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The Mahatma and Modern India

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CENTENARY celebrations of the birth of any prominent man attract assessments of his character, career and influence. Nothing could be more understandable, particularly in the case of M. K. Gandhi, who was by common consent one of the greatest leaders Asia has produced in an era of colonial nationalisms and decolonization, who in his own life time was called a saint and a machiavellian politician, and who has become in independent India both a national myth and an embarrassment. Accounts of the importance of Gandhi in modern India tend to fall into two main categories. There are those who dismiss him, often regretfully, as an idealist whose utopian plans for a democracy of village commonwealths and a non-violent society have collapsed in the face of economic and political necessity and the machinations of unscrupulous politicians. In the words of Jayaprakash Narayan, 'If you consider the political ideologies attaining in India today, you would find that somehow one who is called the Father of the Nation is completely missing from all of them'.[1] Such pessimism assesses Gandhi as if he had been solely a dispenser of blue-prints for a brave new world, and fails to see him as a dynamic leader whose greatest influence flowed from the type of movement he led and the techniques he used, rather than from the peculiarly personal ideals he held. On the other hand, there are those who hail him as the Father of India and try to draw direct causal connexions between his ideals and many of the major changes which have occurred in India since 1947, particularly the official abolition of Untouchability and the institution of *panchayat raj*. But this is the perspective of the biographer. It underrates the complexities of politics and society and their interaction, and turns a blind eye to the innumerable cross currents which make up the main stream of Indian social and political activity.

Bearing in mind these types of analyses and their weaknesses, I have limited the scope of this article to two objectives. Firstly, I trace some of the main ideas Gandhi put forward, discuss influences which coincide with or militate against these ideas, and investigate their fate in modern India. I conclude that generally it is fruitless to look for the Mahatma's influence in contemporary India in terms of direct

[1] P. Mason (ed), *India and Ceylon: Unity and Diversity*, London, 1967, p. 295.

'legacies'. This may seem a rather negative undertaking; but it clears the ground for the second, more positive part of my argument—that to see the influence of Gandhi on India's development it is more fruitful to look at his leadership of the national movement, in which he was manifestly powerful, than to search for Gandhian 'legacies' in solutions to social and political problems. For in such cases, despite the myth of the Mahatma, his ideals are only one of many contributory and competing factors in modern India.

One important area of discussion must be the nature and power of the government, for it is in this sphere that Gandhians like Narayan feel most bitterly that India has deviated from the paths Gandhi indicated. Gandhi was not a systematic political philosopher, and his ideas changed considerably in the course of his life. But at the root of all his later thought were the beliefs set out in his booklet, *Hind Swaraj*.[2] Written in 1909, it showed that a recent visit to England had finally persuaded Gandhi that western civilization, with its factories and machinery, mass communications, noise and violence, was depriving man of quiet and the power to cultivate those spiritual qualities which lie at the heart of Gandhian philosophy, particularly those he described as truth and non-violence.[3] As a corollary he turned against the parliamentary forms of government and the power of the executive which appeared to accompany such civilization, and resisted their imposition on India under the British raj. The precise nature of the indigenous government Gandhi favoured for India changed with the years. At first he envisaged a benevolent autocracy; but by 1918 he believed that some form of elected government on parliamentary lines was necessary as an interim stage of political development. Writing to someone he had met in London in 1906 and 1909, when the ideals of *Hind Swaraj* were forming in his mind, he discussed this apparent inconsistency.

> You have reminded me of what I used to say in London, viz., that benign autocracy was the best form of Government, and have asked me how I reconcile [this with] my activity in connection with the Home Rule movement. I still retain the position held by me in London. But that form of Government is an impossibility today. India must pass through the throes of Parliamentary Government and, seeing that it is so, I naturally support a movement which will secure the best type of Parliamentary Government. . . .[4]

[2] *Hind Swaraj* reproduced in full in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 10, pp. 8–68. (*The Collected Works* are in process of publication by the Government of India, New Delhi; they are cited below as *C.W.*).

[3] *Indian Opinion*, 2 October 1909, *C.W.*, Vol. 9, pp. 388–9.

[4] Gandhi to Florence Winterbottom, 21 February 1918, *C.W.*, Vol. 14, p. 210.

His ideal by 1931 was the withering away of the state, what he called 'enlightened anarchy'. But realizing that such an ideal was unattainable in reality, he insisted that in the immediate future the main characteristic of the state should be the least possible government,[5] and the complete decentralization of power.

> The end to be sought is human happiness combined with full mental and moral growth. This end can be achieved under decentralization. Centralization as a system is inconsistent with the non-violent structure of society.[6]

The culmination of Gandhi's plans for the decentralization of power are in a document dated 30 January 1948, the day of his assassination. In this he advocated the disbanding of the Congress as a political group, its transformation into a social service organization, and the devolution of authority to three tiers of elected national servants, of which the bottom tier should be the village *panchayat*.[7]

But after Indian independence when leaders were forging a new constitution it became abundantly clear that Gandhi's ideal was only one strand in current thought. Dr Ambedkar, Chairman of the Drafting Committee, proclaimed that

> The love of the intellectual Indian for the village community is of course infinite if not pathetic. . . . I hold that these village republics have been the ruination of India. . . . What is the village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism? I am glad the Draft Constitution has discarded the village and adopted the individual as its unit.[8]

Beside such radical criticisms of any proposal to construct an Indian polity on the basis of the village unit, there were also the implications of Congress plans for a socialist society. In the words of the foremost exponent of this stream of thought, Jawaharlal Nehru, 'Political freedom, independence, were no doubt essential, but they were steps only in the right direction; without social freedom and a socialist structure of society and the State, neither the country nor the individual could

[5] *Young India*, 2 July 1931, quoted in S. Abid Husain, *The Way of Gandhi and Nehru* (2nd edition), Bombay, 1961, pp. 37, 50.

[6] *Harijan*, 8 January 1942, *ibid.*, p. 36.

[7] V. P. Varma, *The Political Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi and Sarvodaya*, Agra, 1959, pp. 199–201.

[8] H. Tinker, 'Tradition and Experiment in Forms of Government', C. H. Philips (ed), *Politics and Society In India*, London, 1963, pp. 157–8.

develop much'.[9] Implicit in such plans was the increase of state power to redistribute wealth, to organize resources and production, and to provide the sanction of force behind legislative reform of certain social practices. It is ironic that Gandhi, who had spent so much effort decrying the so-called unbridled power of the British raj, found himself at the end of his life in uneasy alliance with future Indian rulers who planned far greater interference in society, and envisaged wider governmental powers than the British had ever dared to contemplate. It was not only the ideology of Nehru and the socialists which jostled with Gandhian ideals for prominence in independent India's new government. There were severe practical problems, too. After Partition large areas of the country were badly disorganized by communal violence and the influx of refugees, and needed firm administrative control. The structure of government which India inherited from the departing raj was essentially authoritarian, and devolution on the grand scale would probably have resulted in political chaos. Moreover, leaders who had spent most of their lives in conflict with the raj for control of government were naturally reluctant to relinquish authority to village communities when unfettered power eventually came within their grasp.

Out of this conflict of ideals and political necessity emerged the federal constitution of India, conferring large powers on the central and state governments. By this time Gandhi was dead. It was left to the premier of the U.P. to complain that the 'constitution is a miserable failure. The spirit of Indian culture has not breathed on it: the Gandhism by which we swear so vehemently at home and abroad does not inspire it. It is just a piece of legislation like, say, the Motor Vehicles Act.'[10] Since 1950, and particularly since the establishment of the Planning Commission, government control has reached out from Delhi and the State capitals into nooks and crannies of public life where the British never ventured, and deep into people's private lives, too. In theory anyway, government regulates social customs, it orders when children shall attend school, it rations and distributes food on occasion, it interests itself in methods of agriculture, it determines the size of landholdings, it regulates and initiates industrial enterprise as well as performing the traditional roles of the tax-collector and the policeman.

[9] J. Nehru, *An Autobiography*, London, 1936, p. 166. For a study of Nehru's socialist and democratic beliefs, see D. E. Smith, *Nehru and Democracy*, Calcutta, 1958.

[10] Address to University Convocation, Agra, 19 November 1949, quoted by H. Tinker, 'Tradition and Experiment in Forms of Government', Philips *op. cit.*, p. 159.

'The little finger has become the whole hand. Government is everywhere and inescapable.'[11]

But amidst this growth of government power has been one development which at first sight looks explicitly Gandhian in origin and substance, the institution of *panchayat raj*. This entails the devolution of much power over local concerns and substantial funds to a three-tiered structure of elected bodies at the levels of village, development block and district. The breakthrough towards *panchayat raj* came with the publication in 1957 of the *Report of the Team for the Study of Community Projects and National Extension Service*. The chairman of the team which produced the report, Balwantray Mehta, was a former Gandhian worker from Gujarat, and through him a direct connexion between Gandhi's ideals and *panchayat raj* can be traced. But Mehta himself insisted that it was not dogmatic adherence to Gandhian ideals which prompted this reform; rather it was administrative necessity.[12] The Community Development projects of the early 1950s, designed largely to increase food production, had not succeeded in their object, and it was hoped that the devolution of some real power to local communities via *panchayat raj* would remedy this.[13]

So far political commentators and anthropologists have been unable to produce any comprehensive picture of the actual working of this new structure, as it is still in its early stages and the evidence is piecemeal. In some areas food production and the general level of village prosperity has increased rapidly;[14] but these are perhaps exceptional. As a report from Rajasthan in 1960 commented, villagers were willing to spend communal money on schools, dispensaries and roads which would benefit them all. But the improvement of irrigation and other amenities, crucial to economic development, rarely benefited the whole village, and consequently *panchayats* found it difficult to decide how to allocate funds.[15] In other places, as in parts of Gujarat where the go-ahead Patidar caste is strong, village development forges on without the help of new *panchayats*, which are even looked down on by villagers

[11] W. H. Morris-Jones, *The Government and Politics of India* (2nd edition), London, 1967, p. 16.

[12] H. Tinker, 'Tradition and Experiment in Forms of Government', Philips, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

[13] G. Rosen, *Democracy and Economic Change in India*, (Revised edition), Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967, p. 94.

[14] For two successful *panchayats* in Bihar, see K. Nair, *Blossoms in the Dust*, London, 1962, pp. 94–7.

[15] *Report of a Study Team on Democratic Decentralization in Rajasthan*, quoted in Rosen, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

as somewhat irrelevant government creations.[16] The fate of *panchayats* really seems to depend on the state of the individual village in the first place—whether or not there are interested local leaders, whether there is a dominant caste willing to use it constructively, or whether there are competing castes or warring factions which use the *panchayat* as a new arena for their traditional battles rather than as an agency for self-government and an instrument of development.

It is also debatable whether *panchayat raj* is working in a way which is really consonant with Gandhi's vision. Although power has been devolved to village level, its accompaniment is an army of development officers and workers from village level upwards. These bring the prestige and authority of government with them, and though theoretically they work in cooperation with the elected *panchayat*, there is danger that their presence may make local autonomy into a sham. Similarly, Gandhi envisaged a harmonious, non-violent society and state if central power was devolved to the localities, but in many places *panchayats* are at the mercy of castes or factions disputing local supremacy.[17] In such cases they do nothing to promote village harmony. Quite the reverse, they increase existing divisions and rivalries by providing further prizes for the successful. *Panchayat raj* demonstrates at the local level how democracy can most cruelly divide in a complicated and diverse society, just as instalments of constitutional reform did at a higher level in the last forty years of the British raj.

A discussion of the nature and extent of state power in modern India is important because it seems to be typical of the fate of so many of the ideals Gandhi wished India to reflect, ideals and plans which some commentators like to see as his 'legacy' to India. But in this case Gandhi's ideal was only one strand in a conflict of differing ideals and political necessities. It was only put into practice when it coincided with overriding political and economic pressures towards a similar goal, and even then, the end product, contemporary *panchayat raj*, is often distorted from the Gandhian ideal by the necessities of political control and the power of existing social groups.

Virtually identical is the fate of Gandhi's hopes for the economic future of India. His vision was self-sufficient village communities producing the necessities for simple, rural life, with no need for towns

[16] Nair, *op. cit.*, pp. 170–8. For a case where the traditional council continued to rule the village and the statutory *panchayat* was merely an instrument of liaison with the administration, see F. G. Bailey, *Politics and Social Change. Orissa in 1959*, Bombay, 1963, p. 96.

[17] H. Tinker, 'Tradition and Experiment in Forms of Government', Philips, *op. cit.*, pp. 168, 184.

with their factories and their endless possibilities for exploiting the poor.[18] This clashed with the plans of other Indian leaders for a prosperous India able to hold its own as a modern, industrialized nation. What could have been more inimical to the Gandhian ideal than Nehru's pronouncement, 'I am all for tractors and big machinery, and I am convinced that the rapid industrialization of India is essential . . .'?[19] Such a clash obviously embarrassed Indian leaders at the height of the nationalist movement, and a whole section of Nehru's *The Discovery of India* is devoted to reconciling the two views.[20] At the heart of the difference was Gandhi's vision of a non-violent society. For Nehru it was a question of making India politically and economically strong. He wrote:

> It can hardly be challenged that, in the context of the modern world, no country can be politically and economically independent, even within the framework of international inter-dependence, unless it is highly industrialized and has developed its power resources to the utmost.[21]

For Gandhi the overriding necessity was not such conventional strength, but non-violence, as he explained in 1939.

> Rural economy . . . eschews exploitation altogether, and exploitation is the essence of violence. You have to be rural-minded before you can be non-violent and to be rural-minded you have to have faith in the spinning-wheel.[22]

In practice the naivety of Gandhian economics has given way to the Five Year Plans with emphasis on rapid industrialization. The Second Plan, for example, particularly stressed the development of heavy industries in order to make India independent of foreign supplies of producer goods, and consequently able to accumulate capital and reduce the foreign debt.[23] Such reasoning would have been anathema to Gandhian simplicity. However, in deference to Gandhian ideals and the clear need to increase rural incomes, the government has subsidized cottage industries. But the Third Plan commented curtly that under the Second Plan 'the results obtained in respect of both

[18] For a survey of Gandhi's economic ideal, see Husain, *op. cit.*, pp. 39–46.

[19] J. Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (paperback impression of 4th edition), London, 1960, p. 412.

[20] *Ibid.*, pp. 409–16. [21] *Ibid.*, p. 414.

[22] *Harijan*, 4 November 1939, quoted in Husain, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

[23] *Papers relating to the Formation of the Second Five-Year Plan*, 1955, quoted in Rosen, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

production and employment were not commensurate with the expenditure incurred'.[24]

In one area of economic policy, however, Gandhi's ideas did partially coincide with those of Nehru and the more socialist leaders of Congress—that is, the problem of landlordism and landholding. Gandhi's ideal village was a community of peasants cultivating their own land and producing their own food, free from landlords who might subject them to a rural equivalent of the industrial exploitation he so decried in towns. Nehru's socialist vision included rural equality, while his industrial plans needed a sound agricultural base to support the industrial sector of the economy. Both lines of thought pointed to some limitation of the great zemindari estates existing in parts of India. Gandhi would have preferred the method to be moral persuasion, but as early as 1928 Nehru had mooted the limitation of landholding by law.[25] When Congress came to power it determined to abolish zemindari and other titles in land which came between the government and the peasant, and to enforce maximum limits on landholding, in an attempt to lessen rural inequality and to provide incentives for productive peasant cultivators. Despite considerable opposition from the judiciary, which was concerned to protect the property rights of individuals,[26] by the end of the Second Five Year Plan all intermediate titles in land were abolished, and gradually local governments began to enact so-called 'ceiling' legislation against large landholders.

However, once again social conditions, particularly the power of the dominant landholding castes in each area, conspired to defeat the ideals of Gandhian and socialist planner alike. Take Raichur district, once part of Hyderabad, as an example. There in 1955–6, out of 213,953 landholders, only 549 officially possessed more than the 'ceiling' legislation allowed when it was passed, although this was known to be an area of large estates.[27] In Andhra as a whole, as in many other parts of India, landholders redistributed their lands among their families and relatives—a legal dodge which doubtless accounts for the ease with which such legislation passes through local legislative assemblies even though they often contain large groups of landholding representatives.[28]

The corollary to 'ceiling' legislation, the legislative protection of former tenants, has similarly been ineffective in many places. Former

[24] Rosen, *op. cit.*, p. 175. [25] Smith, *Nehru and Democracy*, pp. 133–4.
[26] For a discussion of the conflicts between Nehru and the judiciary, and consequent additions to the Indian constitution, see *ibid.*, pp. 135–41.
[27] Nair, *op. cit.*, p. 61. [28] *Ibid.*, p. 62.

tenants often surrender their lands, apparently without compulsion. But such surrenders are voluntary in name only. For fear of the powerful landlord nearby, able to make life uncomfortable in the immediate circle of the village, is greater than belief in protection through the courts or from a distant government.[29] Moreover, there have been unforeseen effects of 'ceiling' and tenancy protection laws which are certainly contrary to the intentions of the legislators. As landholders share their lands among their relatives there is less surplus land for temporary tenants to work; and people who formerly earned their living by taking on temporary tenures have been degraded to the position of day labourers.[30] Moreover, some powerful landlords like the Patidars in the Kaira district of Gujarat have, through their control of the record keepers, manipulated land titles and used some of the provisions of tenancy laws to evict their tenants and turn them into agricultural labourers.[31] This hits the low castes particularly, demonstrating that power accrues to those who already possess it, in this case the local dominant landowning castes. Clearly it needs more than well-intentioned laws to alter the balance of power in rural India.

So far only the fate of Gandhi's political and economic ideals has been considered. It would be a valid criticism to say that after all Gandhi was not primarily interested or instrumental in formulating constitutions and economic plans, and that it would be fairer to evaluate his influence on modern India in an area of life in which he was supremely interested. So let us turn to caste—a topic to which Gandhi devoted a vast amount of time and energy. For Gandhi, caste presented two distinct problems—the nature of caste divisions in general, and the particular issue of Untouchability. To take the more general question first: Gandhi's attitude to the institution of caste developed considerably over the years. Brought up a strict Hindu in the Vaishnava tradition, he accepted caste divisions without question during his time in South Africa and after his return to India in 1915. He wrote in a Marathi magazine in 1916 that caste was 'a perfectly natural institution . . . invested with a religious meaning', and a ready agent for social and moral reform. 'These being my views,' he wrote, 'I am opposed to the movements which are being carried on for the destruction of the system.'[32] At this stage he still upheld the prohibitions on intermarriage and

[29] Nair, *op. cit.*, p. 64. [30] *Ibid.*, pp. 64–6.

[31] M. Weiner, *Party Building in a New Nation. The Indian National Congress*, Chicago and London, 1967, pp. 89–90. Similar examples from Orissa of powerful landholders vitiating tenancy protection legislation are given in Bailey, *op. cit.*, pp. 74–5.

[32] *Bharat Sevak*, October 1916, *C.W.*, Vol. 13, pp. 301–3.

interdining between people who belonged to different *varnas*, though not between members of different castes within each of the four great divisions. In 1932, however, he came out against all restrictions on intermarriage and interdining; and in 1946 it was announced that no couples could be married at his Sevagram *ashram* unless one of them was an Untouchable. Somewhere in the intervening years, most clearly between 1916 and 1926 he had begun to distinguish between caste as actually found in India, and his ideal of caste, what he called *varnashrama*. *Varnashrama* was a cooperative society with its members divided into occupational groups, each fulfilling their own functions, but all of equal status: and it was this ideal of caste to which Gandhi adhered for the rest of his life.[33] In upholding *varnashrama* as opposed to the current practice of caste distinctions, Gandhi was compromising between the claims of orthodoxy and reform. But in his attitude towards Untouchability there was no element of compromise. As early as 1907 he condemned the practice without hesitation;[34] and in 1915 wrote, 'If it were proved to me that this is an essential part of Hinduism, I for one would declare myself an open rebel against Hinduism itself . . .'.[35]

There are several strands in Indian thought from the later nineteenth century onwards which tie up with Gandhi's attitude to caste. Within the spectrum of the early social reform movement there were many shades of opinion, ranging from the most timid to the most radical.[36] But gradually the radical began to predominate, particularly as the spread of education and communications helped to weaken parochialisms of all kinds, including the distinctions and loyalties of caste. By the 1920s there was a body of opinion which called for the entire abolition of caste, and an even stronger feeling amongst the educated that the practice of Untouchability should be prohibited if India was to stand on equal terms as a modern nation with western countries. The personal example of Gandhi, whose activities were reported in minute detail during the national movement, was undoubtedly of great importance in making these ideas acceptable in India. But

[33] For the development of Gandhi's view of *varnashrama* (also called *varnadharma* and *varnashramadharma*), see D. Dalton, 'The Gandhian View of Caste, and Caste after Gandhi', P. Mason, *op. cit.*, pp. 159–81. A collection of Gandhi's writings on caste compiled by R. K. Prabhu is M. K. Gandhi, *Varnashramadharma*, Ahmedabad, 1962.

[34] Gandhi to Chhaganlal Gandhi, 21 April 1907, *C.W.*, Vol. 6, p. 435.

[35] Speech by Gandhi on 1 May 1915, *The Hindu*, 3 May 1915, *C.W.*, Vol. 13, p. 69.

[36] For a survey of the social reform movement, see C. H. Heimsath, *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform*, Princeton, 1964.

Congress socialism and the actual participation of lower and Untouchable castes in civil disobedience also contributed to a radical approach. At one point it looked as if the Untouchables under Dr Ambedkar's leadership would try to find a solution to their problem through political separatism. But Gandhi's great fast leading to the Poona Pact scotched this plan. Instead, Congress retained their allegiance, but was committed to abolishing Untouchability when it came to power.[37] Consequently in the 1950 Constitution Untouchable status was abolished, and this was reinforced by the 1955 Untouchability Offences Act, applicable to the whole of India.[38] On the positive side, scholarships were provided for Untouchables in schools and colleges, special seats were allotted to them in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, and a certain percentage of government jobs were reserved for them.

But what of actual practice? Untouchability is sanctioned by the tradition of generations, an embedded attitude and social habit hard to root out. Moreover, as a ritual status given to certain occupational groups, it cannot be abolished by the stroke of a legislator's pen, but only as those groups find new occupations and increasing prosperity to free them from their degraded status and give them in effect a new status to replace the old. In towns this happens more rapidly, except where Untouchables live in caste blocs or keep their traditional occupations. But in villages there is still plenty of evidence that Untouchability is as real a status as ever it was.[39] Although the problem of the erstwhile Untouchables is essentially an economic one, such is the complexity of Indian society that sometimes the very prosperity which should undermine old ritual distinctions becomes an incentive for retaining communal identity and degraded status.[40] Even the protective discrimination given to ex-Untouchables in education and government has backfired, making former Untouchability a status in which men have a substantial vested interest.[41] Clearly despite Gandhi's

[37] A. M. Muzumdar, *Social Welfare in India. Mahatma Gandhi's Contributions*, New York, 1964, pp. 56–73.

[38] For the scope of the Constitution and the Untouchability Offences Act, see M. Galanter, 'Changing Legal Conceptions of Caste', Milton Singer and Bernard S. Cohn (ed), *Structure and Change in Indian Society*, Chicago, 1968, pp. 312–15.

[39] H. Orenstein, 'Leadership and Caste in a Bombay Village', R. L. Park and I. Tinker (ed), *Leadership and Political Institutions in India*, Princeton, 1959, p. 417. Nair, *op. cit.*, pp. 80, 187.

[40] For the case of the Chamars whose traditionally degrading leather work has become extremely profitable, see L. I. and S. H. Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition. Political Development in India*, Chicago and London, 1967, p. 134.

[41] The Mahars of Western India are one of the clearest examples of a group deliberately trading on the new benefits available to them if they admit to being

campaign against Untouchability, and despite virtually revolutionary legislation, Untouchable status persists and is even being artificially prolonged in modern India.

It is difficult to generalize about the power and importance of caste distinctions as a whole compared with the specific issue of Untouchability, since these distinctions cover so many areas of life and vary in different regions. But it seems that gradually the ritual importance of caste is weakening as education spreads and as the endogamous circle begins to widen.[42] However, though the ritual implications of caste may weaken, caste and sub-caste groups are finding new areas of activity in public life which make nonsense of Gandhian ideals of a harmonious society of interdependent groups. Educational and economic development, and the devolution of power, first from an imperial to an Indian raj and then down through State to *panchayat*, have disturbed old balances of power, provided new opportunities for social and economic advancement, and with them the means of obtaining corresponding political influence. This process of change and modernization might be expected to weaken caste ties, but in some unforeseen ways it has served to reinforce them.

One way is through the reservation of jobs and seats in legislatures for 'backward' classes, a category which includes some low castes as well as ex-Untouchables. As in the case of the latter, some low castes like the Lingayats of Mysore, are determined to retain the status of 'backward' for the political and economic advantages it now affords them though in fact their economic position has so improved that they no longer deserve the title 'backward'.[43] In another way political change has thrown caste groups into prominence. Operating within the new system of mass franchise politicians have to find appropriate methods of courting political support; and the caste group with its local leaders and supra-village networks is a ready made instrument for political mobilization if politicians can capture its loyalty. Realizing this political potential, political scientists and anthropologists have studied the modern political role of caste in considerable detail. One thing that

Mahars. Even Christians and Muslims, theoretically casteless communities, in some places now claim vigorously that they have among them ex-Untouchables who are eligible for government benefits. See H. R. Isaacs, *India's Ex-Untouchables*, (1st Indian edition), Bombay, 1965, pp. 117–20, 171.

[42] M. N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*, Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1966, pp. 128, 138–9.

[43] A. Bétaille, 'The Future of the Backward Classes: The Competing Demands of Status and Power', Mason, *op. cit.*, p. 89. For a discussion of the difficulties involved in finding a suitable criterion of 'backwardness', see D. E. Smith, *India as a Secular State*, Princeton, 1963, pp. 316–22.

emerges from the recent voluminous literature on that role is the great variety to be found in different regions, among different castes, and at different levels of political life. In State level politics alone there are several distinct patterns of caste activity. Sometimes whole castes go consciously into politics as organized groups.[44] In other cases *groups* of castes form political alliances to preserve or better their position.[45] Sometimes caste loyalties are only one of a number of means which politicians use to attract votes: economic, cultural and social loyalties and interests are also called into play.[46] But though the factors which 'dilute' the power of caste in politics are increasing, caste is certainly a live issue and a powerful weapon, and where it operates it increases bitterness in politics—hence the derogatory use of the word 'casteism' in contemporary Indian political jargon. The harmonious ideal of Gandhi's *varnashrama* is still an ideal and no reality.

The cases on which this discussion has so far centred make it clear that Gandhi's ideals have often left little mark on Indian society and politics; and where they have been influential they have often been distorted in practice by social conditions. What is left by the Mahatma in modern India is not a social and political reformation, but merely a tiny group of devoted Gandhians. Some, under the leadership of Jayaprakash Narayan, preach the doctrines of *Sarvodaya*, the welfare of all. Like Gandhi, they believe that the future of India lies with village communities and the end of party politics and factional strife. Others, led by Vinoba Bhave, have since 1952 toured the country, asking for gifts of land and goods to form the basis of cooperative village communities on the Gandhian model.[47] Their political power in terms of numbers and institutions is minimal. But they have caught the public imagination by sounding a note of simplicity and tradition in a period of rapid change and deviation from traditional paths. In a strange way they provide a focus for much of the current political discontent in India, even though many of their ideas are virtually impossible to enact. They are present as a constant reminder of the heroic days of the

[44] E.g., the Nairs of Kerala, Rosen, *op. cit.*, p. 77; the Jatavs of Agra, O. M. Lynch, 'The Politics of Untouchability: A Case from Agra, India', Singer and Cohn, *op. cit.*, pp. 227–35.

[45] Recently the Rajputs of Gujarat have admitted lower caste Kolis to the status of Kshatriya and allied with them in the Gujarat Sabha in order to capture power from the Patidar-dominated Congress, M. N. Srinivas, 'Mobility in the Caste System', *ibid.*, pp. 198.

[46] The Vanniyars of Madras have progressed from the simple form of political activity in overtly caste parties to this more sophisticated stage where many non-caste factors compete for their political loyalty, Rudolphs, *op. cit.*, pp. 26–7, 88–103.

[47] For a discussion of the *Sarvodaya* movement, see Varma, *op. cit.*

nationalist movement, and are a standing critique of any Indian government.

But surely it is to the days of the nationalist movement that we must turn if we are to see the influence of Gandhi on modern India? To look for direct causal links between his ideals and what is happening in contemporary politics and society is really to pose the wrong questions. Gandhi was not a formulator of constitutions or a planner of economies; nor even a full time politician, since for long periods he would retire almost completely from politics, and devote himself to the service of the Untouchables and to filling India with spinning-wheels. The concrete preparation for the government of independent India was done by the Nehrus and Patels of the national movement. They were the creators of a party machine and the architects of the new state, and one could rightly ask what their direct legacy was to modern India in terms of policies and institutions. Gandhi provided the inspiration and the dynamic leadership, particularly at critical moments in the movement, and it is his leadership which has left indelible marks on contemporary India rather than his specific plans for social and political reform.

Gandhi's role as a leader can be described as essentially that of a mediator between various groups and forces. In the first place, though on occasion not even a Congress member, he became the acknowledged leader and symbol of the anti-British agitation. As such, he held together a group of political leaders, mediating between their diverse ideologies and aims. His very rise to power in 1920 was based on this mediatory function. The Congresses held at Calcutta and Nagpur in 1920 completely reversed the earlier Congress policy of cooperating in the Montagu–Chelmsford constitutional reforms. The reason for this dramatic revision lay in the political forces Gandhi controlled, and the way he used them. Congress from its inception until 1920 had been the preserve of educated groups, predominantly Hindus of high caste, who came from the three Presidencies which had been longest under British influence. They alone were equipped by their education to fence with the raj in western style institutions for political power: they alone had the qualifications which would make them the beneficiaries of the concessions of place and power in government service and the Legislative Councils which were the heart of their political demands. Standing outside this tiny, sophisticated world of the professional politicians were vast groups, areas and communities whose aims might be very different if their political potential was ever released. It was this potential which Gandhi began to release in 1920. His strength, as

shown in the voting patterns at Calcutta and Nagpur, lay in the support of sections of the Muslim community, roused to activity in the Khilafat movement, in the support of representatives from regions which had previously played a peripheral part in politics—Bihar, U.P., the Punjab, Gujarat and the Hindi-speaking parts of C.P.—and in the support of merchant groups whose loyalties had previously lain with the raj. It was not that Gandhi completely swamped the older style politicians, but rather that this novel support made him the most dangerous opponent and the most powerful potential ally in the political situation of 1920.[48] Even B. G. Tilak, in the weeks before he died, was acutely aware that his followers were faced with a critical decision by Gandhi's increasing power. According to a contemporary report, one of 'Tilak's last coherent utterances during his final illness' was 'that Gandhi should be regarded as a political power and not be lightly thwarted or opposed by the Nationalists lest they should find themselves in a minority and lose their lead in politics . . .'.[49] The Presidency politicians realized their predicament and many of them turned to Gandhi at the end of 1920 rather than slide into obscurity; while Gandhi for his part mediated between them and his own supporters so that the older politicians retained influence, if not leadership, in the national movement. One Bombay politician put the situation neatly:

> We have expressed our differences as regards the programme of Non-co-operation to Mahatma Gandhi recently and he has conceded Provincial autonomy so far as it agreed with the fundamental principles of his Non-co-operation and thus we are now in a position to work out the programme as it may suit us best. . . . The time is ripe for us all now, reserving the right to ourselves to express our differences amongst ourselves whenever a proper occasion arrives, to close up our ranks and offer a united front to the Government under the guidance of the only man—Mahatma Gandhi—who can be somewhat of a leader to us, under the present circumstances.[50]

But precisely because of the increasing diversity of those who had begun to participate in politics with their own particular aims under

[48] For an analysis of voting patterns in the Calcutta and Nagpur Congresses and an investigation of the sources of Gandhi's power, see J. M. Brown, 'Gandhi in India, 1915–20: his emergence as a leader and the transformation of politics' (Cambridge Ph.D. dissertation, 1968), pp. 414–72.

[49] Bombay Presidency Police, Secret Abstract of Intelligence of 1920, par. 1211, S. B. Bombay Presidency, Poona, 27 August.

[50] M. R. Jayakar to B. S. Moonje, 5 January 1921, Jayakar Papers, Chronological Correspondence File No. 12, Serial No. 2.

Gandhi's leadership, his mediation between the different groups had on occasion to be dictatorial. One of the earliest examples of this occurred in June 1920 at a meeting of the All-India Khilafat Conference, when Gandhi was trying to ride both Hindu and Muslim horses. Congress had deferred a decision on non-cooperation over the Khilafat issue until the special session in September, and Gandhi's unenviable task was to keep the Muslims sufficiently happy and under his control so as not to alienate the Hindus by wild speeches or actions. He did this by delivering an ultimatum to the Muslims: they could have his mediation and a potential Hindu alliance on his terms only, otherwise he would retire. The Governor of Bombay reported this incident:

> He informed the Khilafat Committee that in order to carry out his programme it would be necessary that an internal committee of two or three of which he should be the dictator (he used this word) should be formed, and he proposed that this should be styled the Martial Law Committee of the Khilafat Movement. He explained the choice of this name by saying that just as ordinary law was suspended in the use of Martial law, so in the case of the Khilafat Committee its power of action and criticism should be suspended *pro tem.*, if they desired his co-operation, in favour of himself and his 'committee'. This was silently accepted.[51]

Both the mediation and the dictatorial tendency were present from then throughout Gandhi's career. There were those who refused to accept both. Most spectacular was the refusal of the Muslim community after the brief rapprochement with Congress on the Khilafat issue, despite Gandhi's insistence that his life's work was to bring together Hindus and Muslims. Some Hindus as well turned against him, particularly those under the influence of Subhas Chandra Bose, and the members of the Hindu Mahasabha. But on the whole the Hindu politicians preferred to stick together under Gandhi and preserve a united anti-British front in a Congress which became a coalition of different interests.

One writer has gone so far as to call the modern Congress an entire party system in itself, in which conflicting groups and interests find expression, conciliation and compromise.[52] This process could be seen until recently not only in the central Congress party, where Nehru continued Gandhi's mediatory activities after the Mahatma's death, but also in the localities. At the local level Congress success in retaining

[51] Sir George Lloyd to E. S. Montagu, 25 June 1920, Montagu Papers, India Office Library, Mss. EUR.D.523 (25).

[52] R. Kothari, 'The Party System', *The Economic Weekly*, 3 June 1961, quoted in Rosen, *op. cit.*, pp. 64.

power and insuring unity has rested very largely, too, on its power as the Government party to mediate between local groups, and to provide them with means of expression and roads to power.[53] The inclusive, synthesising nature of Congress has undoubtedly contributed to the comparative stability of Indian politics in the two decades since independence, and the successful working of elected, parliamentary forms of government—phenomena rare in the post-independence history of Asian and African states. Modern India owes much to the Mahatma for this, because the nature of Congress was very largely determined by his ideal of it as the voice of all India, and by the mediatory qualities of his own leadership.

In a second way Gandhi was a mediator during the national movement—between the educated, high caste groups who had moved easily in politics since the late nineteenth century, and the wider social groups which have moved into politics since the First World War. It is often said that Gandhi was instrumental in creating mass political awareness and participation in India, and that from 1920 onwards he harnessed together the feelings of the masses and the ambitions of an elite. As more work is done on the actual mechanics of Gandhi's political leadership it becomes clear that this is an over-simplification. It is quite true that Gandhi moved with ease in the club-rooms of the Indian Bars and the political associations of the professional politicians, as well as in the market towns and villages, interpreting the different groups to each other. But it was between the politicians and those whom one might call rural and small town elites that Gandhi acted as political mediator, and rarely between the politicians and the masses. The legend of the Mahatma's success in making mass political contact makes this sound like heresy beside the dogmas of Indian nationalist history; and of course there were occasions when Gandhi had direct political influence on ordinary villagers with no claims to the status of an elite group. For example, during the 1920 elections in one U.P. village not a single person voted after Gandhi had visited the district the previous day.[54] Occasions like this doubtless multiplied with the years as he became a truly all-India figure. But generally speaking to the really poor and illiterate Gandhi's message and appeal was social and religious. To the more prosperous peasants, and the traders and professional men of small towns his appeal became more overtly political: while at the highest levels of political participation he could couch demands in the language of legislatures and constitutions. It

[53] Weiner, *op. cit.*, pp. 469–72.

[54] V. Chirol, *India Old and New*, London, 1921, pp. 201–2.

was between these latter groups that Gandhi acted as a political mediator.

This process can be traced in Gandhi's career right from the time when he launched himself into Indian politics with the Champaran *satyagraha* of 1917. In Champaran, though he moved through the villages, his key men were a small group of professional men from Bihar towns, most of whom were lawyers. Among them was Rajendra Prasad from Chapra who was to become one of Gandhi's chief henchmen in Bihar. The only one of the group who had hitherto had much real political experience was Braj Kishore Prasad, who had been a member of the Bihar Legislative Council, and had attended Congress. Among Gandhi's helpers were also business men from local towns who realized that if Gandhi's campaign against the planting community was successful it might increase their own power and prosperity in the area. Of the four main peasant leaders whom Gandhi used, the most prominent was the son of a prosperous Brahmin cultivator who had personal grievances to vent against the planters.[55] Clearly such men belonged to a rural and urban elite, and association with them was not political contact with the masses. Similarly in the Kaira *satyagraha* of 1918 Gandhi's work was not with the poorest peasants, but with the prosperous Patidar community of this district of Gujarat, while his most important helpers were either Patidars themselves or lawyers from Gujarati towns, working through the infant political associations they had begun, particularly the Gujarat Sabha, the Gujarat Political Conference and the local branches of the Home Rule League. Both Patidar and lawyer, Vallabhbhai Patel was the foremost of these associates.[56] The same pattern of leadership appears in the Rowlatt *satyagraha* of 1919 and in the non-cooperation movement begun in 1920. In every case Gandhi used a middle group between the masses and the politicians in the role of political sub-contractor. In Bihar in 1920 this middle group consisted not only of small town pleaders but also of Muslim religious leaders, particularly the *maulvis*, who were interested in the Khilafat cause.[57] In Maharashtra the police reported that the ordinary villagers understood virtually nothing of what was said at non-cooperation meetings, but that village officials like the

[55] For a description of Gandhi's associates in Champaran, see undated letter from W. H. Lewis, Subdivisional Officer, Bettiah, to the Commissioner, Tirhut Division, B. B. Misra (ed), *Select Documents on Mahatma Gandhi's Movement in Champaran 1917–18*, Bihar, 1963, pp. 339–43.

[56] J. M. Brown, 'Gandhi In India, 1915–20', pp. 207–10.

[57] *Searchlight*, 29 April 1920, Government of India, Home Political, A, September 1920, Nos. 100–3.

talatis, *patels* and *shroffs* did, and villagers' behaviour would depend on their bidding.[58]

But though Gandhi's leadership did not create mass political awareness as is sometimes glibly suggested without a detailed study of the mechanics of that leadership, his kind of political sub-contracting significantly extended the range of real political participation both in towns and in the countryside. This has been reflected in the changing composition of some local Congress parties, where the high caste, educated few have had to give way to, or at the very least share power with, powerful rural elites taking active part in politics for the first time. In Belgaum, for example, by the mid 1930s there had occurred a dramatic decline in the power of the Brahmins, who were the earliest leaders and participants in local politics, in the face of non-Brahmin agricultural castes, particularly the Lingayats.[59] An interesting corollary to this is the very recent indication that in some places the rural elites mobilized by Gandhi are now being displaced or challenged in politics by groups from below them in social and economic ranking—groups who were barely touched by Gandhi's leadership. In the Mahatma's home territory of Gujarat, the Patidars who followed him from 1918 onwards and effectively made up the local Congress were in 1962 defeated in Kaira district by a Bariya-Rajput alliance under the banner of a Kshatriya Sabha.[60]

From 1917 onwards Gandhi mediated between the small groups to whom politics had become a natural activity over several decades and a wider spread of groups who began to be active in politics for the first time. As he did so he trained a new kind of leader who has risen to prominence in the years since independence. The Nehrus and Patels of politics—urbane, fluent in English, often educated in England or qualified at the English Bar—are giving way to, or at least needing the assistance of, men like Kamaraj who until recently spoke no English, the late Prime Minister Shastri who had never left India until he took up office. This new style of leader is better equipped to represent and understand the rural groups whose power has increased since the introduction of adult suffrage, and to deal with local party bosses than were the political leaders of the days when politics were still the preserve of an urban elite.[61] India's comparatively smooth transition from

[58] Bombay Presidency Police, Secret Abstract of Intelligence of 1920, par. 1491 (21), Poona, 12 November.

[59] Weiner, *op. cit.*, pp. 234–5. [60] *Ibid.*, pp. 105–10.

[61] The introduction of adult suffrage hastened the process of expanding political participation, and shifted power even more quickly to the dominant rural castes in the regions, castes which then gained more power through the institution of *panchayat*

elitist politics to a stage of far wider participation in political activity owes much to Gandhi's ability to interpret between different groups and to train new leaders who could tap a wider range of support than their predecessors. This is a political dividend of very great value to an ex-colonial territory where violence can so easily erupt from the bitterness of social, economic and regional divisions if those divisions are reflected in a monopoly of political power.

In a third sphere also Gandhi's role was that of mediator—in matters of social and political ideology. Compared with an older generation of politicians who owed much of their political thinking to education on English liberal lines, and made Congress the sober morning-dress affair that it once was, Gandhi appeared both in outward appearance and in his attitudes and arguments to be far more traditionally Indian. Indeed this was part of his strength as he stretched out to groups not yet involved in the sophisticated game of western-style politics. But in many ways he reinterpreted traditionally Indian ideas to justify more modern or western attitudes, and similarly interpreted the more modern in terms of the traditional. One of the most obvious examples of this was his attitude towards caste divisions. His egalitarian ideas owed much to his western education, but he took care always to clothe these ideas in traditional forms, stressing that *varnashrama* was a purification of corrupt Hindu practice, and not a departure from Hindu tradition. Similarly he emphasized that his criticism of the contemporary treatment of women in India was not an attack on Hinduism from outside, but a call to return to the original tenets of Hinduism.

> These statements of mine may have verbal similarity with the occasional attacks of Christians, but, apart from this similarity, there is no common ground between us. The Christians, in their attacks, seek to strike at the roots of Hinduism. I look upon myself as an orthodox Hindu and my attack proceeds from the desire to rid Hinduism of its defects and restore it to its pristine glory.[62]

In somewhat the same way Gandhi's ideal of an Indian nation, and a good Indian, at first owed much to examples of nationalism and heroism from outside India. In South Africa he set himself the task of uniting the Indian community and educating its members in the qualities he thought made nations great, using his writings and the columns of *Indian Opinion* in particular. He drew heavily on the lives of nationalist

raj. This shift in the balance of power to the countryside is one of the main themes dealt with in Rosen, *op. cit.*

[62] Speech by Gandhi on 20 February 1918, *C.W.*, Vol. 14, p. 204.

leaders from outside India, like Mazzini[63] and Mustafa Kamal Pasha;[64] and exhorted his audience to follow men as diverse as Oliver Cromwell, George Washington and Florence Nightingale, in the belief that nations were as great as the people they contained.[65] By the time he returned to India, however, his writings were orientated far less towards western examples, and his stress fell increasingly on the traditionally Indian—hence his use of words like *swaraj* and *swadeshi*, his emphasis on vernacular education, village communities and the wearing of *khadi*. This new kind of exposition was part of the ideological structure he built up round his concept of the supremacy of *satyagraha*, truth or soul force. Much of that ideology and the resulting personal idiosyncracies were rejected in India, but Gandhi's restatement of western political ideals of nationhood and independence in overtly Indian, even Hindu, terms and symbols was of great psychological importance to the leaders of the national movement. It removed the sting of the charge the British had always laid against them, that they were 'denationalized', representing nothing but themselves, a group of over-educated *babus*. It also helped to unify the groups who participated in the movement by stressing the traditional in opposition to the divisions which British rule and influence had caused or exacerbated.[66] Even in the mundane matters of dress and language, by dressing the leaders in *khadi* and exhorting them to speak a vernacular, Gandhi brought them closer to the rest of the population, appearing to iron out the differences between rich and poor, educated and illiterate. Literally and metaphorically Gandhi clothed the leaders of modern India in the robes of tradition, and thus eased India's passage into the modern world.[67]

[63] E.g., a passage in *Hind Swaraj*, *C.W.*, Vol. 10, pp. 40–1; an article in *Indian Opinion*, 22 July 1905, *C.W.*, Vol 5, pp. 27–8; numerous references as in *Indian Opinion*, 27 July 1907, *C.W.*, Vol. 7, p. 122 and *Indian Opinion*, 4 April 1908, *C.W.*, Vol. 8, p. 175.

[64] A course of articles entitled 'Egypt's Famous Leader', *Indian Opinion*, 28 March 1908, 4 April 1908, 11 April 1908, 18 April 1908, *C.W.*, Vol. 8, pp. 166–7, 174–6, 187–8, 199.

[65] *Indian Opinion*, 9 September 1905, *C.W.*, Vol. 5, pp. 61–2; *Indian Opinion*, 27 July 1907, *C.W.*, Vol. 7, p. 122.

[66] Of course stressing the traditional and the Hindu also involved dangers. The increasingly Hindu character of the national movement helped to alienate Muslims and to push them into demands for a Pakistan where they would be free from the danger of Hindu raj. Use of vernaculars, also, was fraught with uncertainties. It might bring educated and uneducated together, but it might also emphasize the differences between the regions of India and the claims of their various vernaculars for official recognition and use.

[67] This process of using tradition in the service of modernity is worked out in some detail in relation to Gandhi's leadership by the Rudolphs in a section of their recent book, entitled, 'The Traditional Roots of Charisma: Gandhi', Rudolphs. *op. cit.*, pp. 157–249.

In discussing Mahatma Gandhi's influence on modern India it is misleading to study his ideals and to try to see them as legacies left to his country, though this is a tempting way to celebrate his centenary. Society and politics are far too complex to reflect the ideals of one man, even though he was one of the greatest leaders India has produced and at times even seemed to personify the Indian nation. Only the collusion of ideals with social and economic pressures can produce radical change in traditional societies: where the ideal alone is present, in practice it is either forgotten or distorted. This can be seen in microcosm in the fate of *satyagraha* and its political application in non-violent passive resistance. This above all was Gandhi's message to India. It was for him the manifestation of a consuming vision of a non-violent world, as well as a superbly adaptable technique for conducting and resolving conflicts. But in modern India the ideal has gone by the board both in external relations and in internal politics. Military intervention in Goa, and wars with China and Pakistan have ended an era of non-violence in foreign affairs and of the diplomacy of non-alignment.[68] Within India since Nehru's death the coalition he held together is splitting up, and political strife has become more bitter and increasingly erupts into open violence. Moreover, the technique of *satyagraha*, which Gandhi hoped would never be used in an India which had won *swaraj*,[69] has become a method of last ditch political blackmail.[70] Political, economic and social pressures have conspired to distort the Gandhian original.

Solutions to the problems of modern India have to be, and are being, forged by the politicians of the '60s and '70s, in response to the needs of the day, and not according to an ideology fashioned in the early 1900s by one who had no experience of the pressures of administrative and economic necessity in a vast under-developed country, and whose main concern was to rouse his countrymen to a vision of an independent destiny. The Mahatma was not the Father of the Nation in the sense that he bequeathed to it a blue-print for a new order; but rather because he bridged the gap between the old order and the new.

[68] For evidence of this change, see the figures for the increase in government expenditure on defence since 1962, Rosen, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

[69] W. H. Morris-Jones, 'Mahatma Gandhi—Political Philosopher?', *Political Studies*, Vol. VIII, 1960, p. 30.

[70] E.g., the resort to *satyagraha* by people hoping to get certain towns and areas included in their own linguistic provinces, Weiner, *op. cit.*, pp. 250–1. The same distortion of the Gandhian original can be seen in the threats of political leaders to fast to death when they have been unable to get their way through the normal constitutional channels of politics.