THE GANDHIAN CONCEPTS OF ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL FREEDOM

SUDARSHAN KAPUR

> Gandhi's invocation of past traditions, religion and the teachings of sages was truly different from others who made similar invocations, because for the latter it was an escape from grappling with the realities of the present. Action for Gandhi was the test of one's philosophy and any escape from action or flight into a romantic past was alien to his approach.
>
> Sethi in *Gandhi Today*, p. 46

The importance of Mahatma Gandhi's role as the leader of the Indian independence movement -- one of the most vigorous and sustained of the twentieth century struggles for freedom and justice -- is generally acknowledged. Gandhi is rightly credited with having speeded up the process of decolonization of the British Empire, thereby opening the way for India, and, indirectly for other nations in Asia and Africa, to re-enter the stage of world history as a free and independent nation. Gandhi believed that though he did not offer any new truths, he did "throw a new light on many an old truth."[1] For example, he provided a radical reinterpretation of many of the traditional Indian religious and philosophical concepts. One of his major contributions was to demonstrate to his people that they had the spiritual, philosophical, and ideological wherewithal to construct a new reality. We will elaborate the meaning Gandhi gave to the concepts of *swaraj* (self-rule) and *swadeshi* (self-reliance). This will be done in the larger context of Gandhi's social activism, particularly his leadership of the national movement for freedom, and the religio-political basis of his conceptual framework. Our understanding of the Hindu notion of *moksha* (spiritual freedom) and *dharma* (the

---

Sudarshan Kapur is a Doctoral Candidate in the joint Ph. D. program of The Iliff School of Theology and University of Denver and recipient of the Elizabeth Iliff Warren Fellowship for 1986-87.

pursuit of righteousness) will constitute the pathway to our understanding the meaning Gandhi gave to the notion of economic and political freedom.

Gandhi's redefinition of the concept of freedom was a part of his great contribution to Indian independence and to the revival of the national psyche. He enabled Indians to overcome their sense of inferiority and self-denigration. He encouraged his compatriots to be at home with themselves. Under his leadership, Indians regained their self-respect and a sense of pride in their rich and varied heritage. In his *Gandhi's Truth*, Erik Erikson argues that Gandhi gave back India its "identity."[2] And by identity Erikson means "a process 'located' *in the core of the individual* and yet also *in the core of his communal culture*, a process which establishes in fact, the i-dentity of those two identities."[3] In their book, *Gandhi, The Traditional Roots of Charisma*, Susanne and Lloyd Rudolph maintain that "Gandhi's leadership, regardless of its objective success or failure, had important subjective consequences, repairing wounds of self-esteem inflicted by generations of imperial subjection, restoring courage and potency, recruiting and mobilizing new constituencies and leaders, helping India to acquire national coherence."[4] He brought women to the center stage of the strug-gle. Some of the most important leaders of the independence movement were women. According to the feminist, Madhu Kishwar, "the main contribution of Gandhi to the cause of women lay in his absolute and unequivocal insistence on their personal dignity and autonomy in the family and in society."[5]

Gandhi rid India of its fear. On the one hand, he enabled Indians to overcome fear. On the other hand, he forced the British to recognize the courage of Indians. He rejected "the prevailing Western definitions of courage," which usually meant inflicting hurt and injury.[6] Instead he offered the way of *satyagraha* (soul force) as a truly courageous way. Struggle based on the instruments of violence was replaced by disciplined nonviolent resistance. The basis and the goal, or the means and the end, of all action became self-restraint and self-control,

not mastery over others.[7] Therefore, the harmonization of the inward and outward life became the critical principle for Gandhi's involvement in the public arena.[8]

Gandhi articulated for the masses the damage British rule had done and was continuing to do to their nation. Together with other national leaders, he spelled out the ways in which India had been brought to economic and political, as well as cultural and spiritual ruin as a result of British occupation. He was convinced that no genuine and lasting progress could be made in India so long as the people pursued Western ways. In *Hind Swaraj*, a pamphlet Gandhi wrote in 1909, he argued that the adoption of Western ways had made British control of India possible.[9] Not only that, he was convinced that "India is being ground down...under [the heel] of modern civilization."[10] In this pamphlet he offered a critique of Western civilization and urged Indians to turn to the best in their own tradition.[11] In it he lashed out against materialism, the capitalistic mode of development, and the gnawing gulf between urban and rural areas. He pleaded for the revitalization of the village economy. He was convinced that national reconstruction could not occur through mass-scale industrialization. Gandhi observed that, "machinery has begun to desolate Europe. Ruination is now knocking at the English gates. Machinery is the chief symbol of modern civilization; it represents a great sin."[12] Gandhi opposed the modern craze for machines till the end. In mature years, he modified his stand on the question of machines. Machines should be used to the extent that their use did not result in exploitation, dehumanization, and alienation of workers as well as the rest of the citizenry. Technology, he argued, is not neutral.[13]

In his attempts at remaking India, Gandhi tapped India's ancient cultural and philosophic roots. In the nation's past he found both the possibilities for a new vision as well as the method to ease India out of its psychological, physical, and spiritual servitude. His reliance on and acceptance of values from a distant past was by no means total or unquestioning. He was selective in what he borrowed. As the Rudolphs argue, under

Gandhi's leadership "social change in India involved adaptation of its past inheritance as much as ... the destruction and displacement of that inheritance."[14] Gandhi's genius lay in his great capacity to revitalize tradition. In the words of Joan Bondurant, "Gandhi used the traditional to promote the novel; he reinterpreted tradition in such a way that revolutionary ideas, clothed in familiar expression, were readily adopted and employed towards revolutionary ends."[15] He put traditional symbols and language to creative uses. Central to his political thought was the Hindu concept of *moksha*.

The significance of the notion of freedom in Indian thought is most powerfully conveyed by Mircea Eliade, a leading authority in the field of history of religions. Writing in his journal, *No Souvenirs*, he noted:

> India was obsessed by *freedom*, absolute autonomy. Not in a naive manner, but taking account of man's innumerable conditionings, studying them objectively, experimentally (Yoga), and making a real effort to find the instrument that would permit them to be abolished or transcended. Even better than Christianity, Hindu spirituality has the merit of introducing freedom into the cosmos. A *jivanmukta's* mode of being is not *given* in the cosmos; very much to the contrary, in a universe dominated by laws, absolute freedom is unthinkable. India has the merit of having added a new dimension to the universe: that of existing as a free being.[16]

At his best, Gandhi, too, was obsessed by freedom. The path he chose to gain liberation for self and the nation was not by way of yoga. Nor was he an ascete who preferred to withdraw to the remote and distant environs of the Himalayas. He was a social activist par excellence. We must now place the Hindu concept of freedom in its context and explain the twist Gandhi gave to it in leading his people to political independence.

In the Indian scheme of values, the four legitimate goals in life are *kama* (desire or pleasure), *artha* (the acquisition of wealth), *dharma* (the pursuit of righteousness), and *moksha* (spiritual freedom). Fame, fortune, power, and pleasure are shortlived. *Artha* and *kama* do not have intrinsic value, and therefore, are valid goals only up to a point.[17] *Dharma* has been variously defined as a person's inner nature, or a call to the

performance of duties befitting one's place in life. *Moksha* transcends all these goals in importance. "Though the schools of Indian thought differ among themselves in their views regarding the content of *moksa*, all of them are agreed that *moksa* is release from the wheel of life and death," writes the Indian philosopher, T.M.P. Mahdevan.[18] *Moksha* means the movement from the lower level of human existence to a deeper level of existence where one realizes "the ultimate identity of personal existence with the primordeal creative energy from which all existence originates."[19] *Moksha* is the supreme goal of the Hindu tradition As already noted, the concept of *moksha* was of great importance to Gandhi. In the introduction to his *Autobiography*, Gandhi writes, "What I want to achieve ... is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain *Moksha*. I live and move and have my being in pursuit of this goal. All that I do by way of speaking and writing, and all my ventures in the political field, are directed to the same end."[20]

By Gandhi's time, however, the concept of *moksha*,as Raghavan Iyer reminds us, had acquired "the negative connotation of the term and its application entirely transferred from its individual to its collective scope."[21] The affairs of the world were given up as irredeemable. Gandhi questioned this escape from the reality of one's immediate existence. As already mentioned, spiritual freedom to him was not to be found in a remote cave; rather, it was through involvement in the affairs of the world. In 1922, Gandhi observed, in his weekly journal, *Young India*, that "When I say that I prize my own salvation above everything else ... it does not mean that my personal salvation requires a sacrifice of India's political salvation. But it implies that the two go together."[22] Clearly, Gandhi sought freedom from bondage by being in the world. He applied the concept of *moksha* "to the practical needs of a society in which men were more concerned to escape than to alter the conditions of worldly life."[23] In his schema, the way to *moksha* ran through the path of selfless service.

Life for Gandhi was an indivisible whole. He did not

accept the general and the widespread separation between religion and politics. Political involvement was necessary. He had no time for Advaitic tradition which advocates distinction between the mundane and the transcendental. *Dharma* (the pursuit of righteousness) also demanded that we act now, moving one step at a time. It is Gandhi's non-dualistic position which leads Margaret Chatterjee to argue, in her *Gandhi's Religious Thought,* that Gandhi harmonized *dharma* and *moksha,* and truth and *swaraj. Swaraj* (self-rule) is one of the key political principles that Gandhi worked with and developed in the course of long years in public life. He joined the idea of spiritual freedom, which is *moksha,* with the concept of self-rule, which is *swaraj.* Gandhi explained the relationship between the two in these words: "Everyone had realized that popular awakening could be brought about only through political activity. If such activity was spiritualized, it could show the path of *moksha.*"

"At the center of Indian political thought lay the concept of *swaraj* or self-rule, connected with the notion of *swarajya* which referred to a particular mode of securing self-determination in a polity comprised of several distinct sectors, "writes Raghavan Iyer in *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi.* He further draws our attention to the fact that by the time Gandhi emerged on the national scene in 1915, two of the most important nationalist leaders, Dadabhai Naoroji and Balgangadhar Tilak, had robbed the concept of *swaraj* of its positive meaning. Both Naoroji and Tilak emphasized the collective dimension of the term *swaraj* as opposed to the individual. Gandhi brought the collective as well as the individual scope of *swaraj* into focus. He restored to the concept of *swaraj* its older personalistic meaning while "retaining its newer sense." Therefore, for Gandhi, *swaraj* was both individual self-rule and national independence.

Simply stated, *swaraj* is "disciplined rule from within." *Swaraj* is not a gift. It has to be claimed. The onus is on the individual and the nation to take responsibility. Unlike the concept of independence which may mean "license to do as you

like," *swaraj* means self-rule and self-restraint. In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi wrote, "it is Swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves. [It] ... has to be experienced by each one for himself. His emphasis on self-rule should not lead us to conclude that he believed in an isolationalist or unconnected existence. He defined *swaraj* as a positive concept and independence as negative. *Swaraj* is not the same as majority rule. In the words of Gandhi, "it is the rule of all people ... the rule of justice."

Gandhi argued that national independence cannot by itself lead to self-rule. Realizing this, he urged Indians not to gloss over their own shortcomings or to lay their internal weaknesses on the British. Gandhi insisted that although national and individual *swaraj* are related, it did not follow that the former automatically led to the latter. We can see that Gandhi was not concerned with narrow nationalism or even the narrow definition of individual freedom. He was concerned with creating structures which could be freeing in every sense of the word. His was a call to citizens to take control, to take charge, both of their own lives and of their communities.

The term *swadeshi* is also rich in meaning. It is a concept of self-reliance. It advocates the production of basic necessities for self-consumption. Over and above that, there is room for exchange. This ancient principle of exchange applies to production within a village, between villages, within a nation, and between nations. The rationale for concentrating on self-reliance by meeting personal or community needs is to minimize or avoid exploitation. The objective is not to impose limits on growth; rather, it is to determine the kind of growth necessary for a full and meaningful life. Gandhi worked creatively with the richness of this concept. He made a distinction between need-oriented growth and want-oriented growth. *Swadeshi* is a plea for need-oriented growth. Such an approach, Sethi maintains, is against the capitalist and Marxist models of development which, among other things, are based on a multiplicity of wants.

According to Iyer, *swadeshi* is rooted in the idea of *swaraj*. It can be applied at personal, social, and political levels. At the personal level, it is a call to austerity and exemplary behavior. In Gandhi's time, *swadeshi* was used as a powerful instrument in carrying on the struggle against the British. Gandhi also used it for the purposes of rebuilding the national economy, *e.g.*, the manufacture and use of homespun. In our own time, we must also see it as a way of fighting neo-colonialism. Sethi claims that *swadeshi* is the central instrument for nations struggling for independence "and desiring a non-dependent model of development. *Swadeshi* was the first and the last message of Gandhi; everything else was secondary," he argues.

From the foregoing it will be seen that the concepts *swaraj* and *swadeshi* are closely connected at the fundamental level. Gandhi believed that *swaraj* (self-rule) was not possible without *swadeshi* (self-reliance). We might say that if *swaraj* is the end, then *swadeshi* is the means. Truth was the basis of *swaraj* and nonviolence of *swadeshi*. Iyer notes that Gandhi demonstrated a link between individual self-rule and individual self-reliance, and national self-government and national self-dependence. Sethi goes a step further in his analysis when he contends that *swadeshi* became the dominant concept. It became *swaraj* itself. Taken together, these concepts form the basis of Gandhian economics.

In conclusion, Gandhi did not merely call attention to the causes of the ills which beset India. He worked against the existing order, and for the creation of another, a new India. He offered both revolutionary ideas as well as revolutionary techniques for the creation of a new order. He dreamed of a nonviolent, egalitarian society based on love. In his efforts to create a new order, Gandhi galvanized the Indian ruling classes as well as the masses into action. On the one hand, he empowered the oppressed. On the other hand, he endeavoured to change the heart of the oppressor. He was not so much a man of conflict as a man of struggle; one who recognized the validity, indeed the

necessity, of constant struggle -- permanent revolution.

In our own time, when we are faced with such fundamental problems of hunger and runaway consumption, ecological imbalance, the threat of nuclear annihilation, and continuing economic and political imperialism, we might do well to recognize and deal with the power of the alternatives posed by Gandhi. In any consideration of the alternatives offered by Gandhi, we might do well to remember the following words of Sethi:

> [Gandhi's] relevance depends upon first conceptualizing his ideas, putting them in the form of a structure and then testing them in actual experience. If Gandhian concepts fail to satisfy these demands, then Gandhi has to be rejected and, if they satisfy, then he has to be brought back not as a god but as an action-philosopher and as a guide that he always was.[41]

Gandhi pointed a way which, if followed with creativity and imagination, might lead to a just and humane world. He reminded us of the continuing necessity of bringing the head and the heart into basic unity in our efforts to overcome the dilemmas of our time.

NOTES

1. Cited in Raghavan Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 3.

2. Erik Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth, On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence* (New York: W.W.Norton and Company, 1969), see pages 265-278.

3. Quoted, *ibid.*, pp. 265-266.

4. Susanne Hoeber and Lloyd I. Rudolph, *Gandhi, The Traditional Roots of Charisma* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 3.

5. Madhu Kishwar, "Gandhi and Women," *Economic and Political Weekly (Bombay)* No. 40 (October 5, 1985), p. 1692.

6. Rudolph, *Gandhi, The Traditional*, p. 29.

7. *Ibid.*, see pages 29-38.

8. *Mohandas K. Gandhi, An Autobiography, The Story of My Experiments with* Truth, trans. from the Gujarati by Mahadev Desai (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), see pp. 52-55.

9. *Hind Swaraj,* in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Delhi, 1958-), vol. X, p. 40.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 39

12. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

13. J.D. Sethi, *Gandhi Today* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 1978), pp. 40 and 67.

14. Rudolph, *Gandhi, The Traditional,* p. vii.

15. Joan V. Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence, The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958), p. 105.

16. Mircea Eliade, *No Souvenirs, Journal, 1957-1969,* trans. from the French by Fred H. Johnson, Jr. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1982), p. 122.

17. For a brief interpretation of the Hindu perspective on the fundamental aims in life see John M. Koller, *The Indian Way, Asian Perspective,* general ed. Charles Wei-hsun Fu (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1982) pp. 60-69.

18. Charles A. Moore, ed., *The Indian Mind, Essentials of Indian Philosophy and Culture* (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1967), pp. 158-159.

19. John M. Koller, *The Indian Way,* p. 67.

20. *Mohandas K. Gandhi, An Autobiography, The Story of My Experiments with Truth,* p. xii.

21. Iyer, *The Moral,* p. 347.

22. Cited in Rudolph, *Gandhi, The Traditional,* pp. 4-5

23. Iyer, *The Moral,* pp. 234-235.

24. Margaret Chatterjee, *Gandhi's Religious Thought.* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. 165.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 158.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

27. Iyer, *The Moral*, p. 347.

28. *Ibid.*

29. Gandhi cited *ibid.*, p. 349.

30. *The Collected*, p. 39.

31. Iyer, *The Moral*, p. 349.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 349.

33. Cited in, Iyer, *The Moral*, p. 357.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 355.

35. Sethi, *Gandhi*, pp. 38-39.

36. Iyer, *The Moral*, p. 348.

37. Sethi, *Gandhi*, p. 38.

38. Iyer, *The Moral*, p. 348.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 347.

40. Sethi, *Gandhi*, pp. 15 and 39.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 43.