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Reinventing Gandhi

The central aim underlying this issue of the Journal has been to undertake a serious retrospective on Gandhian philosophy and Gandhian institutions. Gandhian ideas were intimately connected with practice. Gandhian Institutions were instrumental in actualizing the very crucial link between Gandhi's ideas and Gandhi's practice. One very important point, of course, both about Gandhi's thought and his institutions, was that there was a willingness to make changes or even abandon an organization or an idea, altogether, when it had outlived its usefulness, or, been demonstrated to be mistaken. In an important sense then, to undertake a retrospective of Gandhian ideas and institutions is true to the very spirit of Gandhi himself. Gandhi undertook such examinations of his own ideas and organizations all the time and treated his most fundamental beliefs with caution, as, experiments and not final solutions.

To set up and consecrate Gandhian organizations and deify Gandhian ideas, relegating them to museums and removing them from Indian life, then is essentially to destroy them. Gandhian organizations very specially need to be relocated within practice. And one very crucial role that they could play, one linked to action and community, is that of reconstructing and reinventing Gandhi for the present times. Such reinvention needs to be seriously and creatively undertaken using the essential Gandhian techniques of locating fundamental problems and then constructing a yugadharma in keeping with those problems and needs of the society and community. Both Professor Anthony Parel and Professor Mrinal Miri, in their pieces, have tried to indicate how this can be done. Both have stressed that one very crucial area in which Gandhian organizations can be employed is that of addressing the religious and communal divide in modern India. That religion, caste and creed predominate in dividing humanity today seems well established. Gandhian ideas of ahimsa as love, Gandhian techniques of conversing with the hostile other, Gandhian commitment to responsible practice are all powerfully available to help breach such divides. Gandhian organizations can be effective in transforming this insidious hostile structure of our society into a virtue friendly one. In addition Professor Miri has raised the all forgotten Gandhian Swaraj or self-rule, and its moral underpinnings in the idea of self-control as well as the economic basis in self-reliance. We need, as a people, to seriously examine whether the modern Indian consumerist haven is promoting Gandhian swaraj at all. The lessons of large-scale consumerist opulence and self indulgence seem to detract from self rule and self control. Again Professor Miri suggests that the Gandhian institutions need to work on new areas and techniques of economic self-reliance. It is likely that new technologies may have potential for use in economic activities that derive their inspiration from Gandhi. Gandhian institutions could seriously engage in a constructive critique of the new technology. The reason for this debate of course, has emerged from the powerful feeling— both, in those who are a part of Gandhian institutions and in those who reflect upon them— that these institutions have decayed and are fast losing their vitality and their connection with social living.

There is also a need to rearticulate Gandhian ideas and to undertake a serious study of the moral availability of central Gandhian ideas and of their crucial connection to practice at every stage.

A serious Gandhian critique of Indian society, then, cannot be purely academic but must use constructive Gandhian criticism in line with a creative programme of social repair and moral reinvention. Gandhian institutions can be an active part of all this provided they reinvent themselves. Gandhian notions of responsibility demand this kind of constructive and involved critique of our times which instead of being armchair politics and couched in terms of truth and ahimsa, is, an active responsible location of problems and an inventing of solutions. Nowhere could this critique be more pertinent than in the arena of conflict and conflict dissolution.

I deliberately use dissolution rather than resolution as resolution has the sense of compromise and barter to reach a sort of precarious balance of hostilities whereas Gandhian methods of truth and intimate conversations with the hostile others actually dissolve hostilities with an ability to laugh at oneself and at life itself. Gandhi's sense of humor tremendously aided his ability to dissolve conflicts of the most powerful kinds. His sense of being responsible for all outrages to humanity motivated him to thus seriously engage himself in all sorts of conflicts. Perhaps what we need to inculcate in Indians today is a genuine awareness and tentative understanding of Gandhian ideas in their very urgent application to every little community and its small problems. A step at a time could perhaps, in Gandhian terms, finally succeed in building a sense of responsibility and an art of dealing with hostile others in a spirit of genuine ahimsa to culminate in dissolving conflicts and making friends, as Gandhi very often did, with at least some opponents.

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