

International Journal of Rural Studies - EDITORIAL

There is no doubt that Mahatma Gandhi was a towering figure of the 20th century. Not only did he show us the way to freedom from foreign rulers but he inspired many statesmen and leaders throughout the world. His interpretation of *satyagraha* as 'non-violent and peaceful adherence to truth' has, over the last hundred years, provided the ordinary man and woman with an effective tool for social change in pursuit of a better society. The unique combination of constructive work and civil disobedience has shown that there are better ways to remove evil from society than violence and force.

In our country today, every child, at some stage in his education, learns about Gandhiji. In examinations, thousands of children across the country will reproduce the same facts about Gandhi's life, all learnt by heart from their textbooks. If you ask them, they will tell you that everything Gandhi taught and stood for is good and should be followed. But investigate a little further to see if they practise any of Gandhi's ideas and principles and it quickly becomes apparent that their knowledge of Gandhi is superficial, just a few facts and ideas learnt for examination purposes but never applied to everyday life.

But these are children. What about the situation in the rest of the population? Are politicians, businessmen, religious leaders, traders, teachers and key celebrities actively pursuing the fight against the seven social sins that Gandhi identified?

- Politics without principles
- Pleasure without conscience
- Wealth without work
- Knowledge without character
- Commerce without morality
- Science without humanity
- Worship without sacrifice

To answer this, let us look closely at our society today.

Not only is India the one truly functioning democracy in a region of dictatorships and authoritarian regimes, but her citizens are, in the 21st century, becoming increasingly aware of their democratic rights and keen to exercise them. However, in so doing, they come up against a wall of obstruction that means the average, ordinary man is unable to get his complaints and grievances heard or any help or advice for his problems. Is it surprising, therefore, that in many cases this leads to a violent reaction, born of desperation?

The tools of democracy should enable our government to bring about essential changes in our social and political structures. Yet every day, we see more and more injustice, imbalance and inequality in our social, economic and political lives.

Ironically, it is the poor and disadvantaged, the ones who suffer most, who initially seek democratic ways of sorting out their difficulties while the rich and mighty use money and muscle power. Those who thought democracy would at last bring them fair treatment and some redressal for their sufferings lose their faith in the system and turn to other means such as road blocks, violent rallies and riots.

Even the media, the so-called fourth pillar of democracy, shows no genuine sensitivity to the plight of the poor. Consider the normal coverage in the national daily papers. How many front-page headlines highlight political and sporting events and glorify the criminal deeds of the rich and famous? How much space is given to the rural poor, who still, in 2008, make up 70% of the population?

Exploitation, deception, corruption and bribery are rife and again, the worst culprits are those in positions of power and those with money, education and status. Where is the national political drive to wipe out these appalling practices that taint India's international reputation? Where are the role models of honesty and conscience for today's citizens?

It seems that we have also lost a sense of proportion. The Hindustan Times reported the following cases recently.

October 18 – In Madhubani, Bihar, a thief was caught in a villager's house. A crowd gathered and beat him severely then poured acid into his eyes. A few weeks earlier, 10 suspected thieves had been beaten to death in Bihar.

That same day in Kanpur, U.P., a thief was caught and battered to death.

October 27 - In Muzaffarnagar, U.P., Richa filed a case against her husband, Tayal, for dowry-related harassment. On the day of the court hearing, Tayal's family beat Richa's father until he lost consciousness.

The next day in Kanpur, a retired general manager of a large private company was shot dead outside his house on Saturday by his neighbour and an accomplice. Suman Dubey had a property dispute with the manager. During discussion about the disputed land, Dubey dragged the manager out onto the road, beat him with an iron rod and then shot him three times in the chest.

That same day in Noida, a landlord beat up his tenant for not paying the rent. The tenant died next day.

These are individual instances where relatively minor misdemeanours and disputes led to totally disproportionate punishment and reprisal. If a tenant cannot pay his rent on time, do you beat him to

death? If a petty thief steals something from a neighbour's house, do you pour acid in his eyes? If you have a disagreement with someone over land or property, do you shoot them?

But you might argue that these are individual examples and that in all societies, there are such incidents where particular persons react violently and without any logic or reason. What about the behaviour of crowds? Of students? The following incidents also occurred recently and were reported in the national paper.

October 26 -In Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, college students murdered an assistant sub-inspector of police when he tried to reconcile two groups of students who were fighting over campus politics. The students beat him to death.

October 27 – In Dhubri, activists from a student union set a bus alight and seriously injured more than 21 innocent passengers and the driver. They threw stones at the bus, hurled two petrol bombs at it and locked the doors of the burning vehicle with the passengers still inside. Other activists from the students' union had stopped a goods train the night before.

These are depressing facts. A little more encouraging is an event that made the front-page headlines with colourful photos supporting the news. This is the march of 25,000 people from Bhopal and Gwalior to New Delhi. Among those 25,000 marchers, there were stories of lands illegally taken over by landlords, of land mafia, of displacement due to industrial projects, of urbanization and of policies that deny the local people access to traditional sources of livelihood such as forest produce or fishing rights. The marchers want a resolution of land and livelihood issues so that poverty can be alleviated; they want a reduction in forced migration; and they want appropriate

measures taken to prevent starvation in rural areas.

On October 29th, the editorial gave some interesting facts and figures. The top 20% in India own more than 60% of the land; the lowest 20% own less than 5% and even that little is often taken away from them, frequently without any proper compensation.

The editorial also mentioned a report for the Eleventh Five Year Plan, which says that economic liberalization “has pushed land reform off the government agenda” and that there is “a strong lobby working to enhance or give up land ceilings.” The government has “permanent sovereignty” over natural resources, which empowers it to take property for public use without the owner’s consent. However, this should not be an absolute right and the State’s idea of compensation need drastic overhauling. The editorial recommends the establishment of a National Land Commission as well as a “time-bound legal mechanism to settle conflicts involving land rehabilitation and related compensation.”

These marchers were the very poor, most of them from tribal and scheduled caste communities. At no point, during their long march and when they finally reached Delhi, was there any trouble or violence. There were road accidents along the way and some of the marchers died but the march itself and the final protest in Delhi were peaceful and orderly.

Similarly, in the huge rally organized by the BSP in Lucknow recently, where hundreds of thousands of people gathered in support of Chief Minister, Mayawati, the whole rally, despite these extraordinary numbers, was trouble-free. This vast crowd was made up again of the very poor. If some 600,000 poor people do not instigate a single case of violence or disturbance, then who is it who is indulging in extremes of violence, often against completely innocent people?

The answer is the ultimate irony of life in India today. It is the rich, the highly educated and the well-placed who show a total lack of understanding of Gandhian principles and no interest in them.

We like to look at examples of success rather than of failure. But unless we consider our failures, how can we confront our weaknesses and do something about them?

Remember the Tehri Dam movement led by Sunder Lal Bahuguna, a large Gandhian movement, non-violent in every way? He had tremendous support from many people who opposed both the dam itself and its location but all to no avail. The government didn’t listen.

Then there are the thousands of poor who were displaced by the Nirmala Dam. A peaceful movement against this was led by Medha Patkar who was fighting for those displaced, trying to get basic rights for them. The disadvantages of the dam totally outweighed the advantages. Thousands walked to Delhi to protest, an orderly, peaceful march of the very poor. But no one listened. The government didn’t care.

In my own area, the local people have been fighting against the appalling pollution created by the paper mill. This mill has completely polluted the Aril Nadi which is now just a stream of sludge, black, evil-smelling and stagnant. All the surrounding land belonging to very small farmers has been completely ruined. The mill pours its waste materials and ash onto their land, destroying their crops. In the beginning, it even threw live ash onto the roadside where many unsuspecting villagers were horribly burnt.

Research scientists and environmental engineers have come from Dehradun to test the pollution; all those affected locally have tried every peaceful way possible to get

something done – marches, protests, demonstrations, hunger strikes, appeals, visits to the local government officials, attempts to meet the mill owner, letters to the appropriate government offices and to the U.P. Pollution Board. All this for the last ten years and what has been the result? Nothing. Not a thing. If anything, the pollution has increased. Only the other day, a letter came from the regional office of the National Pollution Control Board saying that they had not received any complaints and knew of no such problem. It is as though the last ten years of effort have been completely wiped out.

What a sad reflection this is on our education today. And not just in India. In the UK, when teachers and miners staged a strike, no one listened. The government cared nothing for their cause.

Higher education and wealth do not lead to better human beings. Education in our country has a very narrow focus. India may be surging ahead in computer and information technology, but there is no humane element in that. IT is quite devoid of humanity. When are we going to learn to love our fellow beings, to listen sympathetically to their plight, to find the will to help them?

What kind of society have we created in the 21st century where college students beat to death someone who was only trying to help? Where people consider lynching to be a suitable punishment for theft? Where so-called activists burn innocent passengers? Where is our conscience? Our feelings of guilt? Our morality? Our sense of right and wrong?

What has happened to Gandhi's ideas and principles? What will make them effective enough to create a truly egalitarian society where the same rules apply to one and all, regardless of status, wealth or education?

We need our educationists and researchers to make genuine, committed investigations into what is wrong with our education system. Why don't our teachers want to teach? Why don't students want to attend classes and learn? Unless the underlying disease and root cause are diagnosed, how can any treatment be found or problems solved?

We are all victims of this illness. But some are more vulnerable than others. Somewhere, in our country, there are those few, those rare people who have the vision, the inspiration and above all, the integrity to make a difference. Let us seek them out and give them our support, our encouragement and our heartfelt gratitude. Who else can show the way?