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Mahatma Gandhi's Populistic Language and Its Effects in the Indian Political Sphere

1. Preliminary remarks

The ideas of social, political or economic order, as formulated by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi,[1] are closely related to the cultural tradition and religion of Hinduism. They are rooted in Hindu history.[2] Classic concepts of state and political order were closely related to Hindu patterns of social order. The functioning of the state, problems of equality, interrelations between the state and religious institutions all look back to values and assumptions deeply rooted in Indian culture.[3]

Following the lead of Max Weber and building upon his observations, many researchers consent to the claim that Hinduism as well one of its derivatives, the caste system, constitute the main obstacles hindering the modernisation processes in India.[4] Such claims seem to result from the erroneous assumption that the Hindu tradition negates materialism and is incapable of coming to terms with rational economic activity. As a matter of fact, however, it should be observed that the tradition is a mixture of influences from various social groups, and as such is open to relatively free interpretation. For instance, one could point out the long-term emphasis on those elements and values of Hinduism, which are relatively easily adaptable to the desired social, political or economic order. It is enough to mention the works of well-known reformers of the doctrine.[5] Gandhi's values and ideas succeeded in reaching a vast majority of Indians, and did so both because of his personality and charisma, and also

because of his political strategy.[6] It should be highlighted that Gandhi used the local language, usually delivering speeches in Gujarati, while the other activists of the Indian National Congress used English. As he saw the greatest political potential in India's working masses, Gandhi was able to appeal to them owing to his familiar manner and understanding of the living conditions of the poor,[7] and his use of populistic language.

2. The rule of *Ahimsa* as a base of the social system

Gandhi's deliberations revolved around moral issues, postulates of social reform within Indian society and the idea of India's political and economic independence. They were based on Hindu ethics[8] with particularly strong emphasis on the rule of *Ahimsa*, prohibition of any form of murder or infliction of physical pain.[9]

Gandhi was responsible for the mass scale introduction of non-violent struggle into the realm of political life. He did not advocate inertia, accepting the necessity of resistance but limiting its acceptable forms. He believed that struggle involving violence and hateful motivation were unacceptable. His postulate of non-violent resistance encompassed a wide array of means aimed at forcing the authorities to make concessions. His methods included civil disobedience to particular regulations, demonstrations, strikes, rallies, marches, boycotting elections, state schools and courts, quitting positions in public administration, refusal to pay taxes, and fasting, the latter so often applied by Gandhi himself.

When discussing *Satyagraha*, Gandhi wrote that there is a difference between *Satyagraha* and non-cooperation.[10] According to him, non-cooperation is a weapon of

the weak and it does not definitely rule out the possibility of violence as the means of achieving the set goal. *Satyagraha* on the other hand, is the weapon of the strong; it does not allow the use of violence under any circumstance. So for Gandhi the real meaning of *Satyagraha* is the pursuit of Truth; it is the spirit of Truth. He has also referred to it as the power of the soul or the force of love. When it comes to civil disobedience, the only form of opposing the government was through rejecting any form of cooperation with it.[11]

The principles of *Ahimsa* and non-violent struggle stem from the belief in unity between people and the natural world, where any act of violence, be it against another human being or an animal, is an act in disagreement with *dharma*.[12] *Dharma* (from the Sanskrit rot – *dhr* – to hold, to constitute the basis) is of first grade importance in the religious and philosophical system. In a general sense, it is understood as laws leading to liberation. In a more focussed perspective, alongside many other meanings, it is a specific caste moral duty. During the period of Braminism, Indian society was divided into four classes (Varnas – literally colour, dye).[13] Membership in a given, small caste requires close observation of particular endogamous and endo-professional principles related to the customs, relations with other castes, professions and forms of worship.

Gandhi spoke against the institution of untouchability.[14] He observed that "untouchables" are socially treated as lepers, and economically as worse than slaves. From the religious perspective they are also handicapped: they are denied entry into places falsely called houses of God, they are deprived of the rights to use public roads, wells, water supply, even parks at par with the members of the pure castes. In certain

cases, so much as approaching them within a certain distance is considered a social offence. The unfortunates have been assigned living quarters in the most unattractive parts of towns and villages, where they are deprived of even the most basic social facilities. Despite his protest against the principle of untouchability, Gandhi did not initially criticise the caste system as such. As observed by Jawaharlal Nehru: he did not challenge the underlining functional theory on which the four-tier caste system was based. He would attack instances of its excessive or deformed applications.[15] In his later statements, however, Gandhi's comments on the caste system were becoming far more energetic and critical. On many occasions he would stipulate that the caste system as such, particularly in its existing form, had to be abolished altogether.

3. *Warnashrama* patterns

In his considerations of systematic evolution, Gandhi focussed on such notions as the belief in the immanent goodness of human nature, objectified notion of truth, renouncement of violence and human freedom. The postulates were addressed to individuals as well as the society as a whole. They are in fact a specification of norms, which ought to be observed in the shaping of the new order. For the above reason, the issue of India's independence became an important element of Gandhi's thought. Initially, the word *swaraj* (self-government) was used by Indian nationalists in early 20th century in their struggle against the British rule as a synonym of autonomy. For Gandhi, *swaraj* meant the introduction of a parliamentary system in India, one that would allow the populace to partake in ruling their country. On another occasion he stressed that *swaraj* was a goal that would satisfy everyone.[16]

In terms of the function of state and law, depending on the relation between the actual state of affairs and the elements of the duties, he distinguished between a "state mostly free of violence" or a "state partially relying on violence" as well as the ideal society of the future he referred to as "a stateless community of truth and love" or "enlightened anarchy".[17]

"A state mostly free of violence" was treated as a certain step towards the formation of a society utterly free from the state. The stage is characterised by limiting the powers of the authorities, which are to be gradually assigned to rural communities, liquidation of the army, application of the *Satyagraha* principle, secularisation of the state which is to maintain balance between the Hindu and Islamic communities, maintaining the tripartite system of central government, similarity to the direct democracy model on the level of rural communities, and a prerequisite of performing manual labour for anyone willing to participate in public life.

The ideal society (*Ram Raj* – kingdom of god) on the other hand, is characterised by elimination of violence from all social and political relations as well as introduction of the rule of love based on the search for truth as the regulator of the relations. A stateless community would be organised around a panchayat /literally a "council of five'/, i.e. a village self-government body constituting the base cell of the social structure.[18] In this way, Gandhi referred back to the traditional social system which dominated ancient India, the so called *varnashrama.*[19]

Gandhi was critical of the notion of parliamentary democracy.[20] He claimed that representative democracy elects officials who remain loyal to their own party leadership

rather than their electorate. He also criticised the principle of party discipline, as – in his opinion – it encourages deputies to passively support any notion raised by members of their own group. He spoke against the principle of majority vote, pointing out that the rule of majority does not apply to a number of issues (e.g. the issues of conscience). Gandhi advocated the idea of real democracy. It was to be defined by the principles of: freedom (individual and collective), renouncement of any form of exploitation of one person by another, and the function of the elites who are aware of the hopes and aspirations of the given society.

His criticism of parliamentary democracy was closely related to the dismissal of party systems. In reference to the future of the Congress, he wrote that in its current form and shape of a means of propaganda and a parliamentary body, it is in fact obsolete; the Congress may not be involved in the unhealthy rivalry with particular political groups and communal bodies.[21] Therefore, he postulated the disassembly of the existing party organisations of the Congress and transferring power to the Servants of the People (*Lok Sewak Sangh*).

4. Traditional rural community

Gandhi was deeply convinced that India did not need to follow the western patterns of industrial civilisation.[22] He saw the future of his country in the rebirth of rural communities with their traditional division of labour and self-sufficiency.[23] Gandhi's main ideas of economic development were therefore focussed on the application of traditional methods of production within the mentioned rural system. He justified this approach with the necessity to oppose the "evil" of modernisation. In the opinion Mahadev Desai, Gandhi's secretary in the 1920s, the spiritual leader of India believed

that farmers ought to spin all the cotton they produce not only for economic reasons (as it meant greater income) but also as a means of relaxation.[24]

As he rejected the possibility of developing modern industry, Gandhi claimed that India could not afford the great investment necessary to apply advanced technologies. It should, therefore, utilise the means at hand – the traditional technology relying on the surplus of workforce to facilitate mass production. With traditional technology, millions of farmers were provided with employment and income which reduced their frustration and led them out of poverty. The application of traditional production methods was also beneficial from the moral point of view: it safeguarded members of the public from the negative aspects of developing modern societies.[25]

An ideal village should, in Gandhi's opinion, develop agriculture and craftsmanship to satisfy the needs of its people, finance a school, a local theatre and a community centre, and maintain fresh water supply facilities.[26] The community should adhere to the principle of equality, thus abolishing the division into particular castes, including the untouchables. Jawaharlal Nehru observed that Gandhi longed for the old days when every rural community was autonomous and to a certain extent self-sufficient, when the balance between production, distribution and consumption maintained itself automatically, when political and economic power was dispersed, when a certain sort of primitive democracy was dominant, when the gap between the rich and the poor was not so apparent, when the negative aspects of big city life were not yet known and the people were closely tied to the life-giving soil and breathed the pure air of open spaces.[27]

The call for the return to traditional labour relations and self-sufficiency were treated by Gandhi as a means of countering poverty. As he realised the insufficiencies of his contemporary rural areas, Gandhi focussed on solving their most fundamental problems. That is why he stressed so much the necessity to rebuild the old, traditional crafts: spinning, weaving, tanning, he encouraged construction of irrigation canals and sanitary facilities, utilisation of any materials at hand for the construction of houses, producing one's own soap and other necessities. He advocated the principles of the *Swadeshi* movement, also known as *Khadi* (a type of fabric). The movement aimed to develop home industries, particularly fabric production, and boycotting foreign products. *Swadeshi* was supposed to allow economic independence from Great Britain. All those postulates were part of the effort to mobilise the masses around the cause of independence and the future of India as a unified community.

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The discussed issues induce several conclusions. First, a common opinion presented in literature is that Gandhi's ideas and actions, characterised by amicability, were aimed against the class conflict. It is also highlighted that his ideas of peaceful coexistence of classes and social compromise were to serve the unification of all social and political powers in the common cause of gaining independence. The goals and political methods he applied, could not be implemented independently of his postulate of the search for truth as well as from the social condition of India.

Second, in his attempt to completely restructure the society, Gandhi rejected the western patterns of development. He is often associated with the generally understood socialist movement in the Indian context. Overthrowing British authority was supposed to initiate

a return to self-sufficient communities and a pursuit of self-perfection. In his opinion, the goals could not be achieved without application of the principles of *Ahimsa*. At the same time, Gandhi was aware of the powerful communalist tendencies[28] in India, therefore he attached a lot of importance to the problems of social integration and unity of the state. Interestingly, Gandhi's traditionalist approach was justified by modern arguments. In this sense, Gandhi may be treated as a "conservative reformer" as he described himself in 1921.[29]

Third, Gandhi referred to the populistic idea of the "golden age", in Indian context invariably associated with the social system of ancient India. The ideal social prototype was seen in a small, rural community. On the other hand, modernisation was presented as 'evil", an attack on the unquestionable, traditional system of values. In this context, Gandhi's fear is understandable when it comes to the consequences of introducing the western industrial civilisation in India. It also justifies his focus on the application of traditional means of production and activation of the masses, which he believed to be the political power of India. To achieve this, he used populistic language: he appealed to the entire Indian society, regardless of any caste divisions.

Fourth, it should be observed that India's struggle for independence created an interest in the problems of mass poverty, protection of farmers and craftsmen, industrialisation, and the general reconstruction of the social and economic life. The movement's leaders recognised regaining independence as a condition for solving the country's problems. For Mahatma Gandhi, freedom was the indispensable means by which Indian masses could be lifted from poverty and socio-economic stagnation. Therefore, it seems justified to agree with Byrski's opinion that Gandhism reorganised public opinion, ploughed

through social awareness and became the basis for a number of non-government organisations.[30]

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[1] See more: Doald Mackenzie Brown, *The White Umbrella,* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1958).

[2] V.S. Naravane, *Modern Indian Thought,* (New Delhi: Orient Longman 1978), 158-191.

[3] Myron Weiner, "Ancient Political Theory and Contemporary Politics"*,* in *Orthodoxy, Heterodoxy and Dissent in India,* eds Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt, Reuven Kahane, David Shulman, (Berlin-New York-Amsterdam: Mouton Publishers 1984), 114-129.

[4] Max Weber, *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism,* (New York: The Free Press 1958).

[5] For example: Ram Mohan Roy, Keshab Chandra Sen, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Gadathar Chatterji, Swami Vivekananda, Bal Gangadhar Tilak or Aurobindo Ghosh.

[6] For example: Bipan Chandra, Aditya Mukherjee, Mridula Mukherjee, *India after Indipendence,* (New Delhi: Viking Penguin India 1999), 20-30.

[7] Compare: Norman D. Palmer, *The Indian Political System*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1971), 84-87.

[8] N. G. S. Kini, "Gandhian Contribution to the Theory of Politics"*,* in *Studies on Gandhi,* ed V. T. Patil, (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers 1983).

[9] Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Autobiografia. Dzieje moich poszukiwań prawdy,* (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza 1973), 394.

[10] Ija Lazari-Pawłowska, *Gandhi,* (Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna 1967), 96.

[11] Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Autobiografia*..., 536.

[12] Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Non-Violent Resistance,* (New York: Schoken Books 1961).

[13] Janina Szatkowska, *Zmiany społeczeństwa kastowego w Indiach współczesnych,* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe 1975).

[14] Dinanath Gopal Tendulkar, *Mahatma. Life of Mohandas Karamczand Gandhi,* (Bombay: The Time of India Press 1961), vol. III, 223.

[15] Jawaharlal Nehru, *Odkrycie Indii*, (Warszawa: Czytelnik 1957), 117.

[16] Raghavan Narasimhan Iyer, *The Moral and Political*..., 346-358.

[17] Janusz Justyński, Państwo i prawo w ideologii M.K. Gandhiego, (Toruń: UMK 1975).

[18] Norman D. Palmer, *The Indian*..., 164-174.

[19] A. S. Alteker, State and Government in Ancient India, (Delhi 1958).

[20] Compare: A. H. Doctor, *"The Relevance of Mahatma Gandhi to Contemporary India"*, in *Studies on Gandhi*, 280-281.

[21] E. M. S. Namboodiripad, *Mahatma i gandyzm*, (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza 1959), 177.

[22] Mohandas K. Gandhi, *The India of My Dreams,* (Bombay: Hind Kitabs 1947), 87.

[23] A. Aziz, "Gandhian Economic System: Its Relevance to Contemporary India"*,* in *Studies on Gandhi…,* 85-96.

[24] Mahadev Desai, *Gandhi in Indian Villages,* (Madras: S. Ganesan 1927), 4.

[25] Reuven Kahane, "India : A Syncretic Mode of Economic Legitimation", in *Orthodoxy*..., 139.

[26] Ryszard Janusz Gibała, „Tradycyjna myśl indyjska w ideologii odrodzenia narodowego", in *Problemy społeczno-gospodarcze i kulturowe krajów pozaeuropejskich,* ed Edward Szymański, (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe 1980), 51.

[27] Jawaharlal Nehru, *Odkrycie Indii*..., 418.

[28] Robert Melson, Howard Wolpe, "Modernization and the Politics of Communalism: A Theoretical Perspective"*, American Political Science Review* 64, (1970).

[29] Mohandas K. Gandhi, *"*Hinduism", in *The Gandhi Reader: 1,* ed Homer A. Jack, (New York: Grove Press 1961), 167-172.

[30] „Legenda Mahatmy. W 50 rocznicę śmierci Gandhiego rozmowa z Marią Krzysztofem Byrskim, byłym ambasadorem Polski w Indiach"*, Gazeta Wyborcza* 25 (1998): 8. See also Gandhi Institut web site: http://www.cbu.edu/Gandhi/