

Marx and Gandhi: Neither Close Nor Too Far

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“Some must follow, and some must command, though all are made of clay”— Long Fellow²

I. Introduction:

‘Marx’ or ‘Gandhi’ - who is a greater political philosopher; ‘class-conflict’ or ‘class-cooperation’ which road is better to reach the egalitarian society, these questions are being debated not only by scholars in India but it is also a very popular topic of discussion among the common people. Even we may say that the common people are interested more and more in knowing which path is more acceptable or which way to follow. But what is very common for ‘*aam aadmi*’ may become very dangerous during the time of academic discussion. In this article I do not have any intention to prove whether the philosophy of Gandhi is more acceptable than the philosophy of Marx or the reverse. Obviously we would compare some basic tenets of the philosophy of Marx and Gandhi but we will do that keeping some other objective in mind. My objective is to search out the area(s) of similarities among the mint of dissimilarities in their thought³. And then in the light of those similarities we try to cultivate how close the two philosophers are? Obviously a section of the people who are still fighting each other in the names of Marx and Gandhi, will be sceptical of our effort. But we in this article try to establish that the followers of Marx and Gandhi have very little space to argue against each other.

II. ‘End’ and ‘Means’:

We like to start the comparison between the two political philosophers by discussing the ‘ends’ and ‘means’ of their philosophy. Marx in his writings tried to raise his voice in favour of the exploited masses. The intention of Gandhi’s writings is not too different from that of Marx. And in doing this Marx sought the help of past history of human civilization and the evolution of the human civilization. To him with the dawn of human civilization people lived in a condition which he called ‘primitive communism’⁴ i.e. a classless society. And the human civilization, depicted

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2 “The New Dictionary of Thoughts”. Standard Book (Reprinted 1992).

3 Obviously we choose a small part of their thought or we may say in this way that we try to compare their thought making it in a nutshell.

4 In this period the common people did not have any idea of private property. Obviously the ill-effects of private property i.e. ‘class-exploitation’, ‘exploiter class’, exploited class’ were absent in this society.

by Marx will finally reach to the phase of 'communism' from classless 'primitive communism', 'slave-society', 'feudal-society', 'capitalist-society' and finally the 'socialist-society'. And this 'communism' phase may be considered as the ultimate goal of human civilization to Marx. Now the question is what is the 'communism' phase? For a better understanding of this concept we have to go through the Marxist view of the evolution of human civilization. In 'primitive communism' phase, there was no chance of 'exploitation' as the concept of 'private property' was absent. 'Exploitation', according to Marx begins with the evolution of private property (i.e. from slave-society onwards). To protect private property, the owners of private property resort to the structure of statehood (whose ancillary wings are police, military etc. which are coercive institutions) against the people who do not possess private property. Then comes the concept for the first time in human civilization 'haves' and 'have-nots'. And the saga goes on from 'slave-society', 'feudal-society', and up to the 'capitalist-society' phase. In 'slave-society' the exploiter group was the 'slave-master' and the exploited groups were the 'slaves'. Then arises the never ending rivalry between the 'slave-master' who is the oppressor and the 'slaves', the oppressed class. When the oppression reaches its peak, the slaves revolt against the existing system and through the revolution the mode of production changes with the emergence of feudal society. But the exploitation would still exist in this new society too. As this new society was born as a result of the protest against the exploitation in the earlier society, some may believe that the new society was free from any kind of exploitation. But this to him did not happen. The exploitation exists in this society but in a different form. Here the exploiter class was the 'feudal-lord' and exploited class was the 'serfs'. And Marx clearly stated that the exploited class (i.e. the 'serfs') in this society would revolt against the existing ruling class (i.e. the 'feudal-lord') and through this revolution another new society or a new mode of production would emerge which he called the 'capitalist society'. But this revolution did not end the exploitation. The exploitation was more ruthless in comparison to the earlier phases. The exploitation persist in this phase under the hands of the capitalist class i.e. the 'bourgeoisie'. And the exploited class in this society was the 'proletariat'. The exploitation in this society forced the proletariat to revolt against the bourgeoisie. And the revolution brought a new society named a 'socialist society'. In this phase there would not exist any exploiting class or exploited people or we may say in this way that in this type of society there will be no exploitation at all. And all this is because the 'proletariat'⁵ class of the earlier society would retain the control over 'base' and 'superstructure'⁶. Although a section of the people who belong to the bourgeoisie class in the earlier society try to destabilize this society but all their efforts would be in vain. And the people who are controlling 'socialist-society'

5 Mainly the workers of the industry.

6 In Marxian thought 'base' is economy and 'superstructure' are politics, religion etc.

would be able to transform it into communism successfully. The important thing of this transformation is that there is no place of revolution here. The transformation from the socialist society to communism will take place without any revolution. And now what are the characteristics of this communism? The important characteristic of the communism phase as well as the difference from the earlier societies is that the concept of 'exploitation' is purely absent in this phase. The 'Exploiter class' and the 'Exploited class' -these two classes would be considered as a myth in this society. So, it is almost clear that the 'end' or 'dream' in the philosophy of Marx is to set up a 'classless society' which is free from any kind of exploitation.

On the other hand what was Gandhi's thought regarding the nature of the state? The simple answer is that Gandhi like Marx also did not believe in the state system. As an anarchist⁷ he dreamt an 'exploitation less' society which he termed as 'Ramrajya'. 'Ramrajya' is nothing but almost a similar condition like communism and it ('Ramrajya') is not possible to create within the existing structure of state. In this society, according to Gandhi decentralization and trusteeship will be two important characteristics. No one in this society will act in a way that harms others. Here we can assume that the goal of the two philosophers were almost the same i.e. to establish an 'exploitation less' society. Like Marx, Gandhi also opposed 'private property' and advocates the concept of 'trusteeship'⁸.

III. The 'Difference':

Now the question is, if both the philosophers dreamt to set up an 'exploitation less' society then where is the differences in their thought? It is in the concept of 'revolution' where Gandhi differed from Marx. Marx believed that if we want to transform the present society into the 'communism' phase, 'class-conflict' is the sole solution to attain that society. On the other hand Gandhi emphasized on 'class-cooperation' to bring about his 'Ramrajya'. Gandhi believed that 'violence' or

7 Anarchists do not believe in the 'state system'. To Gandhi "the state evil is not the cause but the effect of social evil, just as the sea-waves are the effect not the cause of the storm. The only way of curing the disease is by removing the cause itself" (Source: "Non-Western Anarchisms: Rethinking the Global Context-2-: Asian Anarchism: China, Korea, Japan and India" by Jason Adams/ <http://raforum.info/article.php3?id-article=3225&lang=en>).

8 Gandhi gave the idea of trusteeship as an alternative to both, capitalism and socialism. Bhikhu Parekh says that, "A rich man was allowed to retain his property, but was expected to hold his wealth and personal talents in trust and to use them for the service of society..... If he owned a firm, a factory or a large tract, he was to work alongside his employees, make profit by just means, pay decent wages, take no more than what he needed for a moderately comfortable life..... For Gandhi such an economic arrangement had capitalists but not capitalism, socialism but not state ownership, and used capitalist managerial skills to achieve socialist purposes". (Source: "Gandhi- A Very Short Introduction" by Bhikhu Parekh, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2008).

‘revolution’ cannot be a solution to bring an ‘exploitation less’ society. To him, one may try to win opposition’s heart only by love. That’s why he always told his ‘satyagrahis’⁹ not to consider their opponents as their ‘enemy’. Holders of opposite viewpoints should not be considered as ‘enemy’ rather to Gandhi it is the duty of the ‘satyagrahis’ to change the mentality of the opponent by peaceful means.

From the above discussion it is clear that both of them had an objective and this was to uplift the exploited people. We personally think that regarding the ‘end’ of their philosophy there is any disagreement. The only difference is in the ‘means’ to achieve that goal. Marx said that the first stage of the human civilization is ‘primitive communism’ and the final stage will be ‘communism’¹⁰. And during the journey from ‘primitive communism’ to ‘communism’ human civilization has to cross phases like ‘slave-society’, ‘feudal-society’, ‘capitalist-society’, and a ‘socialist-society’. And the transformation from ‘slave-society’ to ‘capitalist-society’ requires ‘revolution’ to bring down the existing society. It is only during the time of transformation from a ‘socialist society’ to ‘communism’ revolution will not take place but other than that in all the phases, revolution is the only thing which will transform the society.

IV. Conclusion:

Finally we would like to conclude by saying something to the people who are still fighting with each other in the name of Marx and Gandhi at the grassroots level. We assume that this problem lies not with the ‘ism’ (i.e. Marxism or Gandhism) but with the ‘ists’ or ‘ians’, Marxists or Gandhian’s. Why? For example one can easily consider that regarding ‘ism’ Marx and Gandhi both dreamt of establishing exploitation less society. But in reality in India still 27.5 per cent¹¹ people are living below the poverty line (BPL). In India “The percentage of rural household not getting enough food every day during some months of the year was 2.0 per cent”¹². And ‘rural households that did not get enough food every day in any month of the

9 Those who follow the Gandhian ideal of ‘satyagraha’ are called ‘satyagrahi’. And Bhikhu Parekh describes satyagraha in this way— “For Gandhi satyagraha, meaning civil insistence on or tenacity in the pursuit of truth, aimed to penetrate the barriers of prejudice, ill-will, dogmatism, self-righteousness, and selfishness, and to reach out to and activate the soul of the opponent” (Source: “Gandhi- A Very Short Introduction” by Bhikhu Parekh, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2008).

10 The difference between these two is that in the first phase people do not have any concept regarding ‘private property’ so there was no concept of ‘exploitation’. But in the last phase although they have the idea about the ‘private property’ in spite of the common people do not obtain the path of exploitation.

11 This figure was given by Mr. Akhilesh Prasad Singh, the then Minister of State for Consumer Affairs, Govt. of India in the Rajya Sabha on March 7, 2008 (Source: <http://news.webindia123.com/news/Articles/India/20090224/1185079.html>).

12 Source: NSS 61st Round Report on “Perceived Adequacy of Food Consumption in Indian Households 2004-2005”. Report No. 512 (61/1.0/5).

year' is 0.4 per cent in India. All the political parties are very much keen to uplift the condition of the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). But still in India 0.6 per cent SC population and 0.4 per cent ST population do not get enough food in any month of the year¹³. According to the 'National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector', in India 77 per cent people's income is less than Rs. 20. 'National Nutrition Monitoring Bureau' provides statistics that 33 per cent Indians are affected by starvation or lack of food. This is not an end. A draft released by the 'Ministry of Rural Development, Govt. of India' reveals that in India, 77 per cent *Dalits* and 90 per cent *Adivasi* people are landless in reality¹⁴. Every year almost 1000 honour killing take place in our country¹⁵. Still in 2004-05 academic session, the school dropout rate for class I-V was 28.49 per cent (Boys- 31.37; Girls- 24.82). And for class I-VIII this was 50.39 per cent (Boys- 50.10; Girls- 50.76)¹⁶. A woman is raped in India every after half an hour. But only 1 out of 70 rape cases are lodged in police stations. Statistics show that only 3 out of 1000 rapists are convicted¹⁷. Considering the above mentioned facts and figures, anyone may agree that the souls of these two great philosophers are not taking rest in heaven. They feel more pain when they see that in their names every day one section of the people is killing another section. Importantly in most of the cases they belong to the poor class. So if anyone says that this is the reflection of 'class-conflict' described in Marxian philosophy there is no space to believe it. Not less than 50 political parties are run in India who claims that they are the real followers of Karl Marx. Some believe in democracy and some do not. The case is no different with the political parties who are saying that they follow and try to uplift the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi. One thing we have to consider that both the philosophies in its pure form cannot be implemented in the 21st century. The socio-economic conditions as well as the mentality of the people have changed. So this is the right time that those who follow Gandhi or Marx should try to improve the poor condition of the folk mentioned in this paragraph rather than wasting time to fight with each other. Hungry people who are the main concern of Marx and Gandhi do not bother about 'class-conflict' or 'class-cooperation' but they believe in *Roti, Kaapda aur Makaan*.

13 Source: NSS 61st Round Report on "Perceived Adequacy of Food Consumption in Indian Households 2004-2005". Report No. 512 (61/1.0/5).

14 Source: "*Je Adhik Shaktishali, Hinsa Bandha Kara Tar-I Dayitva*", Ashoke Kumar Mukhopadhyay, Anandabazar Patrika, Aug. 11, 2010.

15 "Social-legal perspective of forced marriages", a research paper prepared by Mr. Ranjit Malhotra (<http://www.stophonourkillings.com/?q=taxonomy/term/168>).

16 <http://www.developednation.org/issue/education/subissue/dropouts.htm>

17 Source: "On India's 'rape pandemic': A national disgrace" by Nighat Gandhi, The Hindu Sunday Magazine, September 11, 2005.