

LECTURE TRANSCRIPT

Social Movements in India: Six Gandhian Dilemmas

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Transcript of a talk given at a session on Gandhiji and people's movements in India, at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, in 2011. The photograph on the cover is of a public hearing (jan sunwai) around transparency issues, in Kakku, Rajasthan, 2004.

This morning my daughter asked me, as she usually does, what my programme for the day was. I mentioned to her that I had been invited to speak at a seminar on Gandhiji. She looked puzzled and said - I did not know that you were a Gandhian scholar.

That set me thinking. How could I, who has for all practical purposes never seriously studied Gandhi, have the temerity to accept an invitation to talk about his ideas? The academic in me was horrified, but the Indian in me felt strangely at ease.

Gandhiji is one of those people who has become a part of folklore in India, someone we all learn about through stories. In fact, he is possibly the only character in history that I would be willing to stand up and talk about without having actually studied him, as would many Indians. This is because we feel that, being Indian, we know all about him, and what he said.

This is an interesting phenomenon, because frankly speaking I am not sure that many of the ideas I attribute to Gandhiji are really his. However, it doesn't matter, because to me he has become a symbol of ideas that are profound, but very complex, simply formulated and yet often difficult to live by. The moment I come across such an idea I think Gandhiji must have propagated it, and it doesn't really matter whether he did or someone else did, for to me it is a "Gandhian idea".

So I'll start by saying that I don't really know exactly what Gandhiji said, but let me put across to you what I think he said. My purpose here today is very

simple, I'm going to do something that I think is Gandhian (though I am not sure) - I am not going to point the finger at the government, with which I think many things are wrong, or at social movements in general, with whom I think a lot is right - I am going to try to point the finger at us, sitting on this podium, and collectively representing many of the most active social movements in India. I think it is time to ask ourselves, from a Gandhian perspective, how the social movements we are associated with are faring. And I would attempt to describe six of the Gandhian dilemmas (at least I think they are Gandhian) that I believe confront all of us.

The Cause and the Truth

Very often there is no conflict between telling the truth and supporting and fighting for the cause that concerns you. However, sometimes when public opinion has to be shaped or complex strategies to be followed, the truth (especially the whole truth) becomes a casualty. This was one of the first dilemmas I faced in associating with social movements.

As an academic there was an ingrained hesitation in publicly supporting a statement that was not evidentially well founded, or perhaps not the whole truth. However, social movements have the ethical alibi of a just cause, and slowly but surely some of the means start getting justified by this overwhelming end.

Therefore, if you are opposing the construction of a large dam - something I have spent a lifetime doing - then often there is pressure to understate, or

at least not mention, the benefits of large dams while exaggerating negative impacts.

On the face of it this seems to be a simple dilemma where clearly one should refuse to either understate or exaggerate, sticking to what one knows to be the truth. However, in reality the situation is much more complex.

The first problem invariably is the chronic lack of information about such projects. How can one determine what the truth is without access to full information? But what if the authorities are not willing to release the information, then what does one do? Does one say that as we are committed to the truth, we are never going to make an allegation until we actually find out what the truth is? And if we never get the requisite information, should we never protest or oppose anything? Wouldn't this be inexcusable inaction?

Another problem is the disinformation (and misinformation) that vested interests actively and energetically propagate. Though they are untruths, they need to be actively contradicted, lest they, by default, are mistaken for the truth. But without authentic and reliable information (and often bureaucratic and financial constraints to gathering any), how does one counter their untruths with hard facts? Therefore, all one can do is extrapolate from past similar experiences, hypothesize on the basis of some well founded assumptions, or contradict and demand proof. Anything less would be irresponsible.

But the academic in me argues that even in such situations, which are typical, one does not have to descend to the unfounded and the half-truth. Cannot one

expose the methodological weaknesses underlying their documentation, the lack of evidence behind their assertions, and the tentative nature of their assurances?

Social movements are nothing if they are not about mobilizing support of the masses, among those who are directly affected by a cause and others who are potentially sympathetic. And it is almost impossible to enthuse a community if you go and say to them, for example, that the dam might be bad under some circumstances, and good under others, and we do not really know whether it is good or bad, and perhaps will never know, but let us all join hands and oppose it! As a leading social activist once told me, to the community you have to give a clarion call: "this dam will not be made" and keep your butts and ifs, and your doubts and debates, to yourself and to those few in the community who are interested in discussing them.

The Sinner and the Sin

Social movements thrive on having an enemy. Movements thrive on looking at the World Bank as a place of evil. Movements thrive on looking at irrigation engineers as insensitive people and the bureaucracy as mindless and heartless. Now, how does one solve this problem? Such animosity for groups of people as a whole leads to polarization, and if I understood Gandhiji at all, I think that he was a synthesizer. A man, who could get the British on his side while fighting against them for Indian independence, could be nothing less than a synthesizer.

Somebody once described the interaction between the people and the government by saying that for every progressive public action, there is an equal and opposite government reaction. We are getting further and further into this polarized situation where the middle space is being abandoned.

A related dilemma is one of intolerance. In the National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI) we were once having a discussion regarding qualifications of people who should be allowed to participate in the campaign, and I remember there was a point of view, that nobody with a communal bias should be allowed to join. My answer, as a vegetarian, was that all non-vegetarians should be banned because it is very important that people should have compassion for animals. The debate broke down at that point, for obvious reasons.

However the point I am trying to make is that we are unable to find a way in which we can tolerate people who have differences. Again, I understand from the folklore of Gandhiji that he used to believe that circumstances mould people, and when you say hate the sin not the sinner, it's not just a simple statement: hate the telling of lies and not the liar. It implies that the sin lies in the circumstances which create the sinner and therefore your ire should be for the circumstances where people grow up as communalists, or are created into "bureaucrats", in the worst sense of the word.

However, the intolerance that is often shown to "outsiders" seems to disappear when it is one of our own.

Social movements also thrive on collective solidarity, with "progressive" movements uncannily coming together to support each other in their individual struggles. This is both to gain collective strength, and for mutual security and protection. When you stand up and say you want the right to information, you want all the movements to stand up and support you. But tomorrow some movement stands up and says something you don't quite agree with, there is pressure to express solidarity with them. If you don't support them when they give their clarion call, then they won't support you when you give yours. And this is a huge problem. I find that movements are being co-opted into debates that they are not in a position to understand, and sometimes not even in a position to support, because there is this great pressure and urge for solidarity.

Dogma and Free Thought

Another dilemma is related to how social movements educate themselves and others. One of the movements that I have been involved with is the anti-dams movement and this issue is the focus of a very big debate within the movement. The "corporate and technocratic" society is teaching young people that large dams are good, so we must counteract this by teaching them that large dams are bad. However, if we do this then we are just replacing one culture of brain washing with another culture of brain washing. What we are saying is that their "truth" is false and our truth is the truth. We are not saying look, we don't want you to adopt anybody's truth, we want you to think for yourselves. And this is a huge problem, as we are in a sense attempting to be a counterweight, the balance, if someone is pushing in one direction we are

trying to counteract and push in the opposite direction. We are not providing the middle space of truth, and as a result genuine debate and free thought are being abandoned.

Also, even where there is a genuine urge to help people think for themselves, how does one deal with the growing complexity of knowledge? Knowledge is becoming more and more specialized and complicated. Yet, it is important for the community to make informed decisions. Even if all the documentation is available in the local language, which is rare, can it be understood by the people who are most affected, especially when many of them are semi-literate or illiterate? And if it cannot, do we have a tradition of demystification and people able and willing to honestly translate all this gobbledygook into something that is understandable? Otherwise, are we not replacing the dogmas of one set of interests with our dogmas, rather than helping people to break out of the shackles of intellectual slavery and think and decide for themselves? This is another major problem faced by social movements today. How do we uphold the truth in all its complexity while at the same time putting it across in a manner that the common person can understand and assimilate?

Simple Goods and Complex Goods

One of the most valuable things that I have understood Gandhiji to have propagated was the idea that good is not a linear notion. You do not start from bad and go up to good or start from good and linearly come down to bad. Good and bad are complex notions. Life would be very simple if one had a

straightforward choice between good and bad, but it is not like that. Actually, the most interesting dilemmas of ethics are where you have to choose between two things which are good or two which are bad. And the most complex dilemmas are when you have an organic whole, with a multiplicity of parts. By themselves, some parts are good and some parts are bad, so how do you choose between different wholes? I find this is becoming a real problem because people try and reduce all moral debates to linear debates - this is the best, this is the next best and so on - while in reality they come as complex wholes.

Violence and Non-Violence

Finally, we need to ask ourselves if the social movements we are all associated with can at least claim that they are non-violent. After all, none of us sitting here would go around punching people on the nose. So are we nonviolent? While it is true that we do not take up arms or beat people up, frankly I think that is too narrow an understanding of non-violence. If I ask myself whether I am non-violent, I have sadly to come to the answer that I am not. Every time a person takes an extreme viewpoint, or pushes one's own viewpoint to the exclusion of all others, he or she is doing violence to cultural and intellectual diversity. And we do this all the time. When we push a cause unmindful of facts or choosing to ignore many inconvenient facts, then we do violence to the truth. When we sit in judgment of others, and this is not such a problem in the RTI movement, but a real problem with the environment movement of which I am a part, when we say and we feel that anyone who lives in an air

conditioned house, or drives a big car, or flies around world, cannot be an environmentalist, then we do violence of another kind.

Being Part of the Problem and Being Part of the Solution

To my mind, if one understands Gandhiji in the modern context, if one wants to be a synthesizer rather than a polarizer, one has to ask oneself this question: can we not be both a part of the problem and part of the solution as well? If we cannot admit people who are a part of the problem to be a part of the solution, we are going to polarize the world and make social activism a very specialized and narrow place. Besides, we will disqualify most of the world from participating in the search for answers to problems that they might very well have created themselves. Surely those who have created the problems have even a greater responsibility to find solutions than all the innocent victims and bystanders?

In Conclusion

So, these six dilemmas, and I am sure many more, remain unresolved. We are now in an era when social movements are coming into their own. They are being sought out by governments and feted by the media, and are playing unprecedented roles by designing schemes, programmes and even legislation for the government. All this will throw up new dilemmas and new challenges. It would be interesting to see, in the months and years to come, how many of these would be posited as "Gandhian" dilemmas.

