
UNIT 16 GANDHI AND THE LEFT

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16.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we shall study the complex relationship between Gandhi and the Indian Left. The Indian Left consisted of the Radical Humanists led by M. N. Roy, Indian Communists led by Shripad Amrit Dange and the Democratic Socialists led by Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia. All these leaders took part in the Indian freedom movement and spent a number of years in jail. They strongly appreciated the contribution made by Gandhi but had their own differences of opinions. M. N. Roy was a harsh critic of Gandhi and despite differences, Dr. Lohia was an ardent admirer of Gandhi. This unit discusses at length Gandhi's relationship with the leaders of Left-wing ideology and how, inspite of differences, they shared the common goal of Indian independence.

Aims and Objectives

After reading this Unit, you would be able to understand:

- Gandhi's relationship with the Leftist leaders
- The views of M.N.Roy, S.A. Dange and Dr.R.M.Lohia on Gandhi
- Their critiques of Gandhi's thoughts and views

16.2 GANDHI AND THE LEFT: AN UNEASY RELATIONSHIP

When Gandhi entered the Indian politics, the Left was gaining popularity as the people were influenced by the Great October Revolution of 1917. Gandhi did not subscribe to the socialist ideology as his philosophy was deeply rooted in religious idioms and metaphysics. He deeply believed in God. The Leftist leaders did not appreciate his social and political views but took notice of Gandhi because he mobilised the masses on a large scale against the British. Initially, the Leftist movement in India was weak but over a period of time, there emerged three schools- Radical Humanism, Communism and Socialism. Radical Humanism was a school of thought expounded by M. N. Roy who decided to part company with Marxists to establish his own political party. The Indian Communist party was established in 1925 and Dange was its prominent leader. The Congress Socialist party was established in 1934 and Dr. Lohia was one of its prominent leaders.

Though there was a close relationship between the Left and Gandhi, it was an uneasy relationship because the Left did not approve of the spiritualism of Gandhi, his concepts of trusteeship and decentralisation. The Leftist leaders believed in modernist ideas of progress and politics. They sometimes joined the freedom movement. Sometimes they were out of it. In 1942 they opposed the Quit India movement. But the Congress socialists were followers of Gandhi and they took part in all major Gandhian movements.

16.3 M. N. ROY AND GANDHI

Manavendranath Roy was a great Indian revolutionary who took part in revolutionary movement during the Ghadar movement. Subsequently he left the country and carried out revolutionary activities in Mexico and other countries. He came to Soviet Russia and became a follower of Lenin. He took part in the activities of the Communist International and attended its second conference. He had difference of opinion with Lenin regarding the role of Communists in the national liberation movement. He was instrumental in the establishment of Communist Party in India. Roy subsequently resigned from the Communist India. He was arrested and sentenced to six years of imprisonment. After his release from the prison, he decided to join the Congress party. He sought to provide an alternative leadership to the Congress. He was a critic of Gandhi. Therefore, he established Radical Democratic Party and put forward his own alternative programme which was based on rationalism, secularism, scientific outlook and democracy. In 1942, he opposed the Congress party's Quit India Movement and actively supported the British government because it was his contention that Hitler and Fascism were enemies of humanity and they should be defeated at any cost. In 1946 Roy decided to abolish his Radical Democratic Party and expounded his concept of New Humanism. He wanted to work on non-party lines. In this concept of New Humanism, Roy came closer to Gandhi.

16.3.1 Roy's Critique of Gandhi

Roy was a harsh critic of Gandhi's leadership as well as his ideology. In the third conference of the *Communist International*, Lenin was of the opinion that in the Asian Countries, due to the weakness of the working class movement, the communists should support national liberation movement because it was a progressive force. Roy opposed this line and said that the national liberation movements are dominated by reactionary

elements and the communist association with them would harm the interests of progressive forces. He was of the opinion that Gandhi was a religious and cultural revolutionist and he advocated socially reactionary policies. But Lenin saw progressive elements in his leadership.

Roy returned to India and after his release from the jail he decided to join the Congress. But he did not change his opinion of Gandhi and Gandhism. He felt that Gandhi's religious ideas were reactionary and his concept of inner voice irrational. In modern times, instead of relying on science, he relied on religious superstitions and outdated metaphysics. Religion did not encourage morality as the human reason provided free flow of thought. He did not accept Gandhi's concept of *RamRajya* as he did not approve monarchy and wanted to establish Swaraj or self-rule. Though Gandhi criticised parliamentary democracy, he had suggested remedies to its reform. The monarchy could be no substitute for it. Roy also felt that Gandhi was bewildered about future. Due to reactionary pacifism of Gandhi, the Congress would not grow as a party of forward looking people. Gandhi relied upon backward Indian civilisation for the revival of India. Roy opined that the Indian civilisation had become bankrupt and was backward looking.

Roy was also critical of Gandhi's economic idea. He held that Gandhi's concept of trusteeship was based on wrong assumption as the rich would not help poor at the cost of their own interests. Also his opposition to machine was wrong. He did not realise that the machines reduced the amount of hard labour the man had to perform and produced good quality products in plenty. His glorification of village was misplaced because it represented backward Indian world view. Spinning wheel was no match for machines.

But despite this criticism, Roy said that he understood the greatness of Gandhi because he was instrumental in creating political awareness in the minds of the people. He became an embodiment of primitive, blind and spontaneous spirit of revolt of masses.

16.3.2 New Humanism of Roy and Gandhi

In 1946, at the Conference of Radical Democratic Party, Roy decided to abolish his Radical democratic party and expounded 22 principles of New Humanism and decided to work on non-party lines. In 1948, the party was formally abolished. Roy appreciated the ethical content of Gandhi's philosophy and especially his efforts to pacify the victims of the Communal riots in Bengal. In the philosophy of New Humanism he laid stress upon 4 principles: freedom, abolition of party politics, and opposition to parliament and democracy, decentralisation of political power and replacement of the capitalist economy by co-operative economy. He sought to curb the political power of the state by giving power to people's committees at the grass roots level. Thus, in many respects, Roy came close to Gandhi's ideas. There were similarities between New Humanism and Gandhism as Roy pointed out that the greatest task was to educate people in human values.

Roy wrote an article to show differences between Gandhism and New Humanism. He held that Gandhi was not a true Humanist as his ideas were based on compassion and not on science and reason. He did not consider man as the greatest value but held him as the instrument to fulfil God's Will. His morality was not based on human will but it was based on divine will. New Humanism wanted to resuscitate the values preached by the philosophers of renaissance and enlightenment.

It seems that on many points Roy and Gandhi came closer to each other as they believed in the supremacy of morality and freedom, decentralisation of political power and curbing

of power of the state by empowering people. The difference was in their materialism and spiritualism.

16.4 GANDHI AND THE INDIAN COMMUNISTS

We have seen that M. N. Roy played a key role in the establishment of the Communist Party in India. The Communist Party in India was established in 1925 and slowly its influence spread in different labour areas of the country. In Bombay, Shripad Amrit Dange and his Colleagues, and the revolutionary activists of Tashkand played a key role in the development of the party. In 1924, the British government banned the party and conspiracy cases were slapped against its leaders and were sentenced to imprisonment. The Communists used this occasion to defend their ideology. The Communists continued to spread their influence through their ideology in the court, through their trade unions and kisan sabhas.

The Communists supported the Congress movement for liberation of India though they did not appreciate the policies of the Congress party as they held that the Congress made compromises with the British rulers because of its bourgeois character. After their release from prison, the Communists attended the Congress sessions. In 1942 the Communists supported the British government and considered the Second World War as people's war. In 1946, the Communists supported the revolt of the Naval ratings though the Congress government did not support them.

Like Roy, the Communists were opposed to most of the social and political ideas of Gandhi. They did not appreciate many of the policies of the Congress governments which were formed in 1937. But at the same time, the party supported anti-British policies of the Congress.

16.4.1 Dange on Gandhi and Lenin

Shripad Amrit Dange was a prominent leader of the Communist Party who cut his political teeth during the Non-Cooperation movement. He was a follower of Lokmanya Tilak and continued his legacy of anti-imperialism. He was arrested and sentenced to long imprisonment in the Meerut Conspiracy case. He was a prominent trade union leader and spent 17 years of his life in the jail before and after independence. Dange was a Communist leader who wanted to seek closer relations with national movement.

In 1921 he wrote his book on "Gandhi and Lenin". At that time Dange had embraced Communist ideology but had not mastered the essence of Marxist philosophy. In this book, Dange said that Bolshevism was a science of total change and Lenin was its leader. Gandhi was a principal leader of Indian masses who wanted to overthrow the British rule. In his book 'Hind Swaraj', Gandhi had opposed both imperialism and capitalism. Gandhi wanted peaceful change on the lines proposed by Tolstoy. He said that the tyrants tyrannised because tyrannised souls allowed them to do so. Both Gandhi and Lenin wanted to liberate them. Gandhi believed in individual purification and advocated universal peace. Lenin was more practical because he wanted to destroy capitalism and establish workers' federation through the use of force. Gandhi opposed modern production system while Lenin wanted to collectivise it to secure common good. He wanted to use surplus value for the development of working class. The dictates of conscience would not do, as man should confront evil to achieve social change.

Dange said that Gandhi's method of non-co-operation was based on the principle that the people should build their own state within the state. When the internal state grew to its full measure, the external state would collapse. Internal state meant growing power of non-cooperation movement and external state meant that co-operation would sap the morale of the British rulers. Dange said that the rulers would try to suppress the people's attempt to win Swaraj. To counter it, the alliance of workers and peasants was needed. He appreciated the moral fervour of Gandhi and recognised the revolutionary potential in his method of non-cooperation but did not support Gandhi's opposition to machine and his insistence on decentralisation based on village industry. He termed Lenin as a great revolutionary who had opened new page in the world history and held that it was the continuation of the work began by Tilak and Gandhi. Subsequently, Dange said that he did not now support all the views expressed in the book.

16.4.2 Dange's Assessment of Contribution of Gandhi

Throughout his life, Dange considered Gandhi as his teacher because he taught him that we had to rely on masses to provide support to national movement. Gandhi was honest and sincere but the Congressmen who backed him were influenced by the capitalist classes. It was Dange's contention that it was difficult to overthrow the British rule with the help of non-violence alone and Gandhi learnt this lesson during the non-cooperation movement. In 1922, he withdrew non-cooperation movement because of violence at Chauri-Chaura but he did not withdraw civil disobedience movement in 1931, despite violence at Peshawar and Sholapur. He created unique awareness in the minds of the people about their rights.

Paying this tribute to Gandhi on the occasion of his birth centenary in 1969, Dange wrote that Gandhi was a great leader of anti-colonial movement who taught people to fight against injustice. He advocated Hindu-Muslim unity and tried hard to abolish untouchability. When he was born in 1869 the world was dominated by imperialism and when he died in 1948, the imperial forces were overthrown all over the world. Gandhi played an important role in this process of great change.

Dange opined that Gandhi continuously learnt from the masses and it was not Gandhi who made the people radical but it was the people who motivated Gandhi to launch movements. Gandhi wrote a book called 'Hind Swaraj' in 1909 and in this, he glorified the ancient Indian civilisation, laid emphasis on the backward means of production, pleaded for the path of non-violence. But in due course of time he realised that these ideas could not be implemented in practice. Dange said that Gandhi's concept of trusteeship was flawed because businessmen and capitalists would not accept it. As far as the question of purity of means was concerned, the question of the means to be employed was decided by one's opponent. Infact the violent power of all the oppressors was rooted in the state power. The people had to use violent methods to oppose them. His insistence on spinning wheel and village industry was misplaced because people wanted greater amount of production and higher living standards.

Summarising his arguments, Dange said that history did not change because of great ideas of great leaders. These ideas effected change in the society when the material conditions of the society were conducive to the change and then the ideas caught the imagination of the people. Some of the ideas of Gandhi failed because they were not appropriate to the material conditions of the society. Dange was critical of Gandhi but like M. N. Roy, his criticism was not vitriolic. Dange showed limitations of Gandhi but appreciated his

great contribution to India's freedom movement and the role he played in the emancipation of the people from the foreign rule.

16.5 GANDHI AND THE DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISTS

Democratic socialists were the third component of the Indian Left. There were two schools of socialists: the socialists in the Congress led by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and the socialists led by Jayaprakash Narayan, Narendra Deo and Dr. Lohia. The Nehru School of Socialists were influenced by the policies and programmes of the British Labour Party. Jayaprakash and his associates were more influenced by Gandhian ideas. In 1934, the Congress socialist party led by Jayaprakash was established within the Congress party. The basic difference between the communist and the socialist parties was that the socialists wanted to bring about socialism by peaceful means and without the support of dictatorship of proletariat. They believed in the decentralisation of political power. The party worked as a ginger group. The most glorious chapter in the history of socialism was Quit India movement of 1942 when the young socialist leaders assumed the leadership of the movement after the arrest of national leaders. In 1948, the Congress Socialist Party decided to come out of the Congress and established the Socialist Party under the leadership of Jayaprakash Narayan.

16.5.1 Gandhi and Ram Manohar Lohia

Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia was one of the prominent leaders and intellectuals of the Socialist Party. Born in 1910, he had his schooling at Bombay and college education at Calcutta. He studied Ph.D in Economics in Germany and in 1933, secured the degree. He decided to join the Congress party and worked with Pandit Nehru. He went underground during the Quit India Movement but was arrested and put up in Lahore jail. He took part in the Goa liberation movement. He helped the Nepali leaders to form the Nepali Congress. He wrote a number of books on important issues.

The socialist leaders like Jayaprakash, Narendra Deo and Lohia had close relations with Gandhi though they differed with him ideologically. The socialists were atheists and materialists while Gandhi was a believer in God and spiritualism. Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia made penetrating analysis of Gandhian philosophy as well as his contribution to the Indian Society.

16.5.2 Dr. Lohia on the Role of Gandhi

Dr. Lohia had closely associated with Gandhi and held many discussions with him. He pointed out that Gandhi's persona left a lasting impression on the people. The greatest contribution of Gandhi was creating an awakening in the minds of the people about their rights. This was a greater achievement than winning Swaraj for India. He was aware of the problems faced by the modern society and did not provide medieval solutions to them. He gave a weapon of Satyagraha in the hands of ordinary Indians to fight against the British rulers. Modern state had acquired tremendous power and it has to be controlled through people's power. We had to instill courage in the minds of ordinary people. Man should rely upon his own strength to fight against injustice. He also pointed out that Gandhi's insistence on the purity of means was important because impure means sullied noble ends. Lohia was doubtful about the correctness of statement that means or ends could replace each other. But Gandhi's point of view was clear. He did not depict the glorious picture of future ends that were to be achieved by human beings and by

forgetting our immediate tasks of overcoming evil. He said that for Gandhi one step towards progress was sufficient. He continuously moved ahead, resolving problems that came his way, learnt from his experiences and changed his opinions where necessary. During the First World War, he supported the British war efforts but subsequently called it 'a satanical rule'. He sought change in the external world as well as in the change of heart of man. His concept of Gram Swaraj was a good example of direct democracy in which people would be free, self-reliant and self-dependent. He insisted that the spirit of Gandhi's ideas should be followed and not the words because the words were spoken in the specific context and their meanings changed.

Dr. Lohia held that *Adi Shankara*, Marx and Gandhi were three great philosophers who tried to resolve the problem of duality. *Shankara* advised people to follow the path of knowledge and ignore empirical reality. Marx wanted to overcome contradictions by abolishing contradiction with the help of armed revolution. Compared to Marx, *Shankara* was liberal. Gandhi believed in the non-dualistic monism of *Shankara* but advocated the path of selfless action; he was not oblivious of empirical reality as he wanted change in it through continuous striving. Gandhi's slow but resolute movement towards progress was the message of his life as he moved ahead resolving day to day problems of the people firmly adhering to the final goal.

16.5.3 Dr. Lohia's Critique of Gandhi

Dr. Lohia opined that like socialism, communism and capitalism, Gandhism could not be considered as the fourth alternative. In fact, important insights of Gandhi could be incorporated in socialism. He criticised Gandhi on three counts: Gandhi's concepts of trusteeship and change of heart, his insistence on spinning wheel and the outdatedness of some of his ideas in modern times.

According to him, Gandhi's concept of trusteeship was not based on the correct understanding of reality as the capitalists and the rich deceive and amass wealth. Similarly, his concept of change of heart could not be implemented because one can change the heart of an individual, but cannot effect change of an institution like bank. If they allowed change of heart, the very survival of the institution would be in danger. In fact, the ultimate goal of trusteeship was collectivisation of means of production and abolition of right to property. It was difficult to achieve these goals without the militant struggle of the masses. Their hearts could not be transformed without straggle.

Spinning wheel or charkha was not relevant today because production had been mechanised and people wanted better living standards. Spinning had become an empty ritual; instead of using charkha, people should be asked to use small machines which would decentralise production; retaining control over the machines would rest with workers. Dr. Lohia did not want to reject technology. He wanted to decentralise it in the hands of individual producers to overcome individual alienation.

Dr. Lohia supported Gandhi's concept of non-violence but he was not sure about its utility in inter-state relations. Lohia categorised Gandhians into three types- those who had assumed power and become ministers; those who lived in the Ashrams, which received liberal government grants; and those who rebel and continuously waged struggles against injustice. He was of the opinion that the rebels represented the true spirit of Gandhi.

16.5.4 Dr. Lohia on Satyagraha

Lohia opined that Gandhi gave the weapon of Satyagraha to the people to fight against tyranny. We have seen that judicial and legal processes often leave the task of giving justice to the people incomplete and people had to come forward to secure their rights. Civil disobedience had to be kept civil and non-violent.

Dr. Lohia was critical of Vinoba Bhave's interpretation of Satyagraha and said that Satyagraha was a continuous process of reforming social and political institutions of their ills. Satyagraha enables one to face a series of defeats in the hope that ultimately truth would triumph and gives inspiration to people to fight against injustice. It should be accompanied by mass participation of people. It taught man to live like a human being with dignity and self-respect and sought to increase the strength of good. It was therefore commendable that Gandhi made even an ordinary person to wield this powerful non-violent weapon.

Dr. Lohia felt that the practice of Satyagraha should be redefined and should consist of civil disobedience, imprisonment, physical labour with digging axe and ballot box. He saw an interconnection between them. He pointed out that civil disobedience was meant to wage fight against injustice, repressive law and oppressive policies of the government. The result of taking part in Satyagraha could be imprisonment and the Satyagrahi should willingly court it. The use of digging axe was a symbol of physical labour which would restore dignity to physical labour and encourage constructive activities in the society. He added ballot box to the list because, according to him, it was the goal of Satyagraha to effect political change through transfer of power. This transfer should take place through the democratic method of elections.

16.6 SUMMARY

In the preceding pages, we have seen how different groups of the Indian Left had tried to understand the social and political ideas of Gandhi. The Left leaders M. N. Roy, S. A. Dange and R.M. Lohia had differences of opinion with Gandhi though all the three admired his contribution in the democratisation of Indian society. They criticised Gandhi for his concept of trusteeship, excessive reliance on non-violence and insistence on spinning wheel and called many of his ideas as outdated. They did not believe in spiritualism and religion, but appreciated the moral fervour created by Gandhi. They also held that we could not usher in a new society without the support of science, technology and rationalism. Machine-based mass production was the need of the hour to provide basic needs of the society and to ensure decent living standards of the people. Dange tried to understand Gandhi's contribution through historical perspective and sought to take his anti-imperialist and democratic legacy ahead. Dr. Lohia wanted to integrate important Gandhian insights into his concept of Socialism. M. N. Roy's concept of New Humanism and his plan of democratic decentralisation had brought him closer to Gandhi. Thus, the Indian Left's engagement with Gandhi was rewarding.

16.7 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. What were the causes of uneasy relationship between Gandhi and the Left?
2. What are the basic tenets of New Humanism? How does it differ from Gandhism?

3. Explain the Marxist perspective on Gandhi with the help of Dange's book 'Gandhi and Lenin'
4. Evaluate critically Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia's assessment of Gandhi.
5. Write short notes on the following:
 - M. N. Roy on revolution in Asia.
 - Dange on positive contribution of Gandhi
 - Dr. Lohia's Concept of Satyagraha.

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