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NON-VIOLENCE AND POLITICS
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NON-VIOLENCE, POLITICS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

- Manmohan Chowdhury

Political action oriented towards a non-violent world order should
have three objectives:

  (a) welfare of the masses of the world;

  (b) elimination of coercion as an instrument of corporate
      action; as the chief instrument of Government; and

  (c) drastic revision of the idea of national sovereignty.

Welfare of the people as a whole, even of a single state, is a con-
cept of recent origin in practical politics. Traditionally politics
has been concerned with struggles for power between powerful
individuals and groups who sought power to further their private
ends, or interests and objectives that, though not strictly selfish,
had little to do with the welfare of the masses. Alexander's dream
of a world empire had a flavour of idealism about it, but the
masses were nowhere in the picture.

Concepts like democracy, socialism, social security, welfare state
etc. symbolise the entry of the common man into the political arena
as an entity of primary importance. But we are still far from the
ideal state in which the common man should be the entity of supreme
importance in politics.

Here the term welfare is not used to signify provision for material
well-being alone but is meant to include the fullest development of
all latent capacities of every individual, intellectual, emotional,
cultural and spiritual. Modern sciences and technology have made
it possible that an optimum material basis for a good and fruitful
life be made available to every human being on this earth and has
thus made all exploitation and strife, poverty and physical suffer-
ing totally meaningless and eradicable. But to-day vast masses of
people all over the world remain politically ineffective as well
as economically deprived. Effective power is concentrated in the
hands of small minorities. The part that the bulk of the people
play in shaping national policies is very indirect and secondary,
to say the least, even in the advanced democracies. They do not
have the strength even to protect their own legitimate interests

against the onslaughts of the powerful minorities.

One of the most important developments of the last hundred years has been the movements of the under-privileged and the deprived sections to win the rights and conditions of decent human existence. The bulk of the world has become free of foreign domination. Women have wrested equality of sorts in most of the developed countries and in some of the others also. In the Western democracies labour has become a powerful political force. The Negro is fighting for equal rights. This process has to be carried forward and completed by non-violent means.

At the same time new forms of vast vested interests have grown up in trade and commerce and industry that have obtained a stranglehold on the lives of national communities and even on the life of the world at large. Many of these have vested interests in the preparation and making of war. Universal welfare can never be achieved nor war fully eliminated unless and until these interests are dislodged from their positions of vantage and made to subserve the interest of the masses. It is an interesting observation that while emancipated labour has been able to better its position immensely it has had not much perceptible effect on the ramifications and machinations of these interests. Under the given circumstances this might have been natural. The first concern of the emancipated working class was with strengthening its own position and bettering its condition. But very probably a dimension of the total perspective has also been lacking in the labour movements. The emphasis has been on winning own rights, the mission of helping others has receded to the background. The labour movement could not outgrow nationalism as had been expected. It has not fully outgrown racialism and sectarianism even in most of the developed countries. Non-violent action on these fronts has to supply this missing dimension.

The dislodging of the vested interests raises problems of institutional form to which answers have to be found. It is certain that private ownership of the means of production, in the absolute sense in which it is understood and sought to be adhered to in capitalist countries, has to go. But what should take its place? Socialisation in the sense of State ownership in a few limited spheres may be desirable, but not outright State ownership of all means of production. Sharing of ownership and management with employees, decentralisation into smaller units, co-operative enterprise, are some of the answers so far available. A lot of practical experience and experimentation is needed to evolve a pattern or the right mixture of patterns suitable for any specific situation.

Next to the strengthening of the toiling masses and dissolution of the vested interests, the third important task in the context of universal welfare is the resolution of conflicts engendered by prejudices. It has been seen that prejudices have a life of their own. Economic prosperity or spread of formal education do not affect it materially. Even the rise of militant class consciousness has not been able fully to cut across the lines. Traditional prejudices have kept millions all over the world imprisoned in mutual suspicion and hatred. It has divided countries like Congo and Cyprus into hostile armed camps, vivisected India and made enemies of the Arabs and the Israelis.

These then are the most important problems of change that confront

us and problems that carry us right into the thick of politics. Attempts have been made and are even now being made to solve these problems within the framework of the existing political institutions and ideas. These efforts have met with various degrees of success, but they by themselves cannot carry the world to its goal because the existing political structures are part of the scheme of things that needs changing.

The State has evolved both as an instrument of coercion in the interest of "law and order" and a violent machine for making wars, as well as an instrument of large-scale corporate actions that are not intrinsically coercive. Total elimination of coercion in any form has been held up as an ultimate objective by such unlike men as Gandhi and Lenin, as coercion, even of a small few in the interest of the vast majority, thwarts those individuals and arrests their growth. But the evolution of the State apparatus from an instrument used by a minority for the subjugation of the majority to a vehicle of the will of the majority, however imperfect it may be, is a tremendous step forward and thus legislation has a legitimate place in the chain of actions leading to a non-violent order. This is particularly so when it gives formal shape to a consensus that has crystallised in the community or seeks to put an end to some existing form of injustice or exploitation that is resulting in greater violence. Still legislation has its limitations and many a legal reform is nothing more than a pious wish.

Hence forms of non-violent action have to be developed that may replace the coercive functions of the State as well as reach areas which the law cannot.

At the same time the parts of the State and the political machinery that are concerned with its constructive functions have got to be reformed to turn them into more effective instruments for building the future. Thus the State may wither away by ceasing to rule men and being concerned with administering things only.

The Political Pattern

The accepted patterns and methods of present-day political activity, the party-system based on personal leadership, the manoeuvrings and struggles for power, the nature of electioneering etc. have much that is a hangover from the past when individuals and groups struggled for power and human well-being never entered the picture as the or even a primary objective. Total human welfare requires comprehensively and carefully planned action for economic development and social change. The physical sciences, social sciences and technology all have to be drawn upon profusely and their contributions delicately interwoven for any piece of meaningful and effective action. But the current methods in politics have little in common with the methods of science. The political debate, premised on stances of omniscience and omnipotence, is only marginally competent to discover the objective truth. The deliberate attempt to kindle passions and arouse prejudices hardly chimes in with the temper necessary for a rational pursuit of universal well-being.

In economic planning we seek to make the best use of all available material resources and technical skills. In planning for universal social well-being attention must also be given to the maximum

effective utilisation of all available emotional resources and
social skills. In the current mode of politics only that much
emotional energy and social skills are available for constructive
use as are left over from the continuous clashes between the con-
tending parties. But the problem as the social planner ought to
see it is not whether A is more intelligent, efficient, capable etc.
than B, but how to make effective use of all the intelligence,
capability etc. that both A and B possess for the maximisation of
the common good.

At another level, the common good is supposed to emerge out of the
tussle of the contending interest-groups, each trying to maximise
its benefits and minimise sacrifices. Formal codification of the
adjustments arrived at often takes the form of legislation. Here
also the total effect is a large diminution in the total fund of
human resources available for constructive use. The common good
achieved is mostly a minimisation of evil. The trader is prevented
from raising prices, the worker is forced to desist from dropping
hourly production below such and such level, the manufacturer has
to abstain from using adulterants in proportions exceeding a
certain minimum, etc. What is achieved is an equilibrium between
forces pulling in opposite directions and mostly away from the
common good.

Inhibition of undesirable impulses is necessary, but mere inhibition
is also deadening and an attempt has to be made to create an atmos-
phere in which everybody begins to think in terms of making as much
positive contribution as possible to the common good. Dialogues
will have to be initiated that will lift the discussions of problems
from the slough of political histrionics to the higher level of
objective search for effective solutions.

To-day there is one occasion on which consensus and co-operation, a
maximum of contribution and minimum of recrimination is the generally
accepted norm, and that occasion is war or a situation verging on
war. The problem is whether concern about the endemic sufferings of
people, that are so tragic and so unnecessary, can be made acute
enough, the vision of the beautiful new world that we can build
be made dazzling enough, to make such pulling together a normal
feature of our social and political life.

This will involve changes in perceptions, beliefs and motivations.
The perceptions that socio-economic groups have of situations,
problems and each other are at the root of much misunderstanding
and strife. They have traditionally inculcated beliefs, about the
perfection of the party system or about the relationship between
individual good and social good that keeps the present state of
affairs going. People have a multitude of motives for doing what-
ever they do. Emphasis on one motive rather than the other often
makes for considerable change in the way things are done.

Apart from changes in people, institutional changes will also be
necessary. Institutions are built round certain beliefs and motives
and tend to perpetuate them. Conversely, changes in beliefs and
motives make necessary new institutional forms in consonance with
the changes.

The following suggestions have so far been made about such changes

that are necessary:

(1) Emphasis has to shift from rule by bare majority to rule by consensus. This is a difficult change to make. However, it has been pointed out that precedent exists for the acceptance of such a norm. This is accepted as necessary during "national emergencies" such as war. Perhaps a beginning can be made more easily with the smaller units of political and economic organisation.

(2) The concept of maximised contribution makes it necessary that every individual and small group should cease to be a passive object of administration and begin making active contributions to the shaping of the future. Political and economic structures and responsibilities have to be decentralised on a vast scale to make this possible. The degree and kind of decentralisation that may maximise both technological advantages and individual and group initiative have to be worked out experimentally.

(3) The method of elections in which a multitude of atomised individuals have to make a choice between candidates put up by political parties has to give place to a system in which people organised in on-going communities choose representatives who are vitally involved in their lives and activities.

Elimination of coercion

It may be expected that the changes that will make-over the State and the political machine into a more effective instrument for the common good will also help in reducing the need for coercion. The more the pattern of political behaviour changes from pulling aginst each other towards pulling together (the search for consensus) the less necessity will there be of forcing people to act against their will.

A great deal of investigation has been done in recent years on small groups and face-to-face communities which show that a number of influences other than coercion operate in such a community to keep its members within the bounds of its norms.

A direct approach to the problem of withering away is to encourage voluntary action in as many areas of life as possible. Quite a huge part of the business of living is still carried out by voluntary associations. But there is a tendency for its scope to shrink, particularly in the under-developed countries. There are three main reasons for this. Firstly, there is the usual socialist approach that believes the State to be the only organised expression of social will. Secondly, voluntary activity is mostly in the economic field, and private enterprise has made a bad name for itself. Finally, there is the pressure of circumstances in the under-developed countries where there is a lot of work to be done and the State is the biggest visible agency with the largest resources.

The masses of the people in the under-developed countries that have a long history of stagnation, apathy and fatalism behind them have little faith in themselves and come to look upon the government as omnipotent. In industrially advanced countries the sheer complexity of modern life makes the average man despair of ever obtaining a hold on it. Perhaps everywhere in the world the common man is too near to his impotent past to have full confidence in himself.

Though decentralisation in any absolute sense is impossible, still, by breaking down at least some important parts of the social complex into sizes that the common man can master, the latter is helped to regain his confidence in himself.

It seems that elimination of coercion and putting self-confidence and dynamism into the common people are the two faces of the same coin. Much of the coercion that is indulged in by a modern State is an effort to make the people move, to make them behave in newer ways considered urgently necessary by the administrators. Peaceful methods of making the people move help to reduce dependence on coercion. The Bhoodan-Gramdan movement and the Khadi organisation in India are examples of large-scale voluntary action and the potentials of their growth are not yet exhausted.

We have touched briefly on the necessity of forging non-violent sanctions in the context of taming vested interests. This is necessary in many other contexts, especially in those of racial and religious conflicts, discrimination etc.

Non-violent sanction has two aspects, one is concerned with inhibiting undesirable behaviour and the other with rousing people to desirable action, making them dynamic. These are what Vinoba characterises as the negative and positive forms of Satyagraha. These two aspects merge together when the attempt to check evil-doing carries the struggle into the psyche of the evil-doer where his better-self is aroused to wrestle with the evil.

World Order and World Peace

Elimination of war requires elimination of causes of war as well as the invention and use of peaceful alternatives to it. One of the most potent causes is the belief in absolute national sovereignty. To-day this can be criticised not only on moral and idealist grounds but on those of practical expediency also. There have been a number of moves recently to unite several countries into larger federations on the grounds of practical expediency. The European Economic Community is moving in the same direction. It is true that greater defence potential, chiefly against the communist bloc, is also one of the main considerations but still these moves have a positive aspect as they help to erode the hold of exclusive nationalism.

Every effort needs to be made to stress the interdependence of countries in the modern era. Extension of sympathies beyond national frontiers has got to be encouraged. Vinoba had once remarked that the labour movement in Great Britain will be a revolutionary force again when it does not stop merely at improving conditions at home but calls upon the working class to sacrifice for their vastly under-privileged brethren in the under-developed parts of the world. This may apply to the labour movements in all developed countries. Foreign aid is already an issue in politics in all such countries and contributions to the discussions that go on about its objectives, effectiveness, the desirability or otherwise of attaching strings etc., can be helpful. Of course the best form of such aid is from people to people on a voluntary basis.

Political Behaviour of the Non-Violent Activist

Some of the areas of concern in politics of the non-violent activist

have been delineated above. They include:

(1) action on behalf of the weaker sections;

(2) action to curb the vested interests;

(3) working for consensus in public life;

(4) working for decentralisation of political and economic structures and electoral reforms;

(5) promotion of small active communities as the basic units of a new political structure;

(6) the promotion of organised voluntary effort; and

(7) effort to erode the bonds of nationalism.

Now it remains to be considered what should be the relationship of the activist with political parties and his role in elections.

Should he belong to any of the existing parties? If not, need he form a party of his own? The activist may feel that it will be more expedient and effective to push a social reform programme through a political party and it may even help to belong to the party and work from inside.

But it is everyday experience that political parties act as a divisive force in the body politic. The partisan spirit aroused by party allegiance is more intent on discovering points of difference with the opponent than in seeking for areas of agreement. Even points on which there are not any worthwhile differences are distorted out of proportion to accentuate the differences. The most distressing aspect of this is that it leads to a break-down of communication between the parties. The debate becomes a diatribe not a dialogue.

It is vitally necessary for the non-violent activist that he keep his channels of communication open to all sections of the people. This is a difficult enough job in itself without the additional complication of party allegiance and the consequent prejudice. So it is best that the activist keep himself free from all party entanglements.

Then again the ideals of no political party can be commensurate with the ideals of the non-violent activists even if the programmes of the former are progressive enough.

Apart from ideological objections, the formation of a separate party has only an academic interest in any country. So here we need not enter into the question at length. The non-violent activist cannot go after political power. Government functions on the basis of the limitations of human character as they exist at any moment. It cannot do otherwise. The task of the activist is to work for eliminating these limitations. The same person cannot do these two things at the same time.

Again, forming a political party of his own would land him in the same communications difficulty as would arise if he joined an existing one. The best course is to maintain one's independent existence and when promoting a cause to appeal to all parties and beyond the parties to the people in general. It will be open to

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the activist to praise or criticise any party for any of its
policies, but this should not be done in a way that may disrupt
communication and polarise his relations with the party. From one
angle his general activity may be seen as attempts to inculcate
maturer levels of thought and action in the people.

The occasion of a general election can be utilised, by sober dis-
cussion of the issues, to raise the level of political understand-
ing and maturity of the people.

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