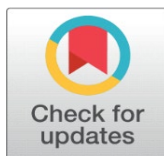
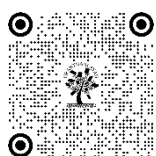


MAHATMA GANDHI'S CONSTRUCTIVE PROGRAMMES: A KIND OF INDIRECT POLITICS OF GANDHI

Bindu Mathew¹

¹ Assistant Professor of History, NMSM Govt. College Kalpetta



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ABSTRACT

Mahatma Gandhi's Constructive programme is one of the focus points of his philosophy for attaining self-reliance social harmony and national integration. This paper examines the major factors of Gandhi's constructive programmes including village sanitation, Khadi and village industries, eradication of untouchability, communal harmony, women empowerment and basic education. By delving into Gandhi's writing and actions the study highlights how these initiatives served as practical tools for socio economic transformation and political mobilization. It also explores the relevance of constructive programmes in contemporary India.

Keywords: Constructive Work, Political Ideology, Khadi, Hindu-Muslim Unity, Nationalist Ideology

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper intends to throw some light on a very special feature of Mahatma Gandhi's Constructive Programme drives which goes beyond philanthropy or apolitical moralistic exercises.

Gandhi's Constructive programmes had a political organizational value too. Khadi Work, Hindu-Muslim Unity, Anti-Untouchability campaign etc., were such issues which required an integrated, collective and compound approach and Gandhi integrated all of them to form a comprehensive set of public work that has to be free from immediate political impact but whose long-term effect must be highly political and helpful in the making of Modern India.

For example, in 1930, he advised a worker,

"A public worker should also learn to keep patience. It is for the leader to think in what way any worker can serve best. If we do with perfect devotion the work assigned to us, we shall have done our true dharma. Only through experience can one know what is beyond one's strength. If we are free from ignorant attachment to anything, it is easy enough for us to discover the limits of our strength."

By Constructive Work emphasis and extensive touring throughout Indian subcontinent in twenties and thirties, Gandhi, in a long-term perspective, helped to create a nationalist network of public workers who had democratic political inclinations and a broad nationalist vision. He encouraged continuous interconnections, discussions and debates among

them and in top leadership also, about public affairs. The secular pro-poor and all-inclusive nationalist ideology in terms of India was the chief domain of the ideological struggle. Of course, this process was not without its limitations in programmes and priorities. It was also not a homogeneous process devoid of any political contestations. The process of Nation Building in political and social terms was, of course, strengthened. But, in Post Independent India, in fact, Gandhian Constructive Work doctrine could not be evolved keeping in view of the challenges before nation. Untimely demise of Gandhi proved too much for the completion of that urgent historic task. No Gandhi-follower had the reasonable political understanding to fulfill the objective of reorganization of Constructive Work drive. A recent publication of a book 'Gandhi is gone: Who will guide us now' tells the utter confusion and indecisiveness of Gandhi followers about the future public work and politics in Independent India.

If we analyze Gandhi's speeches on constructive work propaganda it becomes evident that he strongly opposed the mass proliferation of leadership or the rise of opportunistic leaders who lacked genuine leadership qualities. He virtually made Constructive Work as a qualification barometer to trust political minded enthusiasts about their genuineness of entering public life.

How to make a viable connection between leaders and masses has been one of the most perplexing issues before any radical democratic politics. Gandhi addressed and sought to solve this enduring problem through his different Constructive Work drives. A 'living contact with masses' is a very important factor for conducting politics in a broader strategic way. A constant quest to minimize the 'gap' among them is very fundamental to transform the overall political relationships. In fact, the pro-poor orientations sensibilities or any rhetoric on the part of leadership are bound to be, ineffective in the absence of a network of living connections among them. Constructive Work was the most obvious tool to minimize this gap.

Similar to this issue of bridging gaps among leadership and masses, is the challenge to come into grips with gross-root issues and instant problems of the masses and their perceptions by their leaders.

Gandhi was aware of the fact that political consciousness of the leaders is enriched through an enlightened living contact and empathy towards its objects i.e., masses. And this requires a cool realization of their actual sufferings. Through this enhancing the pro-poor political consciousness and sensibility of the activists and simultaneously, through continuous living contact with real agents of history (masses) Gandhi devised a dynamic mechanism which very easily could evolve or readjust the concrete political understanding of his in particular and of Indian National Movement in general.

A real conundrum of radical democratic politics is how to win the confidence of the masses; so that they mass move along with their leaders in the political journey. Gandhi more than any other political leader was aware of this riddle. Gandhi as a great political mass leader understood that the democratic mode politics must be constructed according to 'exact' political mass consciousness. Otherwise, the leadership ranks get frustrated and masses, no more, see to them for their causes.

Ridiculing the masses for their in-action, was not Gandhi's way of thinking about masses-leaders connection problem. Gandhi attributed this problem on the part of political leadership. Gandhi's Constructive Work logic gained from the 'political insight' that cadre, masses and other political enthusiasts too, cannot repudiate challenge and firth the opponent in the mood that it is 'fight to finish'. It is not a feasible strategy and it is also not a suitable way for the overall constructive social political transformation. In other words, mass based direct political movements have to be halted for various political reasons, and, an indirect gross-root preparation for further enhancing the range and scope of public activities has to be undertaken. So, in a way, for Gandhi, incessant politics or public activity also meant the continuous never ending Constructive Programme which he often described as more important than civil disobedience.

A very significant aspect that Constructive Work connotes is a subtle evoking and even provoking of finer instincts in political minded persons, in individuals and in society as a whole including opponents. Gandhi's understanding of humanity holds that the basic nature of human beings is of advancement in the overall progress of humanity.

For this very reason Gandhi discouraged populist verbal politics and airy high sounding abstract political programmes which had to be meant mostly for the sheer purpose of criticizing opponent authorities and inciting masses to come in the fold of its proponents. Gandhi consciously framed his Constructive Work and Programme in such a way that it should be understood as his weapon of 'indirect politics'.

Through Constructive Work Gandhi made social reform in general as an indispensable criterion for doing public work.

Gandhi did not campaign his Constructive Work in a fragmented and exclusive sense. He always emphasized on the multifarious character and implications of his constructive drives. For instance, in 1933, in his historic Harijan tour, addressing a public meeting among Jubbulpore workers, he said,

“If this effort to abolish root and branch the distinctions of high and low succeeds, it will have a healthy reaction on all spheres of life, and the war between capital and labour will cease and give place to cooperation and concord between the two....”

Gandhi's Constructive Work strategy incorporated a rigorous element of 'self-introspection' on the part of the movement and it included in it an intricate intermingling of social reform drives and other political objectives. A deep sense of responsibility on the part of the movement for bad conditions was kept alive for making an atmosphere for social reforms. Gandhi always insisted that opponent authorities did not make us their slave by physical or military force only, rather, they utilized the weaknesses, incompetence,

disorganization and other inferior negative features of Indian society to control over the Indians. Gandhi's Constructive Work was his response to these types of negative situations prevalent in Indian society. So, it is important to note that Gandhi emphasized that Constructive Work should be done with non-confrontational gestures and intents. Of course, it encouraged ideological struggles, but, it did so in a constructive positive plane. Non-confrontational constructive programme strategy did not mean any surrender or 'dead peace', but, it meant the democratic norm of gentle argumentation and persuasion and, in the process, making a hegemonic advantage over societal issues. That is why Gandhian constructive programmes had to be different from conventional radical terminologies.

In fact, Gandhi's political ideology and understanding is tantamount to a melting pot of anti-colonial, pro-poor nationalist ideology with other distinct Gandhian notions.

Gandhi's selection of Constructive Programme items does not necessarily commence itself from any immediate, tangible or visible considerations. Rather he chose such social issues and programs which were bound to make effect in multi-dimensional ways. As the main purpose of the Constructive Programme was to change the overall societal equations in favor of poorer and weaker sections of society. He believed that small successful battles would inspire other territories also as an infectious precedent.

Along with his constructive work rhetoric, Gandhi diffused in it a sense of self-content so that activists would not feel embarrassed or disheartened on its slow pace or fearing of the impossibility of the task. For instance, in 1925, addressing the students of Gujarat Vidyapith he called them on to move to villages for Constructive Work and also shared their suspicion in these words,

'It is easy to say this, but difficult to do. Faith can make it easy. 'I am alone, how can I reach seven hundred thousand villages?' This is the argument that pride whispers to us. Start with the faith that if you fix yourself up in one single village and succeed, the rest will follow.'

Gandhi had no confusion over the dynamic and evolutionary character of his Constructive Work doctrine. For example, in April 1937, he said that, 'But constructive programme is not, like Truth and non-violence, valid for all time. Take the charkha. If you go to the North Pole or to the Himalayan peaks or to Tibet, the talk of cotton won't do.'

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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Organizational value of Khadi work always remained in Gandhi's mind. He also understood its subtle effects and implications. As he wrote in one of his notes in 1922, 'The spirit of freedom is like the leaven all-pervading. The constructive work which gives the movement stability cannot be felt. It has to be observed by seeing the work that is silently but surely going on in thousands of homes. He will find it in swadeshi, in the spinning-wheel. India will be permanently organized to the extent that hand-spinning is organized. India's joint family system which

affects even Mussulmans and her other special characteristics make further and immediate agricultural organization impossible.' "Already Free", Notes, Young India, January 12, 1922, CWMG 22:160.

"Letter to Vasumati Pandit", August 21, 1930, CWMG 44:94. Similarly he wrote to Lilavati Asar for his impatience, 'If you do not become impatient, you are bound to get the strength to put your ideals into practice. As we get indigestion if we start eating all at once, so also, we fail in our attempt if we try to put anything in practice without first judging our capacity and this gives rise to despair. If we ourselves cannot judge our capacity we should follow the advice of some person in whose judgment we have faith and who has given the advice after considering our capacity.' "Letter to Lilavati Asar", September 21, 1930, CWMG 44:156. Also see "Letter to Gangabehn Vaidya", January 24, 1927, CWMG 33:07.

It is out of purview for me to go into details of it. But it is sufficed to say that Indian National Congress was not the sole authority for doing politics in India in any point of time. Though, it is correct that it was the largest block or national platform of anti-Imperialist, anti-colonial nationalist leadership but beyond its domain there were many other political blocks that denied the Congress umbrella and did their politics on the mass-based methods. Congress had a basic contradiction with that blocks or groups (mainly communal and castiest) and it also fought against them keeping in view the constraints of supremacy of 'Primary Contradiction', but simultaneously it had a natural tendency not to try to attack them ideologically in no holds barred way. Of course, Gandhi and Nehru may be considered an exception in this regard, but, they only partially succeeded in this task.

Very early in his political carrier in India Gandhi sensed the main problem of democratic politics as a problem of living connectivity among masses and their leaders. In 1916 he spoke his mind in these words, 'We the educated class have received our education through a foreign tongue. We have therefore not reacted upon the masses. We want to represent the masses, but we fail. They recognize us not much more than they recognize the English officers. Their hearts are an open book to neither. Their aspirations are not ours. Hence there is a break. And you witness not in reality failure to organize, but want of correspondence between the representatives and the represented.' "Speech on Swadeshi at Missionary Conference, Madras", The Hindu, February 28, 1916, CWMG 13:221.

The reason of partial failure of the Indian Left Parties to emerge as an irrepressible political force also lies in their inability to grasp their fundamental point of revolutionary democratic politics. Gandhi was of the firm opinion that leadership has to be sincere and sensitive to the task they proclaim to fulfill and it requires more than simple genuine intentions. Gandhi sensed this complex problem in a multi-faceted way. And so, he inculcated the educative element in his Constructive Work concepts. As he wrote to young ashram inmates, 'Spinning is primarily an education, for it arouses in us a sense of the duty of service, we learn in it a very useful occupation and there is beautiful art in it.' "Letter to Ashram Boys and Girls", March 21, 1932, CWMG 49:220.

Here an important insight from Gandhi's perception of suffering of masses is that the basic parameter of it has to be specific and not in abstract. Suffering of masses due to under development and other structural reasons has to be analyzed in political and economic terms and to reverse the process one also has to take in to account the issues of social and cultural backwardness.

Most of the top leadership of Congress could not understand the basic strategic vision of Constructive Work mainly due to typical Gandhian political discourse. Even Nehru was only partially able to feel its genuineness for the movement. But as Gandhi understood the political sensitivity of masses and their leaders was truer to the ground realities than others he was never seriously challenged or substituted by any other type of public activity, at least in the Congress umbrella block

Bipan Chandra's classic 'Indian National Movement', Long Terms Dynamics' has analyzed this very crucial aspect of political mass movements brilliantly. Needless to say, I have considered his works as a vantage point to further my study on Gandhi.

Of course, the items in Constructive Work has to be changed or altered keeping in view of the understanding of 'total situation'. They never meant to be static.

It does not mean that Gandhi was not a believer of class consciousness and its impact on human nature, what he argued was that man was capable of surpassing class instincts of the better humanity cause.

N. K. Bose, one of the pioneer sociologists in India, first met Gandhi in 1934 and did an interview raising an important question of Khadi as a humanitarian work or as an instrument of political education. Gandhi replied, "The two issues of Khadi and political organization should be kept absolutely separate. There must be no confusion. The aim of Khadi is humanitarian; but so far as India is concerned its effects is bound to be immensely political."

"The Salvation Army wants to teach people about God. But they come with bread. For the poor, bread is their God. Similarly, we should bring food to the mouths of the people through Khadi. If we succeed in breaking the idleness of the people through Khadi, they will begin to listen to us. Whatever else the Government might do, it does leave some food for the villagers. Unless we can bring food to them, why should people listen to us? When we have taught them what they can do through own efforts, they will want to listen to us."

"That trust can best be generated through Khadi. While working out the Khadi programme, our aim should be purely humanitarian, that is, economic. We should leave out all political considerations whatsoever. But it is bound to produce important political consequences, which nobody can prevent and nobody need deplore." "Tendulkar Mahatma IV, 'Village Industries', 1934, p. 9-10"; For full detailed interview see *ibid*, p.9-13; It is also available in N. K. Bose's 'Studies in Gandhian'; See N. K. Bose, 'N. K. Bose' 'An Interview with Mahatma Gandhi', *Studies in Gandhism*, p.58-65, 1972. Navajivan, Ahmedabad.

It is an important aspect which distinguishes Gandhi from other political practitioners of his age and later too.

"Tendulkar Mahatma III, 'Harijan Tour', p. 229-30; Also see Tendulkar Mahatma VI, p.1-2".

For instance, he advised Mirabehn not to insist on reform to an institution where she for time being had gone to study Hindi. He wrote to her, 'This use of Bhang is a disturbing factor, and if it is not checked in time, it will prove the undoing of that institution. But you are again right in insisting on the reform. You have not gone there as a supervisor or an inspector to make reforms. You have gone there to perfect your study of Hindu and in so doing to give such service as you can and as may be acceptable.' "Letter to Mirabehn", May 28, 1927, CWMG 33:381-382. Also see "Letter to G. T. Hingorani", *The Hindu*, February 07, 1933, CWMG 53:237.

For Anti-Untouchability campaign and his fasts, he explained to a social activist 'The reformer has to convert the people by patience, gentleness and purity of character. My fast can only prepare the ground for the reformer's work and make the reformer also more active than before in the execution of his mission.' "Letter to R. B. Talegaonkar" December 19, 1932, CWMG 52: 233. In another instance he wrote in a letter that 'we must endeavor to bring round orthodoxy to our point of view, if it is at all possible' and, 'in any case we may do nothing to hurt anybody's susceptibilities' "Letter to Motilal Roy" December 31, 1932, CWMG 52: 312. Similarly, in a discussion he said, 'I cannot speak with either the definiteness or the confidence of a Stalin or a Hitler, as I have no cut-and-dried programme say, is different. I propose to convert by patient persuasion. This is a kind of practical adult education to be put to use as it progresses. The center is automatically shifted from the cities to the villages. They will be taught to know what they should want and how to obtain it in the shape of sanitation and hygiene, improvement of material conditions and social relations. If this primary education is taken by them in its fullness everything else follows.' "Discussion with Basil Mathews And Others" November 24, 1936, CWMG 64:71.

I have discussed it in another chapter. It is sufficed to say here that spreading pro-poor orientation among various sections of society and especially among political minded persons was one of the main aims in propagating Constructive Programme with its emphasis on Khadi. On every occasion and on every platform, Gandhi repeatedly spoke and wrote about the poor and even devastating conditions of masses. He consciously interlinked pro-poor rhetoric in his political dialectic while dealing with mass of public activists through letters and other political mediums. See "Letter to W. B. Stover", June 16, 1927, CWMG 34: 09. Also see CWMG 30:182.

To a 'struggling soul' Khadi worker whose mother was hostile to wearing of Khadi, Gandhi advised, "You may not force the wearing of khadi on your mother if she is unwilling. But if your faith in khadi is genuine and strong enough it is bound to prove infectious." "Extracts from Letters", *Young India*, December 20, 1928, CWMG 38:252.

Tendulkar Mahatma II, 'Year of Silence', 1925, p. 229".

"Speech at Gandhi Seva Sangh Meeting, Hudli-II", April 17, 1937, CWMG 65:103.