

Sanyal's Open Letter to Gandhiji

Bhagat Singh

February 12, 1925

I THINK IT IS MY DUTY TO REMIND YOU OF THE promise you made some time back that you would retire from the political field at the time when the revolutionaries will once more emerge from their silence and enter into the Indian political arena. The experiment with the non-violent non-cooperation movement is now over. You wanted one complete year for your experiment, but the experiment lasted at least four complete years, if not five, and still do you mean to say that the experiment was not tired long enough?

You are one of the greatest of personalities in the present age and under your direct guidance and inspiration, your programme was actually taken up, for some reason or other, by the best men in the land. Thousands young men, the flower of the youth of our country, embraced your cult with all the enthusiasm they could gather. Practically the whole nation responded to your call. We can safely say that the response was phenomenal if not miraculous. What more could you want? Sacrifice and sincerity on the part of your followers were not wanting; the most selfish of professional men gave up their professions, young men of the country renounced all their worldly prospects and joined the forces under your banner hundreds of families were rendered destitute for want of pecuniary income. Money was not wanting. You wanted one crore of rupees and you got more than you wanted. In fact I shall perhaps be not far from the truth if I say that the response to your call was more than you yourself expected. I venture to say that India followed your lead to the best of her ability, and this I think can hardly be denied, and still do you mean to say that the experiment was not tried far enough?

In fact, your programme failed for no fault of the Indians. You have only a programme to the country, but you could not lead the nation to a victorious end. To say that non-violent non-cooperation failed because the people were not sufficiently non-violent is to argue like a lawyer and not like a prophet. The people could not be more non-violent than they were during the last few years. I would like to say that they were non-violent to a degree which smelt of cowardice. You would perhaps say that it was not this non-violence, the non-violence of the cowards, that you wanted. But your programme did not contain that item which could transform cowards into heroes or which could detect and ultimately reject the cowards from the bands of heroes. This was no fault of the people. And to say that the majority of non-cooperators was cowards and not heroes, is to shirk responsibilities. To say this is rather to commit an outrage on the manliness of the nation. Indians are not cowards. Their heroism can always be compared with that of the best heroes of the world. To deny this is to deny history. When I speak of Indians' heroism I mean

not only the heroism which sparkled in the annals of the glorious past, but I include the heroism that is manifesting itself in the present, because India is still not dead.

What India wants is a true leader, a leader like Guru Gobind Singh or Guru Ramdas and Shivaji. India wants a Krishana who can give a worthy ideal, to be followed not by India alone, but by all humanity, by all the members of this humanity with diverse temperaments and capacities.

Non-violent non-cooperation movement failed not because there was sporadic outburst of suppressed feelings here and there but because the movement was lacking in a worthy ideal. The ideal that you preached was not in keeping with Indian culture and traditions. It savoured of imitation. Your philosophy of non-violence, at least the philosophy that you gave to the people for their acceptance, was a philosophy arising out of despair. It was not the spirit of kshama of the Indian rishis, it was not the spirit of ahimsa of the great Indian yogins. It was an imperfect physical mixture of Tolstoyism and Buddhism and not a chemical mixture of East and West. You adopted the western method of congresses and conferences and tried to persuade the whole nation to accept the spirit of ahimsa, irrespective of desh, kal and patra like like Tolstoy, but which was a matter of individual sadhana with the Indians. And above all, you were and are still vague as regards India's ultimate political goal. This is miserable. Your idea of independence is not in consistence with Indian ideals. India stands for Sarvan paravasham dukkham sarvamatmavasham sukham and for the ideal that individual existence is solely for the purpose of humanity and through humanity serving god, jagathitaya cha krishnaya cha. The non-violence that India preaches is not non-violence for the sake of non-violence, but non-violence for the good of humanity, and when this good for humanity will demand violence and bloodshed, India will not hesitate to shed blood just in the same way as a surgical operation necessitates the shedding of blood. To an ideal Indian, violence or non-violence has the same significance, provided they ultimately do good to humanity. Vinashay cha duskkritama was not spoken in vain.

To my mind, therefore, the ideal that you gave to the nation or the programme of action that you laid before it, is neither consistent with Indian culture nor practicable as a political programme.

It is simply inconceivable and incomprehensible to think that you still dare to entertain the slightest hope that England can be just and generous out of her free will-this England 'which believes in Jallianwalabagh massacres as a legitimate means of self-defence', this England which tried the O'Dwyer-Nair case and gave Judgement in favour of barbarism. If you have an iota of faith left in you in the good sense of the British government, then according to you where is the necessity of any programme at all? If there is any necessity of any movement in order to bring the British government to their senses, then why speak of the honesty and good intentions of the British government? It seems that the prophet in you is gone and you are once more a lawyer defending a weak case; or perhaps you are always an exponent – a mighty exponent – of half-truths only. A sovereign independent Indian Republic in alliance or in federation with the other independent nations of the earth is one thing, and self-governing India within this imperialistic British empire is perfectly another thing. Your sentiment of remaining within the British empire reminds one of the many Himalayan miscalculations, that you have compromised a worthy ideal with the present needs of a false expediency, and this is the reason that you have failed to capture the imagination of the youths of the country-youths who could dare and who are still daring to go against your wishes although they unhesitatingly recognise you as one of the greatest of personalities of the modern age. These are the Indian revolutionaries. They have now decided to remain silent no more and therefore they request you to retire from the political

field, or else to direct the political movement in a way so that it may be a help and not a hindrance to the revolutionary movement. They suspended their activities so long simply to comply to your request direct and indirect, and they went further. They actually helped you in the carrying out of your programme to the best of their abilities. But now the experiment is over and therefore the revolutionaries are free from their promise, or, as a matter of fact, they promised to remain silent only for a year and no more.

Further, I would like to point out that you have misjudged the revolutionaries in many respects when you blamed them in your recent presidential address in the 39th Congress. You said that the revolutionaries are retarding India's progress. I do not know what you mean by this word 'progress'. If you mean political progress, then can you deny that every political progress that India has already made, however little that might be, has been made chiefly by the sacrifices and the efforts of the revolutionary party? Can you deny that the Bengal partition was annulled through the effort of the Bengal revolutionaries? Can you doubt that the Morley-Minto reform was the outcome of the Indian revolutionary movement which was mainly though not wholly instrumental in bringing about the Montford reform? I shall not be very much surprised if you will answer these queries in the affirmative but I can assure you that the British government realises the potentiality of this movement. Even the late Mr. Montague expressed to an Indian of position and rank that he took the trouble of coming to India and risked his life simply due to the activities of the young Indian revolutionaries.

If you mean that these reforms are no index to true progress, then I would venture to say that this revolutionary movement has achieved no mean progress in the moral advancement of India. Indians were miserably afraid of death and this revolutionary party once more made the Indians realise the grandeur and the beauty that lie in dying for a noble cause. The revolutionaries have once again demonstrated that death has a certain charm and is not always a dreadful thing. To die for one's own beliefs and convictions, to die in the consciousness that by so dying one is serving God and the nation, to accept death or to risk one's life when there is every probability of death, for a cause which one honestly believes to be just and legitimate – is this no moral progress?

You have said to the revolutionaries, "You may not care for your own lives, but you dare not disregard those of your countrymen who have no desire to die a martyr's death." But the revolutionaries are at a sad loss to understand the meaning of this sentence. Do you mean to say that the revolutionaries are responsible for the death of 70 men who were condemned in the Chauri Chaura trial? Do you mean to say that the revolutionaries are responsible for the bombing and killing of innocent people at Jallianwalabagh and Gujranwalla? Did the revolutionaries, during their struggle for the last twenty years, in the past or in the present, ever ask the starving millions to take part in the revolutionary struggle? The revolutionaries have perhaps a better knowledge of the mass psychology than most of the present leaders. And this was the reason that they never wanted to deal with the masses until they become sure of their own strength. They always believed that the masses of northern India were ready for any emergency and they were also right in thinking that the masses of northern India are a dense matter of high explosive, dangerous to be handled carelessly. It was you and your lieutenants who misjudged the sentiments of the masses and dragged them into the satyagraha movement people who were groaning under a thousand oppressions from within and without, where the lightning of anger lay unperceived, and you had to pay the penalty for it. But, Can you give any instance where the revolutionaries dragged unwilling souls into valley of death?

Lastly, I would like to say something about the remarks you have made in connection with the strength of the British empire. You have said to the revolutionaries, "Those whom you seek to depose, are better armed and infinitely better organised than you are." But it is not shameful that a handful of Englishmen are able to rule India, not by the free consent of the Indian people but by the force of the sword? And if the English can be well-armed and well-organised, why cannot the Indian be better armed and better organised still-Indians who are saturated with the high principles of spirituality? Indians are men in the same sense as the Englishmen are. Then, what on earth makes the Indians so helpless as to think that they can never be better organised than their English masters? By what argument and logic of fact can you disprove the possibilities in which the revolutionaries have immense faith? And the spirit of non-violence that arises out of this sense of helplessness and despair can never be the non-violence of the strong, the non-violence of the Indian rishis. This is tamas, pure and simple.

Excuse me Mahatmaji, if I am severe in criticising your philosophy and principles. You have criticised the revolutionaries most unsympathetically and even you went so far as to describe them as the enemies of the country, simply because they differ from your views and methods. You preach tolerance but you have been violently intolerant in your criticism of the revolutionaries. The revolutionaries have risked their everything to serve their motherland, and if you cannot help them, at least be not intolerant towards them.

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