“Humanism is true religion”: Gandhi (CWMG, Vol 88, p. 203)

In Europe in the days of Galileo there was a conflict between reason and organised religion, between scientific inquiry and established religious doctrine. Translated to the 20th Century, which side would Gandhi be on?

And where should one search for answers? In Gandhi’s writings or in his work?

Gandhi himself believed that an ounce of practice was worth considerably more than several times the entire weight of written work. So highly did he prize praxis over prose that at one point he said that his life was his message; and that so far as his writings were concerned people could burn them for all he cared.

With this caveat let us nevertheless examine some of his writings.

Gandhi appears to have begun to think about the place of reason early enough.

He wrote in Young India on July 21, 1920 “I should clear the ground by stating that I reject any religious doctrine that does not appeal to reason and is in conflict with morality. I tolerate unreasonable religious sentiment when it is not immoral.” [Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, (CWMG), Vol 18, p. 73].

Incidentally, this is a somewhat original and creative position. It is helpful in finding the balance which every secular and plural society has to strike between permitting religious freedoms and insisting on equality. It could point a way out, for instance, in the controversy in France in 2003 over the wearing of headscarves by Muslim women and girls in schools.

In 1921 Gandhi wrote: “But scriptures cannot transcend reason and truth. They are intended to purify reason and illuminate truth. I am not going to burn a spotless horse because the Vedas are reported to have advised, tolerated, or sanctioned the sacrifice. For me the Vedas are divine and unwritten. ‘The letter killeth’. It is the spirit that giveth the light.” (Young India, January 19, 1921, CWMG, Vol 19 p. 243)

Four years later he was even more emphatic: “Every formula of every religion has, in this age of reason, to submit to the acid test of reason and universal justice if it is to ask for universal assent. Error can claim no exemption even if it can be supported by the scriptures of the world.” (Young India, February 26, 1925, CWMG, Vol 26, p. 202).

There are many more statements by Gandhi to a similar effect but I’ll mention only a few more: He writes of Man: “… that it is man’s special privilege and pride to be gifted with the faculties of head and heart both; that he is a thinking, no less than a feeling,
animal, as the very derivation of the word manushya shows, and to renounce the sovereignty of reason over the blind instincts is therefore to renounce a man’s estate.” (Harijan, November 21, 1936, CWMG, Vol 64, pp 61-62).

Again, he says, “I exercise my judgement about every scripture, including the Gita. I cannot let a scriptural text supersede my reason.” (November 24, 1936, Reproduced in Harijan, December 5, 1936, CWMG, Vol 64, p. 75).

Gandhi does not hesitate to criticise the Smritis, including some texts from Manu. Referring specifically to many of these texts, he says: “It is sad to think that the Smritis contain texts which can command no respect from men who cherish the liberty of woman as their own and who regard her as the mother of the race…. ” (Harijan, November 28, 1936, CWMG, Vol 64, p. 85).

Gandhi therefore affirms reason. He is not opposed to free inquiry. On the contrary, few non-atheist or non-agnostic thinkers in the 20th century have gone this far in support of reason. Indeed I cannot immediately think of any other. In fact in contrasting India to Catholic Europe, Gandhi makes an important point that has some historical relevance. He remarked in Lausanne on December 8, 1931:

“….. in Catholic Europe the iron discipline allows very little free play to the intellect. These ..... difficulties we have not to face in India which you have to face.” (CWMG, Vol 48, p. 401). Whether or not this remark was true for the time in which Gandhi made it, it is certainly true that historically the struggles which Galileo, for instance, had to conduct with the organised church in the realm of science have not -- at least not so far -- had a counterpart in India.

The specificity of Gandhi’s position lies not in a denial of reason or of free inquiry but in the fact that he does not exclude faith and refuses to make an a priori rejection of intuition. And he sounds some cautions regarding reason. The frequent and widespread phenomena of intellectual corruption suggest that there may be something salutary to these cautions.

Before mentioning these it is necessary to recall that Gandhi’s primary contribution to the 20th Century was the concept and repeated demonstration of mass non-violent struggle. How does Gandhi see such struggles? He sees them as a dual appeal to reason and to the sympathetic chord of the opponent.

Gandhi criticises use of violent methods precisely because they abandon the method of reasoning. In March 1931 he told those who propagated violent methods: “But if you want to carry the country with you, you ought to be able to react on it by reasoning with it. You cannot do so by coercion. You may deal destruction to bring the country round to your view. But how many will you destroy? Not tens of millions. You may kill a few thousands
if you had millions with you. But today you are no more than a handful. I ask you to convert the Congress if you can and to take charge of it.” (Speech at a Labour Meeting, March 16, 1931, Young India, March 26, 1931, CWMG, Vol 45, p. 299).

Gandhi’s critique of apartheid is similar. In a message given to a delegation from South Africa on May 18, 1947, Gandhi remarked: “The future is surely not with the so-called white races if they keep themselves in purdah. The attitude of unreason will mean a third war which sane people should avoid. Political co-operation among all the exploited races in South Africa can only result in mutual goodwill, if it is wisely directed and based on truth and non-violence.” (Harijan, May 25, 1947, CWMG, Vol 87, p. 492).

While asserting the place of reason he does not wish to exclude an appeal to the heart. Indeed he makes that a vital component of his strategy. He wrote to Reginald Reynolds on February 23, 1931: “Remember too that satyagraha is a method of carrying conviction and of converting by an appeal to reason and to the sympathetic chord in human beings. It relies upon the ultimate good in every human being, no matter how debased he may be for the time being”. (CWMG, Vol 45, pp 221-222).

Thus an appeal to reason is a critical element of the main weapon of political struggle for which Gandhi is celebrated.

Now some cautions.

Gandhi’s position is carefully moulded. He described himself as a “practical idealist”, a “doer”. (Young India, August 11, 1920, CWMG, Vol 18, p. 133; Letter to Pierre Martin, May 16, 1947, CWMG, Vol 95, p. 137 ) This means, firstly, that for him there is a scale of priorities. He knows he cannot take on everything. So he tells us: “My unconventionality I carry to the point of rejecting the divinity of the oldest Shastras if they cannot convince my reason. But I have found by experience that if I wish to live in society and still retain my independence, I must limit the points of utter independence to matters of first rate importance.” (Young India, July 14, 1920, CWMG, Vol 18, p.44).

Secondly, related to the first, Gandhi is prepared to tolerate, as distinct from approve, even things that do not pass the test of reason if they are otherwise harmless.

Thirdly, while Reason is accepted and is even made a litmus test for scripture itself, Gandhi is aware of possibilities of the abuse of reason. He warns: “Just as matter misplaced becomes dirt, reason misused becomes lunacy”. (Young India, October 14, 1926, CWMG, Vol 31, p. 496).

Finally, at the individual level, Gandhi believes that reason provides only weak defences in the face of temptations; here faith, to him, is necessary. He writes: “Reason is a poor thing in the midst of temptation. Faith alone can save us…. The fact is that reason is blurred on such occasions. It follows the instinct.” (Harijan, December 18, 1939, CWMG, Vol 71, p. 46).
Gandhi therefore affirms Reason but does not concede that Reason is an exclusive determinant of the entire sphere of the rational or good human life. According to him: “Attribution of omnipotence to Reason is as bad a piece of idolatry as is worship of stock and stone believing it to be God.” (Ibid., pp 496-497)

Reason is therefore necessary but may not be sufficient.

To Gandhi reason is a good and useful guide; but he is suspicious of sophistry and wants the conclusions reached through reason to be ratified also by the “heart”. Here he introduces also a concept of self-suffering in support of a cause he considers justified by reason.

He opened his own heart to the Quakers who he addressed in Birmingham on October 18, 1931. He told them: “Nobody has probably drawn up more petitions or espoused more forlorn causes than I, and I have come to this fundamental conclusion that, if you want something really important to be done, you must not merely satisfy the reason, you must move the heart also. The appeal of reason is more to the head, but the penetration of the heart comes from suffering. It opens up the inner understanding in man. Suffering is the badge of the human race, not the sword.” (Young India, November 5, 1931, CWMG, Vol 48, p. 189).

He explained to them the change in his own attitude towards English Rule and the manner in which his passive resistance or satyagraha sought through self-suffering to supplement the appeal to reason:

“The disillusionment came in 1919 after the passage of the Black Rowlatt Act and the refusal of the Government to give the simple elementary redress of proved wrongs that we had asked for.

And so, in 1920, I became a rebel. Since then the conviction has been growing upon me, that things of fundamental importance to the people are not secured by reason alone, but have to be purchased with their suffering.” (Ibid., pp 188-189).

Reason is a test he applies to himself, to his followers, to the Imperial Government and, as seen above, to the violent revolutionaries. Gandhi could say: “Valuing my freedom and independence I equally cherish them for others. I have no desire to carry a single soul with me if I cannot appeal to his or her reason.” (Young India, July 14, 1920, CWMG, Vol 18, p. 44). He could tell his co-workers: “Till your reason is convinced of what I say, you should follow your own path. I know that you are dedicated to truth and, therefore, I am sure that you will realize the truth ultimately.” (Letter dated December 14, 1930, CWMG, Vol 44, p. 381). And again: “I would like all co-workers to test with their reason all I say. When faith becomes blind it dies.” (Harijan, April 6, 1940, CWMG, Vol 71 p. 378).

When the British Indian Government resorted to arbitrary ordinances, Gandhi, invoking an old Indian axiom, wrote: “The Government is acting like one who is doomed to destruction and whose reason, therefore, is perverted, for it has been issuing all sorts of arbitrary ordinances.” (February 15, 1931, CWMG, Vol 45, p. 177).
Prayer and moral faith have a place in his scheme of things, without necessarily displacing reason. Only on the question of the existence of God he seems to believe that this may be a matter beyond reason. (Harijan, December 5, 1936, CWMG, Vol 64, p. 75).

“My life”, Gandhi declared, “is largely governed by reason and, when it fails, it is governed by a superior force, that is, faith.” (December 4, 1932, CWMG, Vol 52, p. 114)

But there is a complex dynamic at work here. While reason needs to be ratified by faith, the latter even though freely and independently operating in its own sphere (which he would even concede may be a superior sphere), can only be “enforced” by reason. Gandhi writes: “My reason follows my heart. Without the latter it would go astray. Faith is the function of the heart. It must be enforced by reason. The two are not antagonistic as some think.” (Harijan, April 6, 1940, CWMG, Vol 71, p. 377). By bringing in the concept of “enforcement” in faith, he re-introduces the control of reason upon it. “Intuition is lame if it is not supported by reason”, he wrote on June 25, 1946 in a diary of thoughts he had begun to maintain at the instance of Anand Hingorani. (Bapu Ke Ashirvad : A Thought For The Day, Publications Division, New Delhi, 1968).

Thus for Gandhi the real issue is the practice on the ground. “You unnecessarily fear that service for the good of humanity might in, in my opinion, be less than prayer. Laborare est prare, (if) that labour is in the service of humanity.”, he writes on November 23, 1947 to Dr Arnold Heim (CWMG, Vol 95, p. 170). Here Gandhi’s relationship with atheists may be noticed. This was, in many ways, remarkable. He was drawn to the British atheist, Charles Bradlaugh. On February 3, 1891 Gandhi attended Bradlaugh’s funeral at Woking near London. ( Mahatma Gandhi, By H.S. L. Polak, H.N Brailsford, Lord Pethick-Lawrence, Odhams Press, London, 1949, p.19). He continued to refer to Bradlaugh warmly throughout his life. Bradlaugh himself had been sympathetic to Indian political aspirations.

Gandhi must have come under Bradlaugh’s influence, or at least for a while become a sceptic for in his farewell speech on leaving South Africa, in Cape Town on June 27, 1914, Gandhi referred “to the period 21 years ago when he first came to this country, an agnostic.” (CWMG, Vol 12, p. 436). He read widely but ultimately it is the reading of Tolstoy that may have restored, and certainly settled, Gandhi’s faith. It set up, for him, possible points of reconciliation between Hinduism and Christianity and also made him a seeker, after Tolstoy, of the essence of religion. Among other influences, the scepticism of Bradlaugh and the positive but critical faith of Tolstoy, both certainly went into the making of the religion of Gandhi.

In practical life experimentation was a central theme of many of Gandhi’s activities.

G. Ramachandra Rao, “Gora”, the famous Indian atheist, wrote extensively on Gandhi. Gora writes that Gandhi “was pre-eminently a practical man. As a practical man, he took any situation as it obtained with all its paradoxes. He never sat down to scan and to sift its
contradictions intellectually; but he moved the whole situation towards the ideal of happiness for all mankind. He condemned nothing beforehand lest a good cause should be lost by bad judgement. He only let things drop when they could not bear the strain of progress. Practice was his test of fitness. He subordinated intellectual and sentimental considerations to practical purposes. He tested a system of medicine by the cure it effected; he tested the advocate of the cause by the work he turned out; he allowed me to dissect a frog when it served a practical purpose.” (Gora, “An Atheist With Gandhi”, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1951, pp 56-57).

“The emphasis on practice was the meeting point between Gandhi and myself.”, observes Gora (Gora, “We Become Atheists”, Atheist Centre, Vijayawada, 1975, p.64). He mentions some incidents.

Gora records that when he was with Gandhi at the Sevagram Ashram he was asked to teach science to the nurses at the dawakhana, the hospital attached to Gandhi’s Ashram (An Atheist With Gandhi, p. 38). In the course of this work, Gora wanted to dissect a frog “to demonstrate the phenomenon of heart-beat to the nurses’ class which I was teaching. The nurses objected to the dissection on the ground that it went against the principle of non-violence (ahimsa)”. (Ibid., p. 40). The issue was placed before Gandhi. Gora writes that Gandhi replied: “Dissect the frog, if that is the only way to explain the heart-beat” (Idem). He adds: “And I dissected a frog”. (Idem).

Gora writes: “The other instance related to my daughter, Manorama’s marriage with Arjunarao. She wanted to marry an ‘Untouchable’ on principle in order to establish castelessness. Gandhi agreed to get the marriage performed in Sevagram Ashram, as it conformed to his vow of blessing marriages between untouchables and non-untouchables only. He also accepted to replace mention of god with truth, in deference to the needs of my atheism. Further, my wife, children and atheist associates did not attend the regular prayers of Sevagram Ashram. Gandhi did not mind our absence. Evidently doing work was more important to him than repeating the name of god.” (We Become Atheists, p. 65).

Gora asks “Why then did Gandhi conduct prayers so regularly and mention god so frequently?” (Idem). According to Gora: “The reason is clear. He was conventionally a believer in god by early training, even as I was. He continued the habit in so far as it did not stand in the way of his work. He was more concerned with real practice of programmes than with intellectual perfecting of principles. Nevertheless he did not hesitate to revise an old habit whenever a present situation needed the change. He started with the common Raghupati Raghav type of god. As he pushed forward, he held that god was truth. But in 1931 he said, ‘I went a step further and said Truth is God. You will see the fine distinction between the two statements, namely that God is Truth and Truth is God. In fact it is more correct to say that Truth is God than to say that God is Truth.’ He made the change in order to meet the objection of rationalist workers. In 1925 itself when a conscientious objector protested against the mention of god in the Congress pledge, Gandhi answered, ‘So far as the conscientious objection is concerned, the mention of God may be removed, if required, from the Congress pledge of which I am proud to think..."
I am the author. Had such an objection been raised at the time, I would have yielded at once. In the case of my daughter’s marriage, he dropped the mention of god altogether from the pledge.” (Ibid., pp 65-66).

In conclusion Gora has this to say: “Therefore, Gandhi was not that superstitious as he appeared to be by the conduct of prayers. Leading millions of illiterate, downtrodden and tradition-bound common people of India towards the goal of Swaraj or freedom, he was ‘hastening slowly’ in changing old ways which were of no immediate concern”. (Ibid., pp 66-67).

Gora writes of Gandhi: “In essence he was not a Hindu. He was basically a Human. In the sea of humanity, a human is a rarity. Cut up by labels of race and nationality, class and culture, caste and religion, humanity has become highly sectarian. There is hardly a place for a human to live. So Gandhi was eliminated.” (Ibid., p. 67).

He adds: “Emphasis on practice as the test of truthfulness, openness of mind for progressive change and humanness transcending were the characteristics of Gandhi that took me to him.” (Ibid., pp 67-68).

Gandhi faced the wrath of orthodox Hindus for, on one occasion, putting a calf to sleep and thereby, as they saw it, offending against their faith in the holiness of the cow. Gandhi described this incident to an African-American, Prof Benjamin Mays, as follows: “A calf was lame and had developed terrible sores; he could not eat and breathed with difficulty. After three days’ argument with myself and my co-workers I put an end to its life. Now that action was non-violent because it was wholly unselfish, inasmuch as the sole purpose was to achieve the calf’s relief from pain. Some people have called this an act of violence. I have called it a surgical operation. I should do exactly the same thing with my child, if he were in the same predicament.” (Harijan, March 20, 1937, CWMG, Vol 64, p.224). The incident itself was dealt with at length by Gandhi some nine years earlier in Young India, October 4, 1928: “The suffering of the animal was so great that it could not even turn its side without excruciating pain.” (CWMG, Vol 37, p. 310).

Significantly Gandhi placed Gopalrao Valunjkar, who belonged to the Brahmin “upper caste”, in charge of leather work which was traditionally considered polluting and therefore customarily done only by the Dalits, or Harijans or Scheduled Castes as they are also called.

Contrary to an impression that is sometimes created, Gandhi was not innocent of the scientific temperament or recognition of the need for technological change. He promoted village industries and improvements in local technologies. He was a close observer of technical change, especially those related to his fields of activity.

Of the handspun and handwoven cloth (khadi) that he had sought to popularise, Gandhi wrote in 1928: “Many people believe through ignorance that nothing whatever can be
learnt from the industrial techniques used by mills, while others have assumed that khadi of any quality would pass muster”. (Navajivan, December 16, 1928, CWMG, Vol 38, p. 230)

The famous American journalist, William Shirer, reported for the Chicago Tribune from India and also from England. In his memoir Shirer records a comment that Gandhi made to him after visiting textile mills in England in 1931. Gandhi said the English were using antiquated technology. (William L. Shirer, Gandhi: A Memoir, Abacus, London, 1979, p.184). He would tell foreign visitors: “If you dangle your millions before us, you will make beggars of us and demoralize us. But in one thing I do not mind being a beggar. I would beg of you your scientific talent” (Answers To Questions, December 1, 1936,CWMG, Vol 64, p. 99).

The khadi programme was intended to generate some income especially for the poor underemployed in rural India. Gandhi commended the scientific attitude and held up Galileo and Newton as examples. Referring to them, he wrote in 1941: “A khadi worker should adopt a similar scientific attitude. Newton or Galileo did not ponder over the problem of Daridranarayana and of serving Daridranarayan. They followed an intellectual quest. The khadi worker has however to find a solution to the problem of feeding the hungry masses. That is why their attitude should be all the more scientific.” (CWMG, Vol 74, pp 270-279)

He had already honed his position on machinery: “I would prize every invention of science made for the benefit of all. There is a difference between invention and invention. I should not care for the asphyxiating gases capable of killing masses of men at a time. The heavy machinery for work of public utility which cannot be undertaken by human labour has its inevitable place, but all that would be owned by the State and used entirely for the benefit of the people. I can have no consideration for machinery which is meant either to enrich the few at the expense of the many, or without cause to displace the useful labour of many.” (Harijan, June 22, 1935, CWMG, Vol 61, p. 187). “How useful it would be”, he said in August 1945, “if the engineers in India were to apply their ability to the perfecting of village tools and machines. This must not be beneath their dignity.” (CWMG, Vol 81, p.130).

The charge of unreason has been thrown at Gandhi largely because of the statements he made at the time of the Bihar and Quetta earthquakes in 1934-35 and the great Bengali litterateur Tagore’s immediate condemnation of these. Gandhi, immersed in his anti-untouchability campaigns, had attributed the Bihar earthquake to divine retribution for the practice of Untouchability. Though the statement is often recalled, it was atypical of Gandhi, except in the general sense of the popular Hindu belief that everything is divinely ordained. Tagore himself admitted that Gandhi’s argument “far better suits the psychology of his opponents than his own” (D.G. Tendulkar, Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Volume 3, Publications Division, New Delhi, 1961, p.250). Indeed Gandhi’s statements on reason as an essential test for scriptures are perhaps unmatched by Tagore himself.
Gandhi criticised the blood sacrifices made in the name of the Goddess Kali. He was disgusted by such sacrifices when he came across them on his visit to Calcutta in 1901 and continued to oppose them publicly and privately. (Mahatma Gandhi, By H.S. L. Polak, H.N Brailsford, Lord Pethick-Lawrence, Odhams Press, London, 1949, p.38; ) He returns to the subject in 1913, describing the practice as obnoxious. (CWMG, Vol 12, p 155). Referring to the practice, Gandhi writes in his autobiography: “I hold that, the more helpless a creature, the more entitled it is to the protection of man from the cruelty of man”. (CWMG, Vol 39, p.190). He addressed the Humanitarian League on December 31, 1917 and reiterated his opposition to animal sacrifice in the name of Hinduism. (CWMG, Vol 14, p.121 and p.154). Later, on February 3, 1934, he was to make a similar point in Ottupatrasi in South India where Harijans or Dalits were given to this practice in the name of Kali. (CWMG, Vol 57, p. 106).

Gandhi and Tagore share a similar attitude in looking for the essence or spirit of a scriptural text. In a letter from Johannesburg on August 7, 1913 Gandhi had used strong language:

“We need not assume that all our shastras have been written after careful thinking and from knowledge…. If by the term shastra we mean that alone which contains perfect knowledge, then, of course, we can say that all shastras have been written from knowledge. From this point of view, any shastra which mentions human sacrifice, etc., should be taken to be mere ignorance. The idea may have been interpolated in the genuine shastras at some later time….It is the concern of the historian; we, on the other hand, should look for the essence, the spirit of every text or utterance. Why should we put ourselves to the bother of reading sense in their nonsense in the belief that all shastras are shastras [in fact] ?” (CWMG, Vol 12, p.155).

Gandhi spoke out repeatedly against prevailing social mores on marriage. While in South Africa he had already written against the “cruel practice of kanya-vikraya”, the demanding of a price for girls offered in marriage. (Indian Opinion, April 23, 1910, CWMG, Vol 10, p.227) He criticised child marriage, saying that ordinarily “a girl under 18 years should never be given in marriage”, supported legislation raising the age of consent and warned that laws would not suffice; public opinion would have to be created. (Young India, August 26, 1926,CWMG, Vol 31, p. 330). Interestingly, his own marriage with Kasturba had been a child marriage. When a religious text was sought to be invoked in support of child marriage, Gandhi said : “But even if the texts ordering child, as opposed to early, (for early marriage means marriage well before 25), marriage be found to be authoritative, we must reject them in the light of positive experience and scientific knowledge.” (Young India, September 9, 1926, CWMG, Vol 31, p. 380).

Gandhi was inclined to treat some gross cases as void from the beginning: “The least that a parent, who has so abused his trust as to give in marriage an infant to an old man in his dotage or to a boy hardly out of his teens, can do is to purge himself of his sin by remarrying the daughter when she becomes widowed. As I have said in a previous note, such marriages should be declared null and void from the beginning.” (Young India, November 11, 1926, CWMG, Vol 32, p. 22).
A lawyer from Gujranwala, a town now in Pakistan, sought Gandhi’s advice on a legal problem arising from what was apparently a farcical “marriage” of his sister. Gandhi’s advice was blunt: “If you have enough courage, the remedy is incredibly simple. Your sister should ignore the so-called marriage and take a suitable person for husband…. When a girl is given in marriage without her knowing the person, that …. is no marriage according to law.” (Letter dated September 23, 1929 to Ratanlal Tara, CWMG, Vol 92, Supplementary Vol 2, p. 84).

Gandhi was critical of “deti-leti”, the practice of dowry-seeking by prospective husbands or money payments by the wife’s relatives at the time of marriage. He told students that he expected them “to boycott deti-leti once for all”. (Young India, March 14, 1929, CWMG, Vol 40)

He condemned the practice of sati or widow self-immolation (Young India, May 21, 1931, CWMG, Volume 46, pp 73- 75). He mocks the practice, saying: “Yet we have never heard of a husband mounting the funeral pyre of his deceased wife. It may therefore be taken for granted that the practice of the widow immolating herself at the death of her husband had its origin in superstitious ignorance and the blind egotism of man. Even if it could be proved that at one time the practice had a meaning, it can only be regarded as barbarous in the present age. The wife is not the slave of the husband but his comrade, otherwise known as his better half, his colleague and friend. She is a co-sharer with him of equal rights and of equal duties. Their obligations towards each other and towards the world must, therefore, be the same and reciprocal.”

Three days after the publication of this article Gandhi wrote to Premnath Bazaz of Kashmir in support of widow remarriage, even outside their caste if necessary. He said young men should treat this as a kind of “satyagraha”. (CWMG, Vol 46, p. 213).


Criticising female infanticide, Gandhi formulated a principle of social responsibility that bears repetition in today’s context: “We consider ourselves Indians and we believe ourselves to be one nation and persuade others to believe so. Therefore whether from the point of view of religion or of patriotism we are one; the responsibility of the misconduct of any one falls on all of us. For this reason we are all responsible for the infanticide of girls among Rajputs, whether we are Rajputs or from any other community.” (Harijan Sevak, July 4, 1936, CWMG, Vol 63, p. 117).

His criticism of the practice of nose-piercing and ear-piercing is noteworthy: “Why increase artificial differences between boys and girls? Are there many parents amongst us who get the ears of both their boys and girls pierced? Why then show this favour to or inflict this tyranny on girls alone?” [ (From Gujarati) Harijanbandhu, December 6, 1936, CWMG, Vol 64, p. 109]. In such piercing of women’s noses and ears, Gandhi saw “a symbol of their slavery.” (Ibid., p. 110).
Even as late as the 1950s there were fierce debates in India about reform of Hindu and other law to give equal status to women. Gandhi, for his part, had declared as early as October 17, 1929: “But I am uncompromising in the matter of woman’s rights. In my opinion she should labour under no legal disability not suffered by man. I should treat the daughters and sons on a footing of perfect equality”. (CWMG, Vol 42, pp.4-5)

The impact of such statements on orthodoxy can well be imagined. This writer can recall Hindu orthodox elements even in the early 1970s still fuming over the legal reforms in the late fifties which placed daughters on the same footing as sons in the matter of succession to property.

Of the Manusmriti, Gandhi wrote: “When I read this book, whilst I was stirred by many verses of moral beauty, I was repelled by several verses which seemed to be so wholly contrary to the spirit of the moral teaching”. (February 7, 1933, CWMG, Vol 53, p. 241).

The social revolutionary Gandhi was acknowledged as such by his contemporaries, though in recent years the focus has been mainly on those who were often not well-disposed toward him.

The educationist Zakir Husain, who had been a leading figure in the Gandhi-inspired movement for Basic Education and was later to be President of India, told an interviewer in 1957: “Gandhiji was one of the most rational thinkers I have come across.” (Francis Watson and Maurice Brown, Talking of Gandhiji, Orient Longmans, Bombay, 1957, p. 15). The basic education movement inspired by Gandhi had brought together leading educationists like Husain himself, E. W Aryanayakam and Asha Devi. It was based primarily on Gandhi’s view that: “The utterly false idea that intelligence can be developed only through book-reading should give place to the truth that the quickest development of the mind can be achieved by artisan’s work being learnt in a scientific manner”. (Harijan, January 9, 1937, CWMG, Vol 64, p. 219).

Dada Ganeshi Lal, an old Indian socialist and freedom fighter had been one of the the first in Punjab to organize the agricultural tenants, or Muzaras. Ganeshi Lal used to say:“Swami Dayanand had dyed me Bhagwa, Gandhiji washed it white.” (Prem Bhasin, Democratic Socialism: Profiles in Courage and Conviction, Sneh Prakashan, Yamuna Nagar, India, 2000, p.220).

Gandhi’s contemporary, the Marxist socialist Narendra Deva (1889-1956), was the doyen of the Indian socialist movement. Narendra Deva maintained that Gandhi was “in no sense an orthodox Hindu. On the contrary, he breaks almost every rule and practice enjoined by orthodox Hinduism”. [ Hari Dev Sharma (ed.), Selected Works of Acharya Narendra Deva, Volume 2 (1941-1948), Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, 1998, p.119]. The Socialist leader, Ram Manohar Lohia, wrote of Gandhi in an essay on Hinduism in July 1950: “Never had a Hindu delivered greater blows on
fanaticism in respect of caste, woman, property or tolerance.” [Lohia, Fragments of a World Mind, Maitrayani, Calcutta, n.d., p. 118].

Rahul Sankrityayan (1893-1963), the scholar who was also in the Congress Socialist Party, and along with Narendra Deva, a co-translator into Hindi of the Communist Manifesto, wrote an essay, during Gandhi’s lifetime, entitled “Buddha and Gandhi”. In this essay Sankrityayan, while stressing the philosophical pre-eminence of the Buddha, acknowledged the evolution of Gandhi, that Gandhi had struggled for the benefit of “Bahujans” and that he had in his lifetime to face difficulties which even the Buddha perhaps did not face. Sankrityayan called upon Gandhi to focus on the economic class struggle which, according to Sankrityayan, would take Gandhi even beyond the achievements of Buddha himself. (“Buddha Aur Gandhi” reprinted in the Hindi in Rahul Sankrityayan, Ateet Se Vartaman, Hindi Pracharak Pustakalaya, Varanasi, 1965, pp 119-123).

These were perhaps appropriate comments on one whose long praxis had led him to the conclusion that “Humanism is true religion” (June 24, 1947, CWMG, Vol 88, p. 203).