

## **AHIMSA IN PRACTICE**

Mahatma Gandhi writes in Harijan on 27<sup>th</sup> January, 1940

Thus writes Dr. Rammanohar Lohia<sup>1\*</sup>:

Does the Independence Pledge necessitate belief in a social order for free India which will be based exclusively on the *charkha* and the present constructive programme? I personally feel that it does not. The pledge is inclusive of the *charkha* and village crafts, but it is not exclusive of other industries and economic activities. Among these industries may be mentioned those of electricity, ship-building, machine-making and the like. The question of emphasis still remains. The pledge decides it only to the extent that belief in the *charkha* and village crafts as an integral part of the future social order is essential and cannot be superseded by other belief.

Does the pledge immediately necessitate abandonment of every other action except such as is based on the present constructive programme? I personally feel that it does not. Agitation against land rents, taxes, interest and other economic obstructions to the advance of our people appears to be permissible. It is not, for instance, impossible that you should yourself decide upon a no-rent and no-tax campaign when you choose to start *satyagraha*. Whether you actually do so or not is not so important from the viewpoint of the pledge as the fact that you may do it. At any rate, agitation on economic lines is today permissible.

These two questions arise in so far as the negative aspect of the pledge is concerned. A third question arises in regard to its positive aspect. It is undoubtedly necessary that anyone who takes the pledge must be ready to express his positive faith in the principle of decentralized economy. The actual forms of this faith may, however, be decided by the march of history. Only in regard to the *charkha* it should be possible for anyone who takes the pledge to believe that the complete decentralization of the textile industry is possible and that it should be attempted.

I have not at all referred to irregularities of conduct due to indolence and similar causes; that happens in regard to all pledges and faiths. Only the wish must be there to remove these irregularities.

I do not know if this interpretation of the pledge is correct and can meet with your approval. I do not also know if my socialist comrades will approve of it. It might perhaps be worthwhile for the country of it. It might perhaps be worthwhile for the country to know soon your opinion. Perhaps it is already too late for the Independence Day.

I need hardly repeat, what I have said often, that the legal and authoritative interpretation of the pledge can only come from the Working Committee. My interpretation has as much authority as my questioners choose to give it.

On the whole I can say that I have no difficulty in accepting Dr. Lohia's interpretation.

Whatever the ultimate outcome of the Congress effort, the discussion that is going on over the pledge provides healthy political education for the public and crystallizes the opinions that rule the various schools of thought in the country.

Though I am in general agreement with Dr. Lohia, it will be well for me to give the interpretation in my own language. The pledge is not exhaustive. It represents the limit to which I could carry the Working Committee with me. If I can convert the country to my point of view, the social order of the future will be based predominantly on the charkha and all it implies. It will include everything that promotes the well-being of the villagers. It will not exclude the industries mentioned by my correspondent so long as they do not smother the villages and village life. I do visualize electricity, ship-building, ironworks, machine-making and the like existing side by side with village handicrafts. But the order of dependence will be reversed. Hitherto the industrialization has been so planned as to destroy the villages and village crafts. In the State of the future it will sub serve the villages and their crafts. I do not share the socialist belief that centralization of the necessaries of life will conduce to the common welfare when the centralized industries are planned and owned by the State.

The socialistic conception of the West was born in an environment reeking with violence. The motive lying behind the Western type and the Eastern is the same—the greatest welfare of the whole society and the abolition of the hideous inequalities resulting in the existence of millions of have-nots and a handful of haves. I believe that this end can be achieved only when non-violence is accepted by the best mind of the world as the basis on which a just social order is to be constructed. I hold that the coming into power of the proletariat through violence is bound to fail in the end. What is gained by violence must be lost before superior violence. India is within an ace of achieving the end, if only Congressmen will be true to their creed of non-violence and live up to it. The working of the constructive programme is the test. Those who play upon the passions of the masses injure them and the country's cause. That they have noble motives is irrelevant. Why will not Congressmen work out the programme fully and faithfully?

It will be time to consider other programmes when we have come into our own. But like the fabled men who quarreled over the division of the buffalo before it was bought, we argue and quarrel over our different programmes before swaraj has come. Decency requires that when a programme is approved by the majority all should carry it out faithfully. Most decidedly, the pledge does not necessitate the abandonment of the other items that have hitherto adorned the Congress programme and are adverted to by Dr. Lohia. Agitation against every form of injustice is the breath of political life. My contention is that, divorced from the constructive programme, it is bound to have the tinge of violence.

Let me illustrate my point. My experiments in ahimsa have taught me that non-violence in practice means common labour with the body. A Russian philosopher, Bondoref, has called it bread labour. It means closest co-operation. The first satyagrahis of South Africa laboured for the common good and the common purse and felt free like birds. They included Hindus, Muslims (Shias and Sunnis), Christians (Protestants and Roman Catholics), Parsis, and Jews. They included the English and the Germans. By profession they were lawyers and architects, engineers, electricians, printers and traders. Practice of truth and non-violence melted religious differences, and we learnt to see beauty in each religion. I do not

remember a single religious quarrel in the two colonies<sup>1</sup> I founded in South Africa. The common labour consisted of printing, carpentry, shoe-making, gardening, house-building, and the like. Labour was no drudgery, it was a joy. The evenings were devoted to literary pursuits. These men, women and boys were the vanguard of the *satyagraha* army. I could not wish for braver or more loyal comrades. In India the South African experience was continued and, I trust, improved upon. Labour in Ahmedabad is by common consent the best organized in India. If it continues to work along the lines on which it began, it will ultimately own the mills in common with the present holders. If that is not the natural outcome, its non-violence will be found to contain flaws. The peasants of Bardoli who gave Vallabhbhai the title of 'Sardar' and won their battle<sup>3</sup> and of Borsad<sup>1</sup> and Kheda<sup>2</sup> who did likewise, have for years been working the constructive programme. They have not deteriorated as satyagrahis by working it. I am quite certain that Ahmedabad labour and the peasantry of Bardoli and Kheda will give as good an account of themselves as any other in India if there is civil resistance.

Thirty-four years of continuous experience and experimenting in truth and non-violence have convinced me that non-violence cannot be sustained unless it is linked to conscious body-labour and finds expression in our daily contact with our neighbours. This is the constructive programme. It is not an end it is an indispensable means and therefore is almost convertible with the end. The power of nonviolent resistance can only come from honest working of the constructive programme.

SEGAON, January 23, 1940

Harijan, 27-1-1940

<sup>1</sup>\*Rammanohar Lohia (1910-1967); joined the Congress Socialist Party in 1934; Secretary, foreign department of the A.I.C.C., 1936-38; General Secretary, Praja Socialist Party, 1953-54; author of Marx, Gandhi and Socialism and other works. (THE COLLECTED WORKS OF MAHATMA GANDHI VOL. 77: 16 OCTOBER, 1939 - 22 FEBRUARY, 1940, page no. 242-244)