' appointed in the 1930–31 Civil Disobedience Movement, with these words:

The political upheaval of 1930–31 brought to light many hidden qualities of the Indian people, one of the most striking of them being the phenomenal courage displayed by the younger generation of Indian women, both in the villages and towns, in shattering the social fetters that had hitherto chained them into a form of slavery, in joyously participating in the national struggle for freedom, in braving the lathi blows of the police, in voluntarily courting imprisonment, in unflinchingly inviting suffering in the performance of their self-imposed tasks and in cheerfully bearing up all the insults, humiliations, and the wrath of the public, the elders and the authorities.¹²

The experience with subsequent movements was similar.

Many women, including elderly women like Bhogeswari Phukanani and Khahuli Nath, died facing police bullets at Bahrapur and Dhekiajuli in the course of nonviolent demonstrations in Assam.¹³ Matangini Hazra, a 72-year-old woman, similarly succumbed to police bullets in the course of a nonviolent demonstration she led in Tamluk, Midnapore, Bengal in September 1942.¹⁴ Apart from women, there was appreciable Dalit participation in the nonviolent struggles. The famous Dalit leader Juglal Chaudhri even lost his eldest son, Indra Dev Chaudhri, to police bullets in 1942.¹⁵ Such protesters had surely not taken the 'safer' route. In fact, by not acting furtively they had openly courted personal danger and physical injury, if not worse.

Independence and After

As independence approached, Gandhi, addressing socialist workers on 7 June 1947, exhorted them: 'Why don't you try to save the country from the calamity which has befallen it today? So long as this communal virus has not been eradicated, socialism will never come' (*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 88, pp. 96–97).

15

Continuing in the same vein, in a letter addressed to a Socialist leader on 22 July 1947, he discouraged the Socialists from splitting away from the Congress, warning:

The country is today passing through a critical time. If we do not unite and work together, I think neither the Congress nor the Socialists will succeed. Don't they both have the same goal? This is a time to think only of our duty as men. Consult among yourselves and let me know what you desire. I see no wisdom in people banding themselves into separate groups. (*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 88, p. 396)

On the Partition of India and particularly its aftermath, there is nevertheless a position that, citing Gandhi, holds *all* responsible for the tragic denouement. At the beginning of his famous fast on 13 January 1948, Gandhi told a Sikh friend: 'My fast is against no one party, group or individual exclusively and yet it excludes nobody. It is addressed to the conscience of all, even the majority community in the other Dominion' (*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 90, p. 413).

Later in the evening on the same day, he said in his speech: 'I have said that we have all sinned.'¹⁶ This is appropriate from Gandhi's reflexive point of view, where he is addressing Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims in general. Taken out of context, and without historical perspective, it could, however, be utilised to dilute some specific responsibilities of particular groups that were spreading division and inter-communal hatred. Gandhi himself was only too conscious of this. That is why Gandhi clarifies in the same speech:

That does not mean that any one particular man has sinned. Hindus in trying to drive out the Muslims are not following Hinduism. And today it is both Hindus and Sikhs who are trying to do so. But I do not accuse all the Hindus and Sikhs because not all of them are doing it. People should understand this. If they do not, my purpose will not be realized and the fast too will not be terminated. If I do not survive the fast, no one is to be blamed. If I am proved unworthy, God will take me away. People ask me if my fast is intended for the cause of the Muslims. I admit that that is so. Why? Because Muslims heretoday have lost everything in the world. (Speech at Prayer Meeting, 13 January 1948, in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 90, p. 414)

That is also why during his last fast in Delhi he insisted on assurances even from some religion-specific sectarian groups before breaking his fast.

Another matter that troubled Gandhi was the increasing degeneration that he noticed in politics. He had observed also the creeping corruption within the Congress itself. He referred to the 'stench spreading within the Congress and across the country' which was 'choking' him.¹⁷ This requires some explanation lest it convey a distorted impression in the current context. Gandhi's understanding of corruption was wider than the largely prevalent narrower notion of the phenomenon that restricts

On Gandhi's Reflections During His Last Days

Anil Nauriya

it largely to instances of bribery. To Gandhi abuse of power and non-performance of duty, were also corruption. Gandhi's understanding of corruption corresponds to the notion of 'roguery' and 'debasement'. This would of course include such matters as bribe-taking and so on but would not be limited to that.¹⁸ As he had told Mridula Sarabhai more than three years earlier, on 26 October 1944: 'If we can rid our people of falsehood and roguery, Government's falsehood cannot work. Let us remove the corruption prevailing everywhere. It is already there in the Government, but it has increased to a very great extent among those middlemen who live on brokerage' (*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 78, p. 234).¹⁹

The spread of hatred or the demolition of a place of worship, for example, would to Gandhi be an instance of such debasement. The manner in which the Babri Masjid was demolished in 1992, for example, violated the principles formulated in the unity resolution passed in October 1924 at the highly representative Unity Conference held in Delhi. The relevant part of the Resolution on Religious Toleration read as follows:

That all places of worship, of whatever faith or religion, shall be considered sacred and inviolable, and shall on no account be attacked or desecrated, whether as a result of provocation or by way of retaliation for sacrilege of the same nature. It shall be the duty of every citizen of whatever faith or religion, to prevent such attack or desecration as far as possible and where such attack or desecration has taken place, it shall always be promptly condemned.²⁰

Yet another question often arises in the context of Gandhi's last days. It is usual for certain non-Congress groups today to refer to the suggestion attributed to Gandhi that the Congress be wound up. There are several aspects of this matter that are not widely known and require analysis.

On 29 January 1948, a day before his assassination, Gandhi was working on a draft constitution for the Congress which was prefaced with a note that began as follows:

Though split into two, India having attained political independence through means devised by the Indian National Congress, the Congress in its present shape and form, i. e., as a propaganda vehicle and parliamentary machine, has outlived its use. India has still to attain social, moral and economic independence in terms of its seven hundred thousand villages as distinguished from its cities and towns. The struggle for the ascendancy of civil over military power is bound to take place in India's progress towards its democratic goal. It must be kept out of unhealthy competition with political parties and communal bodies. For these and other similar reasons, the A. I. C. C. resolves to disband the existing Congress organization and flower into a Lok Sevak Sangh under the following rules *with power to alter them as occasion may demand*. . . . (Emphasis mine)

The proposal that the Congress mutate itself into a Lok Sevak Sangh

17

was not unalterable and was premised on a larger understanding which needs to be understood. It should also be noted that Constitution that Gandhi had drafted does not appear to be complete and the part of it that is available focuses largely on the village-level worker. It was clearly something he was still working on though his secretary Pyare Lal, seems to have presented it after Gandhi's death as his last will and testament. It was published posthumously in *Harijan* on 15 February 1948.

What then is one to make of this?

There was a larger issue that was troubling Gandhi and its significance will become apparent presently. Gandhi had gone on record a few months earlier to say that he would revolt against the Congress 'only when I see that the Congress has become a capitalists' party'.²¹ But even in his penultimate days he did not envision an India without the Congress.

In a letter dated 16 January 1948 to Prema Kantak, Gandhi had written: 'The Congress is still a political body and will remain so in the future. When, however, it holds political power, it becomes one of the parties, no matter how big. Those, therefore, who have perfect faith in ahimsa should not hold any office in the Government' (*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 90, p. 434).

This was written a fortnight before Gandhi was assassinated and while he was still on a fast in Delhi. *He clearly envisaged the Congress as a political body which would remain so in the future.* He is, in his letter to Prema Kantak, distinguishing between those who believe in nonviolence as principle and those to whom it was useful as an advisable policy. He suggested that the former should not hold office in Government. He was also undoubtedly uncomfortable with the idea of the Congress remaining as just one of the political parties. He would have liked it to remain above the fray.

These diverse considerations pulled in different directions. He wanted those who believed in pure ahimsa to concentrate on constructive work.²² The need to emphasise the importance of constructive work seems to have led to the draft recommendation about the Lok Sevak Sangh. It was obviously something Gandhi was mulling over and which he would have liked to discuss further. But he had not given final shape to the draft besides which it was incomplete though it was posthumously presented as his testament which that incomplete document clearly is not.

Gandhi had in a discussion with constructive workers on 11/12 December 1947 regretted that the Congress was not sufficiently interested in constructive work programmes (*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 90, p. 221) He pointed out that the 'objective of constructive works organizations is to generate political power' (*ibid.*, p. 217). He was therefore emphasising to Congress leaders the vital importance of these programmes not for attaining power for constructive workers but placing them in a

situation by dint of service where 'we should indeed have that hold upon the people that whomsoever we might choose, should be returned' (ibid.).

This was a matter that had been vital to the historical growth of the Congress. It is necessary to dwell on this point a little further. In the 1930s the Frontier Gandhi, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan made a tour of Bengal. On coming back he spoke at the Bombay session of the All India Congress Committee (AICC) in 1934. And the point that he made was to underline the link between the constructive work programmes of the Congress and its political programmes. He said he noticed in the course of his tour that people were willing to come forward and listen to the Congress wherever the Constructive work programme had reached. For example, he noticed, that where the *khadi* (handspun and handwoven cloth) programme had reached and had been able to help generate some income, people would flock to the Congress meetings to hear their message.²³

The crucial link that the Frontier Gandhi observed in 1934 was sometimes lost sight of in post-independence twentieth century India. To some extent an essential and necessary accompaniment to post-independence legislative initiatives – the corresponding socio-political programmes and initiatives and continuing political education of the people required along with these – would be absent even in the early years but this aspect came more prominently to the fore after the 1969 split in the Congress.

A year after the 1969 split in the Congress a seminar was organised on Nehru and Nation-building. This was in December 1970, that is the month in which Prime Minister Indira Gandhi recommended dissolution of the Lok Sabha and called for fresh general elections. In a paper presented at the seminar (21–23 December 1970) at the University of Rajasthan in Jaipur, K.R. Narayanan (1920–2005), who would serve as the President of India between 1997 and 2002, assessed the issue perspicaciously and observed: 'In his passion for legislative revolution Nehru and the Indian National Congress did not, after independence, place sufficient emphasis on the aspect of a social reform movement in the country.'²⁴

This problem became germane especially after 1969 because the split in the Congress and the lines on which it occurred had the effect significantly of cutting the Congress off from the constructive work movements, that is the very civil society organisations which were its roots and which had provided it sustenance.

The importance of such work may be gauged from a self-criticism that Socialists made on the eve of their departure from the Congress in March 1948, a few weeks after Gandhi's assassination. In his annual report as General Secretary to the Socialist Party's session at Nasik, Jayaprakash Narayan would admit:

Looking back it seems to me that we would have done well to associate ourselves with the constructive work of the Congress to a far greater extent than we did. We were responsible—and I more than others perhaps—in creating the feeling that all constructive work was unrevolutionary and, for socialists, a waste of time. I should like to put on record that that was an immature and mistaken view. Possibly, if we had come into the field of constructive work we might have developed aspects or types of it that would perhaps have enriched it. But whether that would have happened or not there is no doubt that we have impoverished ourselves a great deal by keeping out of that valuable field of activity, which would have given us experience and wider mass contact and enabled us to understand rural India in a more intimate manner.²⁵

But the somewhat neglectful attitude that the socialists had towards constructive work activities was reflected to some extent even in the post-independence governmental apparatus. The shortcoming which K.R. Narayanan noticed in 1970 was near-exclusive reliance, on state action, legislation and state policies. The implicit thinking seemed to be: Now that we are in power we do not need to build up civil society institutions for social reform and action because we have the state to do this for us. The consequences of this, albeit benign, neglect were not immediately apparent because, for one thing, the Congress was historically associated with a network of ground level constructive work institutions on whose support it could implicitly rely in the first 22 years after independence. The 1969 split in the Congress shook up this arrangement by cutting if not virtually snapping whatever connections the Congress led by Indira Gandhi had with the constructive work organisations and activities traditionally associated with the Congress. The implications were not immediately obvious in the short-term. This was for other reasons, primarily the short-term electoral victories that the Congress secured in the General Elections of 1971 and the nation-wide elections to the state assemblies which followed in 1972. In the General Elections of 1971 it was the freshness of Indira Gandhi's faction, which had emerged from the Congress split of 1969, that swayed the electorate. In the state assembly elections in the following year there was the added factor of victory in the Bangladesh War.

Yet the overall impact of the 1969 split in the Congress did not take long to make itself felt and it was soon obvious that the Congress, or what remained of it, needed to rebuild its grassroots constructive work network. That, then, is the significance of the document Gandhi was working on 29–30 January 1948. The heading 'The Last Will and Testament' is obviously a flourish by his secretary Pyarelal, to whom it had been entrusted to fill up gaps.²⁶ Gandhi himself could not have known that he would never see the draft again and would hardly have described it as such. The scholarly editors of the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* were careful to describe it only as 'Draft Constitution of the Congress' (Vol. 90, pp. 526–28). Even as a 'Draft

On Gandhi's Reflections During His Last Days

Anil Nauriya

Constitution of the Congress' (Gandhi had drafted more comprehensive such constitutional documents in the past) it is too incomplete to be considered a final text except as a matter for further drafting, fine-tuning and discussion.

Most important of all, and in addition to Gandhi's letter to Prema Kantak referred to above, is this note by Gandhi which was written on 27 January 1948, that is, *three days before his assassination*:

Indian National Congress which is the oldest national political organization and which has after many battles fought her non-violent way to freedom cannot be allowed to die. It can only die with the nation. A living organism ever grows or it dies. The Congress has won political freedom, but it has yet to win economic freedom, social and moral freedom. These freedoms are harder than the political, if only because they are constructive, less exciting and not spectacular. All-embracing constructive work evokes the energy of all the units of the millions. (*Harijan*, 1 February 1919, in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 90, pp. 497–98)

It was published in *Harijan* within two days of his death, that is, before anyone could have had time to make any interpolation claiming that he had been so authorised by Gandhi.

This is confirmed by the discussion that R.R. Diwakar and another (presumably Acharya Jugal Kishore) had with Gandhi on 27 January 1948. Gandhi told them, *inter alia*, that:

even for carrying out parliamentary activities the Congress had to carry on constructive activities in the country to maintain contact with the people and to educate them to understand Congress policies and programmes. But apart from this kind of activities the Congress had also to rebuild a new society based upon truth and non-violence – a society not so much dependent on the existence of a strong and centralized government as on the intelligent co-operation of the people organized on a voluntary basis and inspired by the ideals of justice, tolerance and truthfulness. He was of opinion that unless the Congress took up this role, the Congress would gradually lose its moral influence and was likely to degenerate into a political party hankering only after power and position. Viewed in this context, the Congress must reorganize itself on the basis proposed by him and become eventually a strong and efficient instrument of public service and of public will. (AICC File No. 1876, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 90, p. 506; emphasis mine)

Clearly, Gandhi's practical and primary concern was that the Congress must not lose touch with constructive activities, *as this was necessary even for carrying on its parliamentary activities*, not that it dissolve itself.

In Conclusion: Gandhi and Nehru and Their Commonalities

Thus the ‘Congress dissolution’ aspect of the so-called ‘Last Will and Testament’, which feeds into the state action-versus-constructive work divide is belied by Gandhi’s thinking upto even a few hours earlier.

This divide is often overlaid with a claimed divide between Gandhi and Nehru on the matter of the secular state. In fact the reverse is true. Gandhi and Nehru often strove to find common ground. The secular nature of the state – that is, a religiously neutral state as postulated by the Karachi resolution of 1931 – is a successful instance of the search for common ground not only between Gandhi and Nehru but also between Maulana Azad, Sardar Patel and others. The Karachi resolution was based on a draft jointly agreed to between Gandhi and Nehru.²⁷ It furnishes a very successful instance of achievement of consensus between them. Apart from the dialogue on socio-economic policy which, as we have seen, does not necessarily lead on to an irremediable Gandhi–Nehru divide, the understanding of nation and state that Gandhi and Nehru had was essentially the same.²⁸ The notion of the secular state that was implemented after independence also emerged from the freedom struggle and Nehru invariably emphasised the connection between the establishment of a secular state and the ‘whole growth of our national movement’.²⁹ It is intrinsic to the Gandhi–Nehru framework. It is a model of equality and equal citizenship.

A secular state was thus established which went beyond the usual European notion of a denominational state whose secularism consisted merely in the separation from the very church to which that state was a simultaneously committed. Post-Independent India understood a secular state to be a non-denominational state and a state that was religiously neutral as specified in the Karachi Resolution of 1931. To this resolution Gandhi adhered and in speaking of a secular state had also defined it in clear terms in what would now be depicted as a Nehruvian manner, that is in terms of separation of state from denominational religion (6 May 1933; 27 January 1935; 20 January 1942; September 1946; 16 August 1947; 17 August 1947; 22 August 1947; 15 November 1947; 28 November 1947).³⁰ (See Anil Nauriya, ‘Gandhi on Secular Law and State’, *The Hindu*, 22 October 2003.)

Contrary to a widespread impression, when Gandhi speaks of a secular state he speaks in no other manner than this. Having arrived at the Karachi consensus on the religiously neutral state he rigorously adheres to it. As I have suggested elsewhere, it is in the social domain and at the level of the individual that the ideas of Gandhi and Nehru may not be congruent or may even diverge; but even here they tend to be complementary rather than contradictory.³¹

Notes

- 1 This correspondence has been covered in Sudhir Chandra, *Gandhi: An Impossible Possibility* (London: Routledge, 2017). This work was originally published in Hindi in 2011 by Rajkamal Prakashan under the title 'Gandhi Ek Asambhava Sambhavna'. It has been translated into English by Chitra Padmanabhan. Sudhir Chandra acknowledges also that the 1945 formulations by Gandhi in his correspondence with Nehru constituted a considerable revision of his position. He records his surprise that this fact is so often neglected. I may add that such a revision in Gandhi's position is already evident in earlier statements by Gandhi. It is curious also that while the post-Revolution Soviet Union and Lenin are permitted a New Economic Policy without inducing major academic outrage, Gandhi and Nehru are often permitted little dialogic leeway in their socio-economic vision for the reconstruction and construction of India.
- 2 For the entire correspondence which includes also Nehru's side of it, see Uma Iyengar and Lalitha Zackariah (eds), *Together They Fought: Gandhi-Nehru Correspondence, 1921-1948*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 449-57.
- 3 See, for example, M.K. Gandhi, *Village Swaraj*, compiled by H.M. Vyas, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Trust, 1962.
- 4 See Anil Nauriya, 'Nonviolent Action and Socialist Radicalism', in David Hardiman (ed.), *Nonviolence in Modern Indian History*, Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2017, p. 137.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 104.
- 6 See, for instance, Gandhi's letter dated 1 January 1948 to Karl Struve (*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 90, p. 337).
- 7 Cf. (i) *Report [with evidence] of the Peshawar Enquiry Committee*, Allahabad: Allahabad Law Journal Press, 1930; (ii) Gene Sharp, *Gandhi Wields the Weapon of Moral Power*, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1960; (iii) Arun Chandra Bhuyan and Sibopada De (eds), *Political History of Assam*, Vol. 3: 1940-47, Dispur/Gauhati: Government of Assam, 1980; (iv) for Dharasana, a classic account is Webb Miller, *I Found No Peace: The Journal of a Foreign Correspondent*, Special Edition for The Book Club, London, circa 1936, pp. 179-90.
- 8 Mohan Dharia in *Indian Express*, New Delhi, 28 May 2003.
- 9 Usha Thakkar and Sandhya Mehta, *Gandhi in Bombay: Towards Swaraj*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 167.
- 10 See Prabha Chopra (ed.), *Who's Who of Delhi Freedom Fighters*, Vol. 1, Delhi: Gazetteer Unit, Delhi Administration, 1974, *passim*.
- 11 G. Venkatachalam, *Profiles*, Baroda: Nalanda Publications, 1949, pp. 218-23.
- 12 Arun Chandra Bhuyan and Sibopada De (eds), *Political History of Assam*, Vol. 3: 1940-47, pp. 71-73.
- 13 Ajoy Mukherjee in S.P. Sen (ed.), *Dictionary of National Biography*, Calcutta: Institute of Historical Studies, 1973, Vol. II, pp. 159-61.
- 14 Bipin Behari Mandal, Govind Sharma, Shiv Dayal and Arvind Anjum (eds), *Bihar Ke Gaurav: Swatantra Sangram*, Khand 1, Patna: Shri Brajkishore Smarak Pratishthan, Sadaquat Ashram, 2016, p. 199.
- 15 Speech at Prayer Meeting, 13 January 1948, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 90, p. 414.
- 16 Sudhir Chandra, *Gandhi: An Impossible Possibility*, p. 147.
- 17 For the code of conduct that Gandhi expected from Congressmen and those who were attached to the legacy of the Indian struggle, see the excellent compilation by H.M. Vyas: M.K. Gandhi, *Gandhiji Expects*, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1965.

- 18 Thus the limited understanding of corruption reflected in the question sometimes put in connection with the recent Rafale transaction: ‘Where’s the money trail?’ would not be an adequate response to corruption involved in cronyism and abuse of power.
- 19 *Indian Annual Register*, 1924, Vol. 2, p. 156.
- 20 Sudhir Chandra, *Gandhi: An Impossible Possibility*, p. 147, citing Gandhi’s statement of 5 June 1947.
- 21 Born essentially out of the non-co-operation movement of the 1920s, the constructive programme was later explained in a small compendium by Gandhi in December 1941 listing activities connected with inter-communal unity, removal of untouchability, prohibition, khadi, other village industries, village sanitation, new or basic education, adult education, women, education in health and hygiene, leprosy, provincial languages, national language, that is, Hindustani (inclusive of Hindi and Urdu), economic equality, kisans, labour, adivasis, and students. This was further revised and enlarged in 1945.
- 22 See Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan’s speech reproduced in ‘Report of the 48th Session of the Indian National Congress: Proceedings’, Bombay, 1934, pp. 111–12, cited in Anil Nauriya, ‘Nonviolent Action and Socialist Radicalism’, in David Hardiman (ed.), *Nonviolence in Modern Indian History*, p. 138.
- 23 K.R. Narayanan, *Nehru and His Vision*, Kottayam: D.C. Books, 1999, p. 34.
- 24 Narayan, *Jayaprakash Narayan: Selected Works*, Vol. 4, pp. 229–30. More than 40 years later this would be echoed by the socialist Madhu Limaye who said of Gandhi: ‘Through his constructive programmes he penetrated the village India’: see Madhu Limaye, ‘Gandhi, Nehru and Quit India’, *Janata*, Quit India Number, Bombay, 1991, p. 13, cited in Anil Nauriya, ‘Nonviolent Action and Socialist Radicalism’, in David Hardiman (ed.), *Nonviolence in Modern Indian History*, pp. 139–40. The Socialists left the Congress in March 1948. Interestingly, Jayaprakash Narayan was reported in July 1964, a few weeks after Nehru’s death, to have said that ‘leaving the Congress in 1948 to form the Socialist Party’ was a mistake committed on account of ‘the wrong assessment of the character of the Congress.’ According to him ‘(m)ost of his partymen thought at that time that the Congress would slowly develop into a conservative-cum-liberal party just like ‘what the Swatantra Party is today. But history belied this assessment’ (*The Hindustan Times*, 4 July 1964, cited in Girja Shankar, *Socialist Trends in the Indian National Movement*, Twenty-First Century Publishers, 1987, p. 294n.). Ironically, that assessment may have provided an accurate description of the later Congress towards the last two decades of the twentieth century. By then, several possibilities and alternate policies the socialists could have meaningfully expanded and expounded and to which they might conceivably have made a greater contribution, were lost to them.
- 25 See Pyarelal, *Mahatma Gandhi*, Volume X [*The Last Phase: Part II*], Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1958, pp. 819–20. The editors of the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* note as follows: ‘In his article “The Fateful Friday”, in *Harijan*, Pyarelal writes: The whole of the 29th had been so cram-full with work that at the end of the day Gandhiji felt utterly fagged out. “My head is reeling. And yet I must finish this”, he remarked to Abha, pointing to the draft constitution for the Congress which he had undertaken to prepare, and then, “I am afraid I shall have to keep late hours”. The next morning Gandhiji revised the draft and gave it to Pyarelal to “go through carefully”. He added: “Fill in any gaps in thought that there might be. I wrote it under a heavy strain.” When Pyarelal took the revised draft to him he “went through the additions and alterations point by point with his characteristic thoroughness and removed an error in calculation that had crept in in regard to the

On Gandhi's Reflections During His Last Days

Anil Nauriya

number of panchayats" (*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 90, pp. 526–27 n.2). There are too many questions that arise here for this document, published posthumously in *Harijan* more than a fortnight later on 15 February 1948, to be treated as a basis for the suggestion that the Indian National Congress be wound up and that too at a time when the inter-communal situation in the country was yet to be stabilised and on the eve of the state formation process in the newly-independent nation. Still more so when both in his letter to Prema Kantak on 16 January 1948, and his note dated 27 January 1948 as also his discussions on the same day with R.R. Diwakar and another, Gandhi had, as we have seen, expressed opinions that expressly and implicitly envisaged a continuing Congress role as a political and parliamentary body.

- 26 D.G. Tendulkar, *Mahatma*, Delhi: The Publications Division, 1961, Vol. 3, pp. 87–88.
- 27 Anil Nauriya, 'Notions of Nation', *The Times of India*, 31 August 1998, https://www.academia.edu/1385074/Notions_of_Nation_Gandhis_Composite_Vision_of_India
- 28 *The Statesman*, Delhi, 8 July 1951.
- 29 See Anil Nauriya, 'Gandhi on Secular Law and State', *The Hindu*, 22 October 2003, <https://www.thehindu.com/2003/10/22/stories/2003102200891000.htm>
- 30 See <https://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/2000/05/08/stories/05082523.htm>.

Anil Nauriya is a counsel at the Supreme Court and the Delhi High Court, studies struggles for freedom, and has written widely on contemporary affairs.