



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Gandhi And The Village

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Gandhi is probably one of the most written about personalities in India with almost each facet of his life being the subject of research and writing. Each generation of scholars looks to rework aspects that can shed some light on yet another unexplored aspect of his life or his ideas. It is at one level easy to find material on Gandhi since, Gandhi was someone who not only lived his life in public but was open to discussing all kinds of ideas with those around him. He was also a writer of letters, and articles and also editor of periodicals in which he put out his views. Many of Gandhi's ideas on life and living had a long consistency, and can be traced as far back as the years he spent in England and South Africa.

This paper looks at his engagement with the Indian village which runs coterminous with his entry into Indian public life in 1915. Having been advised by Gokhale to not enter politics until he had spent a year observing events in India, Gandhi spent that time travelling across the country including to Santiniketan where he had originally thought he would set up an Ashram similar to his settlements in South Africa.

In 1916, when he proceeded to Bihar and Champaran, he not only worked for peasant rights but also encouraged those with him to work for the betterment of the villages specially on educating the children. Later, when he put forth the proposal for non-violent non-cooperation at the Congress session in September 1920, he clarified his vision of swaraj¹ to include both economic and social justice. This comprised a wide range of programmes for the uplift of the villages from basic education to sanitation, to the development of village industries, the production of khadi and the organization of village panchayats to name a few² which led to the idea of Gram Swaraj. The idea was built on the assumption that India lives in its villages which had been pushed into poverty as a result of exploitation by British industry and the task ahead was to reconstruct India bottom up, by revitalizing the villages.

This view echoed the notion of the self-sufficiency of the Indian villages earlier put forward by Sir Charles Metcalfe in 1830, with the addition that this self-sufficiency ought to be restored. Gandhi's image seemed to be describing utopia :

My idea of village swaraj is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its own vital wants, and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is necessary. Thus every village's first concern will be to grow its own food crops and cotton for its cloth. It should have a reserve for cattle...will maintain a village theatre, school and public hall...will have its own waterworks...every activity will be conducted on the cooperative basis. There will be no castes.. government of the village will be conducted by a Panchayat...Any village can become such a republic today without much interference even from the present Government whose sole effective connection with the villages is the exaction of the village revenue³.

This view has been confronted with sociological/anthropological data and does not quite stand up to test. On the contrary, it has been concluded that the Indian "village was always a part of a wider

¹ P 106, Kripalani, J B, *Gandhi His Life and Thought*, Publications Division Government of India, 1970, New Delhi.

² P. 336, Etienne, Gilbert, *The Mahatma Gandhi, Rural Development and Society*, in B R Nanda Edited, *Mahatma Gandhi 125 Years*, ICCR, New Delhi, 1995. (pp.335-340).

³ Joshi, Divya, *Gandhiji on Villages*, Gandhi Book Centre, Mumbai, 2002, pp.5

economic, political and religious system. The appearance of isolation, autonomy and self-sufficiency was only a illusion"⁴. Weekly markets, inter-regional trade, the dependence on towns for certain services and being subject to "wider political, economic, kinship, religious and ethical" (ibid) structures all shatter the illusion of self-sufficiency.

Be that as it may, Gandhi spelt out his vision more than once in letters, articles and speeches. Not all aspects of the vision were problematic. He envisaged women as part of the panchayat administrators and the marginalised being mainstreamed. His desire for equal access to education, accessible roads, electrification and health care services and cleanliness are all still to become a reality even seventy years after independence. And lest it be said that he was an armchair theorist, Gandhi's views did stem from his exposure to reality – something he continued to engage with right to the end. It is the last phase of Gandhi's life that this paper focuses on, following my current work documenting Gandhi day by day through five English language newspapers through 1947. This is an attempt to look at Gandhi through the lens of contemporary sources which cover his activities in some detail and throw up some illuminating insights.

Gandhi began 1947, in the villages in Noakhali spreading his message of peace post the very bloody communal riots that had occurred a few weeks prior. It is possible to see many of the themes and ideas listed above at work in the villages in Noakhali. It is worth noting that as he walked through the villages on a peace mission, in the biting cold with scant clothing, surrounded by images of destruction and violence, Gandhi drew attention to these villages, not just as political sites but as places of habitation. He also forced other Indian political leaders to do the same specially when they travelled there to meet him. Gandhi had long believed that congressmen need to identify with the villages and here he was in 1947 getting them to do it.

Focusing clearly on the business at hand which was establishing communal harmony through the message of peace, truth and non-violence Gandhi did some plain speaking on the communal violence that had ensued. He told his Muslim audience that they had committed great wrong not only to the Hindus but also to the political party to which they owed allegiance. This was a walking tour and Gandhi walked from village to village, stopping at different villages for a night or more – meeting people, going into their homes, seeing the extent of damage to property etc and also accepting food from people along the way. His walks specially his morning walk in every village was an occasion for the people to see him and many followed him quietly. And sometimes he used to ask them about things which caught his attention. People had open access to him in the villages in a manner that has almost disappeared from those in public life.

But very early on in the official walking tour, Gandhi described East Bengal as a land of gold and said that unfortunately the life of the people was not as it should be. The water in the tanks was so dirty that he could not dare even to wash his hands in them. He kept reiterating the need for one source of uncontaminated drinking water in each village which would not be used for any other purpose and must be used by both communities. The villages were unclean. The lectures on cleanliness were quite sharp and he did not hesitate to tell the people about what he had learnt from the West about cleanliness and hygiene and his belief that poverty played a very small part in sanitary conditions. He chided the villagers that dirt was a state of mind and told them to listen to volunteers trying to tell them about the negatives of open defecation. Gandhi had written in his booklet titled *Constructive Programme* (1941) that a sense of national or social sanitation is not a virtue among Indians. "We may take a kind of bath, but we do not mind dirtying the well or the tank or the river by whose side or in which we perform ablutions. I regard this defect as a great vice which is responsible for the disgraceful state of our villages and the sacred banks of the sacred rivers and for the diseases that spring from insanitation".⁵ No matter what else may have been happening in people's lives, Gandhi was not going to ignore issues like sanitation.

⁴ Srinivas, MN and A M Shah, *The Myth of Self-Sufficiency of the Indian Village*, Economic and Political weekly, September 10, 1960, pp. 1375-1378.

⁵ Tendulkar, Mahatma Vol. Six (1940-45), p.37

He urged the village to accept his 18-point constructive programme⁶ and exhorted the people to shape their organization according to new ideas of equality and comradeship and to improve their economic condition through cottage industries. They would then be working for a common cause and unity among them would grow. It is clear that Gandhi would use the village to village pilgrimage to also instruct villagers on village reconstruction in line with his plan. The peace mission did not distract him from ideas that had been lifelong articles of faith with him with regard to the India he would like to see develop. He continued to exhort people to shake off their idleness and unite in the work for rural development.

Another startling factor in Gandhi's tour of these villages is his interaction with the women. The persona of Gandhi and what he had become by then for the people in India was such, that he had access in most villages to what would be called women's space. Both Hindus and Muslims invited him into the interiors of their homes, where women usually dwell, to interact with them. The ease with which he could enter this women's space and the level of comfort on both sides with having him there are a testimony to his connect with people. He made speeches telling women they were not weak or *abala* and how he didn't like the use of this word. Indian women he said were famous for heroic deeds and they could help the nation in various ways – he went so far as to lay the blame for what happened in Noakhali, on both the men and women. Involving women in the task of peace Gandhiji told Hindu women that they enjoyed more freedom than their Muslim sisters and should mix freely with Muslim women so that understanding between both communities might grow.

Gandhi also advised women to utilize their time in spinning if their daily household duties so allowed. Not only would they thereby supplement their income, they could supply yarn to the weavers who had been starving for want of it. The cloth problem which was so acute could be solved for an extent⁷. He involved the women again in his idea of abolishing untouchability and asked them to take the lead in the matter. He asked his audience to invite a harijan to dine with them every day – or ask a harijan to touch their drinking water before they consumed it.

So even during one of the worst communal crises in India, at a time when the level of animosity between the Hindus and Muslims had reached a peak, here was Gandhi, engaging with rural India in all its dimensions. His method was visible in both speech and action and that included all of the volunteers in different villages who worked to restore peace and facilitate the return of those who had fled. His empowerment of women was not mere talk since many of the volunteers living in various villages who were in-charge of the rehabilitation work included women. Women comrades in the peace mission who were assigned villages to work in included Abha Gandhi, Sushila Nayar, Sucheta Kripalani, Sushila Pai, and Amtus Salam. Noakhali became a demonstration of the idea that each village should have a volunteer who would inspire everybody in the village to adopt the Gandhian notion of life. While this was not happening at an all India scale, it was visible during the Noakhali rehabilitation.

Rather than working from the top down, Gandhi in Noakhali repeatedly asked the people in the village to take their own decisions on issues of living together with others. He urged them to develop brotherhood at the ground level and not worry about what the leaders of various parties said. Heart unity had been Gandhi's mantra since 1941. Gandhi was also able to secure from the Muslims in one village a written assurance guaranteeing the religious freedom of the minority community and an assurance that there was no repetition of disturbances within their area. The document also stated that Gandhiji himself would go on a fast if the promise made therein was not kept⁸. This agreement while a first of its kind, was secured in an environment where Gandhi tirelessly continued to engage with the Muslim community be it the youth or older people. When it was suggested that he should head to Bihar where the Hindus had inflicted large scale violence on the Muslims, Gandhi said he had to prove by

⁶ Hindu, Jan 5 1947; p.4

⁷ HT: Jan. 15, 1947, p.1

⁸ Hindu:Jan.22:4).

living among Muslims that he was as much their friend as that of the Hindus or any other community. This could evidently not be done from a distance or by mere word of mouth.

Being forced to travel from Noakhali to Bihar, where the Hindus had sought revenge for Bengal on the Muslims, Gandhi lost no time in going into the villages. Here too he appealed as he had done in Noakhali, to the local villagers to restore all the properties looted. He asked them to clean up the debris that had been created by their mischief and make it possible for their Muslim neighbours to return home quickly and safely. He simultaneously drew the attention of the audience to the fact that their village was as filthy as could be imagined. He asked all villagers to volunteer their services to set the paths right, fill up the ditches and replace them by gardens for the recreation of the inhabitants, and in short, convert the dung heaps into abodes of peace and happiness. They should at least begin with those villages which had been laid waste by their insane anger against their Muslim brothers.

Gandhi's visit to these villages drew many Muslim families back to their homes from different refugee camps. Some came especially to be present in time for Gandhi's visit. A parallel trend was also noticeable when Gandhi was visiting different villages in Noakhali and Tipperah⁹. Gandhi's presence in Bihar was hailed at the time as setting an example for the rest of India in the way of communal unity. This was made possible by the attitude of the villagers who were not only genuinely penitent over the past happenings but are also willing to atone for what they had done in whatever manner Gandhi might suggest.

The first suggestion Gandhi made immediately after his arrival here was that people must have the courage to own up their guilt and face the consequences as *prayashchita* (penance) for their sin. This led 50 persons to come forward to confess their part in the communal riots and ready to undergo the punishment adjudged for them. The second form of penance which Gandhi suggested was that Hindus should contribute liberally for the relief of Muslim sufferers as a token of their change of heart. Not one prayer meeting passed since this appeal when collections did not run into hundreds and sometimes into thousands. The third method of *prayashchita* prescribed by Gandhi was that Hindus of the riot-affected villages should themselves take up the work of relief and rehabilitation, guard the property of the Muslim refugees and, by their conduct, inspire such confidence that refugees could return to their villages and settle down in their hearth and home. It was reported that people in the interior villages adopted this line of action with enthusiasm leading to the return of Muslim refugees. There were reports by May of this happening in some villages where the perpetrators of crimes had gathered to clean the debris and repair broken homes¹⁰.

This was the Gandhi effect in this tour with the people in the villages across communities connecting with his presence rather than that of the Congress party and being open to listen to him and even argue with him. Gandhi for his part continued to live as he preached, respecting all he met – apologizing if he had not had time to prepare his evening address; explaining his actions and decisions on the prayers at his meetings, to his tour programme. Gandhi continued to encourage all those outside village India – be they foreign correspondents or scientists or others, to go and see the real India that lived in the villages and to work for the awakening of the villages and to teach people the right way to live in the “manner of the East”¹¹.

This time spent in the villages in the last year of his life shows that Gandhi was still walking the talk on village reconstruction and communal harmony. This was not the propaganda visit of any politician – this was the practical demonstration of his thoughts and beliefs by a 77 year old man who went to stay in the villages among the people to test his theory of non-violence. By dispersing his colleagues to take charge of individual villages, he put himself under some hardship having to do most of his work alone. This period from January to March 1947 was one of the most significant in Gandhi's life and showed the consistency of his views on the village.

⁹ Hindu: March 30, 1947 p.4.

¹⁰ Hindustan Times, May 5, 1947, page 1.

¹¹ Times of India June 3, 1947, page 7