

Opinion

How to Make Gandhian Institutions More Relevant?

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In approaching this question we should begin with Gandhi's own example. He had a gift for translating ideas into practice; for realizing great vision in and through organizations. Social ideas that did not lead to practical results did not interest him very much. It was because of this approach to ideas and action that he established so many voluntary organizations.

Gandhi's example indicates that three things are needed to make Gandhian organizations relevant. The first is that the organization should focus on the serious issues of a given time and place. The second is that the motivation of the members of the organization should be of the highest order. The third is willingness to make changes or even abandon an organization altogether when it has outlived its usefulness.

All of Gandhi's organizations met the pressing needs of time and place. The Phoenix Settlement was established to acquaint a com-munity of South African Indians and Europeans with the social ideas of Ruskin and Tolstoy. The Tolstoy Farm was established to meet the urgent needs of the families of satyagrahis who had been sent to jail. It lasted only for two years, after which it was disbanded. The Sabarmati Ashram was established to train Indian youth, drawn mostly from the upper middle class, in the art of satyagraha and the voluntary service of the nation (CW.13: 91). When experience taught him that the Ashram was not doing what it was supposed to do, he disbanded it. Instead of bringing upper middle class youth to the Ashram, he brought them to the villages and taught them in situation, how to serve the nation by serving the villagers. The idea of *seva* replaced that of *ashram*. That was how Sevagram came to exist.

Gandhi's work in and for the Indian National Congress offers even better insights. In his view the Congress was meant to meet two of the most pressing needs of the nation—communal harmony and national swaraj. Experience showed him that most members of the Congress lacked the right motivation. They were thinking in communal terms. Their religious identity was trumpeting their Congress identity. In the dark days of rising communal tension he was at his wits end. “I can see my way to rebuilding the Congress with five true men [or women] with whom there is neither Hindu nor Muslim or any other. Religion is a personal matter. It ought not to affect the political field” (CW. 74: 27).

What this plaint does not say is more revealing than what it does say. It says of course that he could make the Congress an efficient organization, if only he had a handful of people who were completely free of the virus of communalism. But what it does not say is that he was not very hopeful of finding them.

I use this complaint of Gandhi to make the point that the minimum qualification for a member of any Gandhian organization is freedom from communal psychology. The Congress had formally recognized that such freedom was a precondition for attaining national freedom. But formal acceptance of a principle was one thing, and its practical realization quite another.

Gandhi came back to the idea of freedom from communalism in a famous document that he wrote later in the same year (1941). I am referring to *Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place* (CW. 75: 146-166). There he says that the members of the Congress are in need of a psychological revolution—a restructuring of their motivational universe—as far as communalism was concerned. The word revolution is Gandhi's.

A deeply religious man himself, he knew intuitively as well as experientially that religion was the great divide of Indian politics. It was now threatening to divide the country. The “first thing” therefore the members of the Congress had to do was to bring about a psychological revolution in their sense of identity. He was not asking them to ignore their religious identity. On the contrary, he was asking them to deepen and broaden it. Being religious was not the same as being communal. Being religious in the deep sense should enable them to empathize with each other's religions. If being religious meant narrowing one's political horizon, then religion would only diminish one, would make one a bad citizen and a poor specimen of religion. Each religion, he understood, had the resources within itself to broaden the outlook of its members. Members of the Congress who are religious minded should draw on those resources of their own religion. Every member of the Congress, he wrote, “whatever his [her] religion may be,” ought to represent in his own person Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Zoroastrian, Jew, etc. He or she has to identify himself or herself psychologically with the members of every other religion in India.

Was Gandhi being too idealistic here? Did he ignore the fact that religious passions were among the most inflammable of passions? I do not think so. Already in *Hind Swaraj* he had spoken of the harm that “shastris and mullahs” had done and continued to do. Communal hatred, he said, was generated in our psychology “by selfish and false religious teachers” (ch. 10). Again, “Our religious teachers are hypocritical and selfish” (ch. 18).

The behavior of these false teachers of religion was an added reason why the Congress should set a good example. And he made one practical suggestion in this regard: “every Congressman will cultivate personal friendship with persons representing faiths other than his own.... The beginning of such a revolution has to be made by Congressmen without any political motive behind the correct conduct” (CW. 75: 147-78). The motivation had to be of highest order—ethical, not just tactical.

There is a widely held perception today that in India religion is becoming, once again, the great divide between Indians. Gandhian organizations therefore have every reason to take this issue very seriously and to focus their attention on it. If existing Gandhian organizations lack this focus, then they should make the necessary changes. They should find imaginative ways of combating communalism. That will surely make them relevant in our times.