

Gandhi on Princely and Temple Property

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The nation was awestruck at the vast precious wealth brought to light (by the order of Supreme Court) from the five sub-terranean vaults of Sri Padmanabha Swamy Temple, Tiruvananthapuram. Apropos the subsequent public discourse relating to proprietary rights, protection and preservation, value and utilization of the wealth, the following anecdote may be of interest and a guide to action.

Late Professor Debi Prasad Chattopadhyaya, renowned Marxist philosopher and a "thought transformer" of modern India (Walter Ruben), was visiting Professor in the Department of Philosophy, Andhra University, during the academic year 1977-78. We were drawn together due to shared interest in the study of Marxism and the dialectics of its theory and practice in the colonial as well as independent India. We used to meet frequently and engage in long and stimulating conversation. In one of his impromptu dialogues, he referred to a bunch of letters exchanged between M.K. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru in the latter half of 1947, which did not become a part of the public archive. The central issue of this correspondence is of great interest and importance to us even today. It seems, Nehru sought and appealed for foreign aid to help the new nation. Gandhi sharply asked, why do we need foreign aid? Nehru's response was simple. We are poor and do not have resources to modernize our economy and reduce the poverty of people. Gandhi interrogated Nehru regarding the volume, form and value of the wealth held in the possession of Maharajas and Zamindars, and temples, mosques, churches, Mandirs and trusts in our country. He suggested to tap this vast hidden and unproductive wealth and use it for national development. DP said this correspondence between Gandhi and Nehru did not see the light of the day as it dealt with very sensitive political and cultural issues. He concluded that Professor Amalan Datta, Director of Gandhi Centre, and Vice-Chancellor of Viswabharati University, and a very small circle of academics in West Bengal were knowledgeable in respect of the location and contents of the letters. I will comment on the veracity of DP's dialogue a little later.

The objective of this note is two-fold. First, it gives an account of the ideas of Gandhi relating to the property of temples and religious institutions and bodies, and of Maharajas and Zamindars. Second, the ideas and ideals of Gandhi may provide a lead to the current public discourse regarding the wealth found at Sri Padmanabha Swamy Temple, and also of the enormous wealth which is in possession of famous religious institutions and the former princely rulers of India.

Gandhi delivered a speech on February 6, 1916, at a meeting presided over by Annie Besant in the Benares Hindu University. It was a festive gathering of the students, faculty and princely rulers, who were benefactors of the University, and top bureaucrats of the Raj. Gandhi said: "I want to think audibly this evening..... I entirely agree with the President of the Congress that before we think of self-government, we shall have to do the necessary plodding. I have turned the search light all over and as you have given me the privilege of speaking to you, I am laying my heart bare. Surely we must set these things right in our progress towards self-government. I now introduce to you another scene. His Highness the Maharajah, who presided yesterday over deliberations, spoke about the poverty of India. Other speakers laid great stress upon it. But what did we witness in the great pandal in which the

foundation ceremony was performed by the Viceroy? Certainly a most gorgeous show, an exhibition of jewelry which made a splendid feast for the eyes of the greatest jeweler who chose to come from Paris. I compare with the richly bedecked noblemen the millions of poor. And I feel like saying to these noblemen: 'There is no salvation for India unless you strip yourselves of this jewelry and hold it in trust for your countrymen in India'. ("Hear, hear" and applause). Sir, whenever I hear of a great palace rising in any great city of India, be it in British India or be it in India which is ruled by our great chiefs, I become jealous at once and I say: "Oh, it is the money that has come from the agriculturists".

Earlier, in the same speech, he said: "I visited the Viswanath temple last evening and as I was walking through those lanes, these were the thoughts that touched me. ... I speak feelingly as a Hindu. Is it right that the lanes of our sacred temple should be as dirty as they are? The lanes are tortuous and narrow. If even our temples are not models of roominess and cleanliness what can our self-government be? Shall our temples be abodes of holiness, cleanliness and peace as soon as the English have retired from India, either on their own pleasure or by compulsion, bag and baggage" (vide The collected works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol: 15 (21 May 1915-31 August, 1917) pp 151-152, 4th ed. 2000. New - Delhi: publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India).

At this point I will examine the trust-worthiness of DP's reference to the said correspondence of Gandhi and Nehru relating to the theme of foreign aid vis-a-vis internal resources in India's economic development. First, DP is a person of high professional and personal integrity.

Second, Gandhi was in Bengal from 13th August, to 7th September, 1947.

Third, we do not have an opportunity to check the veracity of the matter with Prof. Amalan Datta, since he died in March 2010. Perhaps Prof. Amalan Datta and the small circle of academics had an unenviable task in putting the said correspondence under the carpet in the given historical context of independent India in the latter half of 1947. The aftermath of the Partition of India and the surcharged religious emotion was an awesome and almost unmanageable situation. The process of integration of Princely States with the Indian State was in the initial stage. The new Indian State encountered complex problems, and the administrative system faced an unprecedented and up-hill task in the governance of the nation. Perhaps Prof. Amalan Datta and his friends wisely thought that public knowledge of the contents of the said correspondence, especially Gandhi's ideas on the property of religious institutions of all denomination and of princely rulers, would threaten the stability of the Indian State. Therefore, their thoughtful decision to keep the said correspondence in the dark was a product of its time. After he returned to Delhi from Bengal, Gandhi had a Talk with P.C. Joshi (General Secretary, Communist Party of India) on September 9, 1947. He initiated the Talk with the following observation. "First of all I want you not to report our conversation in any paper. Not that I have anything to conceal, but it will not serve the cause" (The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol: 96. P.353). the observation of Gandhi is a testimony to the historical context for the decision of Amalan Datta and his friends.

Fourth, Gandhi landed at Bombay on January 9, 1915 from South Africa via London. His speech at the Benares Hindu University dated February 6, 1916 was delivered during the initial phase of his long and eventful political struggle in India, when our nationalist movement was led by Gokhale, Tilak, Annie Besant, Motilal, Lajpat Rai and other illustrious leaders. The letters of Gandhi to Nehru which were referred to by DP were written in the last year of Gandhi's life. One finds a striking similarity in the views of Gandhi on the property of religious institutions and of Maharajas and Zamindars expressed in 1916 (BHU speech) and 1947 (letters to Nehru). Consistency or strict adherence to a set of fundamental ideas is the governing principle or virtue of Gandhian thought and practice. For these reasons, I am inclined to think that DP's dialogue relating to the said correspondence of Gandhi and Nehru is authentic.

For Gandhi, the goal and agenda of Swaraj and Swadeshi was to serve the poor and wipe out their tears, and provide succor to the most needy and deprived sections of our people. He was firmly of the opinion that wealth held in the custody of princely rulers and religious institutions and bodies was produced by agriculturists, workers, craftsmen and artisans. Religious institutions should be centers of prayer and holiness, learning, good conduct and cleanliness. The princely order should hold its wealth in trust for the good of the society and poorer strata.

The meaning and message of Gandhian ideas are very clear. It is our bounden duty to properly utilize the wealth, except objects of historical and artistic value identified and certified by experts, found in the vaults of Sri Padmanabha Swamy Temple for financing programs and projects to cater to the needs of poor people, and for national development.