

# GOPAL KRISHNA GOKHALE'S IDEAS AND SERVICES

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## INTRODUCTION

Today when freedom faces the challenges of disintegration, external aggression, subversion, acute socio-political and economic anomalies—a state of affairs whereby freedom itself seems to be on trial, every conscientious Indian would agree that apart from several other cankerous causes of the malady that need to be remedied, the dissipation of our public life requires a thorough diagnosis. Public life is always demanding, always exacting. Times change: problems survive. If any-thing, they seem to have become more deep-rooted and exasperating. To apportion blame for this would be easy enough but that neither solves the issue nor redresses the situation. An objective appraisal of our public life since 1947 should amply bear this out. If the party in office has, of late, devised a plan of cementing the cleavages and cracks in the organization, repairing its ebbing resistance and strengthening its vulnerable echelons, there is some reason to feel satisfied, not only for the cleansing up and homogeneity this ought to bring about, but, in the wider sense, there is likelihood of other political parties catching up with the primary need of the hour, and by emulation (as it were) of reviving the spirited enunciations of public life as natural and normal to a free people. In the crisis of character we face today that would be the foremost act of mercy and the first gospel of political messiahs. Gopal Krishna Gokhale's ideas and services in this context deserve attention. His eminent biographer has observed: Altogether there is scarcely a problem of the present public life of India which might not be handled in cleaner manner and with better results; if Gokhale the great fountain head of Indian public life-were freely resorted to.<sup>1</sup>

## EARLY LIFE OF GOKHALE

Renouncing the luxury and comfort of a lucrative career he could have had for the asking, Gokhale chose the life of a public servant. That, for him, was a self-imposed abnegation. That, for the country, meant spiritualization of public life. That, for posterity, was to become an enriching legacy, reminiscent of the mythological phoenix. Gokhale's short life-span (1866-1915) was not that of a minion of Destiny He carved out a niche for himself by his self-effacing public service His pedagogic association with the Deccan Education Society and the intellectual regeneration of the youth as Professor at the Fergusson College, Poona (1886-1902), his dedicated services to the Sarvajanic Sabha (1886-1895/06), the Deccan Sabha

(1896-1915), and the University of Bombay (1895-1915); his legendary evidence before the Welby Commission (1897); parliamentary work in the Bombay (1899-1901) and Imperial Legislative Councils (1902-1915); spiritualization of public life through the Servants of India Society (1905-1915); his evidence before the Hobhouse Commission on Decentralization (1908); his membership of the Islington Commission on Public Services (1912-1915); expedition to South Africa (1912); his seven political pilgrimages to England (1897, 1905, 1906, 1908, 1912, 1913 and 1914); and the far-reaching impact his liberalism exerted on India's constitutional developments are landmarks of a career religiously given to public service. Facing the vicissitudes of calumny, opprobrium, malice and schism, Gokhale kept to his station and "played the often thankless role of interpreting the Indian people to the British and the British administration to the Indians"<sup>2</sup> Gokhale's precocity<sup>3</sup> was rationalized and in his thoughts, speeches and services, the syncretic brilliance of a political realist and a dynamic liberal is evident.

Gokhale's first date with public life is worthy of recall. The reference here is to the opprobrium usually referred to as the Apology Incident.<sup>4</sup> While away in England in connection with his evidence before the Welby Commission (April-July 1897), Gokhale was informed by several correspondents of the outrages committed by European soldiers during plague-relief operations and also that two Indian women were violated, one of whom later committed suicide.<sup>5</sup> Charges and counter-charges multiplied in the heat of controversy and, believing in his correspondents, Gokhale stood his ground. But, he was soon to be in a quandary when asked to reveal the sources of his allegations against plague-relief workers and operations. His correspondents were frightened and none dared to come forward and substantiate the grave charges.<sup>6</sup> Manly enough to go it all alone, Gokhale saw in an unqualified apology and complete retraction the only course open to dignity, public service and political ethics.<sup>7</sup> Given but little attention hitherto, the Apology Incident remains a classic example of trials and tribulations of public life inasmuch as it shows that Gokhale chose to suffer the vilest affronts and preferred eclipse from the Indian political scene to any temptations of an expedient alternative rather than conveniently disown his part in the episode, he volunteered to camouflage and shield the initiators of the unsubstantiated allegations. His courage and fortitude were not a case of rash or reckless despondency, nor an escapist's last straw.<sup>8</sup> But for his mature assessment and foresight, Gokhale would have been sucked into the vortex of oblivion. In his letter to A.K. Ghosh, Gokhale explained: I am glad all your doubts are removed and you are satisfied that the course adopted by me, however painful, was the only course left to me consistent with duty and honour ... For myself, I am bearing the blow with composure. Thanks to the teachings and examples of Mr. Justice Ranade, I have long learnt to make my conscience and not popular applause the spring of my actions.<sup>9</sup> Thus, Gokhale embarked and by the time his sojourn on the crest of public life came to a brilliant close, he was enshrined forever as a forerunner and pioneer, for from being "a weather-beaten, tempest-tost, shipwrecked mariner ..."<sup>10</sup>

## SOCIO-POLITICAL LIFE

Gokhale believed that a people's national character and capacity as a community are synonymous with public life.<sup>11</sup> Public life, to be an effective and fruitful projection of public spirit, ought to "distinguish between matters of conscience and matters of judgment".<sup>12</sup> For any life to be described as public life there should be two pre-conditions : first—"it must be for the benefit of the public"; and, second—"it must be a life shared and participated in, if not by the entire public at any rate by a very large number of people".<sup>13</sup> For aspirant India, Gokhale turned his attention to public life in the West and pointed out that, broadly speaking, it showed three distinct, though co-related, spheres: those of national public life, political public life and social and humanitarian public life.<sup>14</sup> The results, in his own words, seem to echo the yell for liberty, greater liberty and more of it to harmonise the means and end of public life: ..securing liberties, political liberties that they (the people) are bound to enjoy at any particular moment; secondly, of widening the bonds of freedom, of acquiring more political liberties, and thirdly, of discharging efficiently those responsibilities which always come with political liberties.<sup>15</sup>

Gokhale clarified that public life in the past sometimes also meant service of the British Government; but, with the change in times, public life had come to mean, for Indians, "voluntary service in the interests of our fellow being."<sup>16</sup> Gokhale also cautioned that public life in India was a result of comparatively recent acquisition and as such it could not be understood, if divorced from the problems and limitations that come naturally to a nation for long held in bondage. And, therefore, Gokhale declared : "We have now got to make a business of our public life, we have now got to make a business of our public service."<sup>17</sup> To the public worker, Gokhale said: That man alone can claim to be animated by public spirit who is prepared to sacrifice personal gain, personal comfort, and personal convenience, for the common good ... we should be prepared to subordinate our own personal judgment in the consideration of public matters to what is necessary for the common good.<sup>18</sup> But that was not all. With patience and self-reliance the public worker should cultivate and build up strength of the people who should be seized of the needs and responsibilities of public life. Gokhale believed that by co-operation, discipline and unflinching devotion to creative public service the people would be drilled "to see that such responsibility as has been given to us or as may be given to us is properly and efficiently discharged by us."<sup>19</sup> Gokhale desired that the public worker should devote himself singularly to the education of masses vis-a-vis their constitutional capacity. Their inert reluctance had to be scrapped and they ought to realize their capacity and right to be free. Public life in India ad dearth of reliable and willing workers and a beginning had to made. He implored:" ... from Councils of the country down the village unions, in the Municipal Councils and local bodies, the press and the platform, and in various movements which we have inaugurated for the education of public opinion" the public worker will have adequate opportunities that would further his cause.<sup>20</sup>

## EFFORTS FOR COMMUNAL HARMONY

Gokhale was a firm believer in communal harmony, co-operation and tolerance. He called them essential planks of fruitful public service. Gokhale warned: Torn among ourselves, we cannot build up any strength and we cannot bring any strength to bear upon the Government and we are unable to discharge our duties in the nurseries of Self-Government and the whole thing will be in feeble and chaotic state in which we shall content to be as are today".<sup>21</sup> Yet another challenge was to deal with the British Government, and Gokhale himself showed by his services how best to bring strength to bear upon the bureaucracy to achieve what was just, desirable and possible. In some quarters, for this delicate and difficult role, Gokhale was subjected to virulent criticism and some thought of him to be an Anglophile.<sup>22</sup> While it was not for Gokhale to answer every criticism, from time to time he explained his political-ethics and his belief that there could be nothing impossible under the British rule.<sup>23</sup> He wanted the public worker to realize that the British and the Indians were bound by a reciprocal obligation : the British abiding by their democratic institutions, principles and practices; the Indians dispelling any suspicion of the character and intentions of the British and adhering to the reality of the propitious British connection.<sup>24</sup> Gokhale's call was: "We have to see that we do our duty by our own country". Association with the British did not mean the loyalty of a 'dumb, driven cattle: it did not mean the capitulation of a people in the disgusting bargain. As Gokhale had himself declared: the goal what we should keep in view, therefore, is representative government on a democratic basis.<sup>25</sup>

## IDEAS AND SERVICES

One does not have to be an apologist of Gokhale to recall that he was essentially a man of action. His stirring call to the conscientious bears this out: To the young men of means I say this and I shall continue to say it while there is breath in me. Go and take up the work of the country; take up public service ... I have enough faith in our race, in the intelligences, in the capacity to feel that a great destiny is in store for us. Everything that I see around me is working towards it.<sup>26</sup> Cognizant of the need of the hour, Gokhale declared before the Students' Brotherhood, Bombay, on October 9, 1909: The very air we breathe is laden with a longing for change. Old beliefs are crumbling. New adjustments of ideas have become necessary and amidst this general commotion which has been very properly called "unrest", it was not to be expected that our students alone should continue to stand where they did.<sup>27</sup> In his search for the right type of public workers, Gokhale did not forget students. He was also aware of the intellectual attainments and growing political inquisitiveness among students, and he assessed the situation thus:

To the Indian student ... Indian politics is only a struggle in which his countrymen are engaged on behalf of the Motherland, with a body of foreign officials representing the rule of another nation ... an interest in politics is, to the Indian student, the same thing as an interest in his country.<sup>28</sup> The solution he

suggested indicates his concern to escalate life in India to its rightful niche: I strongly hold that a crying need of the present situation is the provision in colleges of facilities for the efficient training of what may be called the political sense of our young men. The present policy of treating politics, and specially current politics, as a dangerous and in some respects, even a forbidden subject, has only resulted in depriving the students of that guidance, to which they are entitled at the hands of their teachers in forming sound views on important questions.<sup>29</sup> What Gokhale, therefore, prescribed under the existing circumstance was objective appreciation of public questions, development of enlightened political sense and cultivation of sound views and values Like Ranade who abided by the maxim : "Turn the search inwards"<sup>30</sup> and Gandhi's "the still small voice within"<sup>31</sup> he was also guided by 'a voice within'.<sup>32</sup> He sought retirement from the Fergusson College Poona, to devote himself exclusively to public service. In his farewell address he said: it is purely from a sense of duty to the best interests of our country, that I am seeking this position of greater freedom, but not necessarily of less responsibility. Public life in this country has few rewards and many trials and discouragements. The prospects of work to be done are vast, and no one can say what is on the other side - or how all work may end.<sup>33</sup>

This was the backdrop against which Gokhale founded the Servants of India Society at Poona on June 12, 1905, "being an order of political workers pledged to work for the Motherland on a pittance and subject to rigid rules of discipline as well as loyalty to the Empire."<sup>34</sup> In the constitution & the Society Gokhale wrote: " .. a sufficient number of our countrymen must now come forward to devote themselves to the cause in the spirit in which religious work is undertaken. Public life must be spiritualized".<sup>35</sup> In his letter to Sir William Wedderburn, of April 29, 1910, Gokhale clearly put down his objective assessment of public life in India and his constructive plan of action revealing a -pragmatic strain"<sup>36</sup> of his political realism. Gokhale wrote: We propose to devote all our energies now to educating and organizing public opinion on the necessity of universal elementary education, on technical, industrial and agricultural education, improved sanitation, the growth of the co-operative movement, the relief of agricultural indebtedness and the development of local self-government ... In addition to this, my men are going to devote themselves to the spread of higher education among women, the promotion of harmony between Hindus and Mahomedans and work among the depressed classes. We cannot expect any large constitutional changes for the next ten years or so now; meanwhile the work we have taken in hand will amply repay itself, and prepare the ground for the next advance.<sup>37</sup> Gokhale was the eminent forerunner of spiritualized public life in India. The tradition was passed on to Gandhi. If statesmen and public workers choose to hold that torch aloft today, precious enough will have been achieved in their bid to emancipate public life. That is the only ray of hope for the crisis in character we face now.

**NOTES AND REFERENCES:**

1. T.K.Shahnai, G.K. Gokhale : A historical Biography, (Bombay 1929),p.'7
2. D.M. Brown, Indian Political Thought—From Ranade to Bhave, (Berkeley, 1960), p. 57.
3. Cf., Gokhale's Obituary : The Mahratta, February 21, 1915, p. 62.
4. Gokhale's explanation of the Apology Incident: The Times of India, August 4, 1897; (Gokhale Papers: The National Archives, New Delhi).
5. India, August 1897, p. 249.
6. The Times of India, August 4, 1897, (Gokhale Papers).
7. D.E. Wacha wrote to Gokhale on January 29, 1898: "The affair was not a personal one. Had it been so, I should have certainly done as you wished. But to me it seemed that it was public affair relating to a person who has done a great deal for the public good," D.E. Wacha Letters, Gokhale papers)
8. Justice, W.H. Grahame wrote to Gokhale on March 24, 1898: "In my Opinion it required far more courage to makethe retraction than to make charges, and no one but a man possessed of high and true courage and keen sense of honour would have been able to bring himself to act as you did in making the retraction. You have done more, far more, for your country by the course you took than if you had adhered to the original assertion when you found, they could not be substantiated." Apology Incident File, (Gokhale Papers).
9. Gokhale to A.K. Ghosh, 15th January, 1898, Apology Incident File, Gokhale Papers).
10. Speeches of G.K. Gokhale (Madras, 1916), p. 1052: It is relevant to ,recall Alfred Webb's letter to Gokhale, written from Dublin on January 4, 1898 No one there is that ever enters into public life that does not make mistakes on else information. Few there are so candid in withdrawing them on the spot as you. The whole business gave me a higher conception than over of your character". Apology Incident File: (Gokhale Papers).
11. G K. Gokhale, Public Life in India-Its Needs and Responsibilities, bay, 1922), pp. 2-3.
12. Ibid. 12.
13. Ibid., pp. 1-2.
14. Cf, Ibid. p. 4.
15. Ibid P. 5.

16. It is interesting to compare in this context Gokhale's speech in the Imperial legislative Council on Feb. 27, 1912,,moving a resolution in favour of the creation of District Advisory Councils. See: Speeches, p. 577.
17. G.K. Gokhale, op. cit., p. 35.
18. Ibid., pp. 10-11.
19. Ibid., pp. 20-21. To the public worker Gokhale said, "You remember that a great deal depends on your selves. Ibid., p. 25.
20. Ibid., pp. 9-10.
21. Ibid , p. 30.
22. Cf D.M. Brown, op. cit., pp. 59-60.
23. Cf. G.K. Gokhale, op. cit., p. 26.
24. Cf. Ibid., pp. 19-20.
25. Ibid., p. 24
26. Ibid., p. 37.
27. Speeches, p. 1143.
28. Ibid., p. 1144.
29. Ibid., pp. 1145-46.
30. Gokhale's Address at the Dharwar Social Conference, April 27, 1903, Ibid., p. 1056.
31. Cf., G.N. Dhawan, The Political Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi. (Ahmedabad, 1951), p. 139.
32. Gokhale's Farewell Speech : Fergusson College, Poona; September 19, 1902: Speeches, p. 51.
33. Ibid , pp. 1051-52.
34. B.P. Sitaramayya, History of the Indian National Congress, Vol. I, (Bombay, 1946), p. 91.
  
35. Speeches, p. 1231. G.K. Devdhar, an eminent Servant of India, in his lecture at all the John Small Memorial Poona, on August 30, 1913 said: "A stage was reached in the evolution of public life when people, by their habit of introspection, began to examine as to how much was due to them from others and how much was due to them from themselves in the work of national elevation, to appreciate the relative merits of mere criticism of Government measures as against their own constructive work, and to judge of the policy of justifying everything that was old

as against an honest endeavor to change with the spirit of the age".-G.K.

Devdhar, The Servants of India Society, (Poona, 1914), p. 2.

36. Cf., S.A. Wolpert, Tilak And Gokhale, (Berkeley, 1962), p. 162.

37. Gokhale to Sir William Wedderburn, April 29, 1910: Wedderburn Letters, (Gokhale Papers).

