Gandhian Sarvodaya and Anarchism

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> *"In the ideal state every one is his own ruler. He rules himself in such a manner that he is never a hindrance to his neighbour. In such a state, therefore, there is no political power because there is no State."*
>
> -M. Gandhi (*Young India*, 2 July 1931)

The practical difference between socialism and anarchism, at the purely local level, is small. They differ, of course, in how each responds to the question of a state and national policy. Gandhi saw an India with a plethora of local problems, and for them he prescribed local solutions. In this respect, his thinking and philosophy most closely resemble Western anarchism than any other political philosophy. In fact, he acknowledges Tolstoy, especially his spiritual anarchist treatise *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, as an influence. But Gandhi's political thought is not derivative, it originally combines his Hinduism and his thoughts on non-violence. Nevertheless, many concepts familiar to the student of Western anarchism are also present in the philosophy of Sarvodaya.

One small example is that of decision-making through consensus or unanimity. Vinoba Bhave, who was to continue and extend Gandhian concepts of social organization and progress (*sarvodaya*) into the Sarvodaya Movement wrote: "Now we 'pass' decisions by a majority … as though God now speaks through such a majority. I contend that such proposals are not really passed, so long as they fail to convince even one person. Only that proposal deserves to 'pass' which commends itself to all. We must revive this ancient Indian tradition, for a people's democracy can only be built on mutual trust and cooperation."[1]

Vinoba contends that such procedures are the method of ancient organization in India, though *sarvodaya* is not merely an unsophisticated appeal to recreate the past. It is an attempt to bring about self-rule (or *swaraj*), carefully defined. As Vinoba asks: "If I am under some other person's command, where is my self-government? Self-government means ruling your own self. It is one mark of *swaraj* not to allow any outside power in the world to exercise control over oneself. And the second mark of *swaraj* is not to exercise power over any other. These two things together make *swaraj*: no submission and no exploitation."[2]

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[1] OSTERGAARD, Geoffrey and Melville CURRELL. *The Gentle Anarchists: A Study of the Leaders of the Sarvodaya Movement for Nonviolent Revolution in India.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971; pp. 112–13.

[2] Ibid; p. 33.

Vinoba and Gandhi both understood that they could not rely on all to voluntarily abide by the principle of "no submission and no exploitation", especially exploitation. In a sense, they willfully labored under an illusion to bring about such a change in humanity. When revolutionary violence broke out against the British, though, Gandhi expressed doubt that India was ready for self-rule. In the words of Vinoba, "Government can be had through violence. Self-government is impossible without nonviolence."[3]

As the transformation to a nonviolent state is a long one, something must be done in the meantime: "Until all men, or at least a large proportion of them, are fit for a society without government, government, as a matter of fact, will continue to exist. In this situation, it seems reasonable to accept the best government of which society is presently capable. For *sarvodayites* this means at least a democratic government, with all its faults."[4]

Thus the Sarvodaya commitment to nonviolence requires a degree of moderation when it comes to dismantling the state apparatus. As Vinoba writes: "We too believe in a stateless society as our ultimate goal. We recognize that in the preliminary stages a certain measure of government is necessary, but we do not agree that it will continue to be necessary at a later stage. Neither do we agree that totalitarian dictatorship is necessary to ensure progress towards a stateless society. On the contrary we propose to proceed by decentralizing administration and authority. In the final stage there would be no coercion but a purely moral authority.[5] In the end, therefore, *sarvodaya* relies on the moral development of the citizen and the community to achieve its highest organizational structure.

In this respect, *sarvodaya* differs from much (but not all) Western anarchist thought, which posits that the mere destructive abolishment of the state will immediately release the oppressed goodness of man. Sarvodaya requires both the transformation and the man to cultivate a high moral standard. In the end, the revolution is not one of violence, but one of love.

Instead of talking of 'abolishing power', one talks of abolishing coercive and remunerative power, or better still, of replacing coercive and remunerative relationships by purely normative relationships. This is not to say that *all* normative power relationships are necessarily acceptable. It may be that, once we have rid ourselves of linguistic confusions, we shall be able to focus attention on distinguishing morally acceptable from morally unacceptable forms of normative power. For *sarvodayites* such a distinction would centre upon the concept of love: that is, a positive concern for the integrity, dignity, and self-respect of others. Only normative power relationships consistent with love for others would, in the last analysis, be acceptable. In this sense, but only in this sense, the politics of *sarvodaya* is not the politics of power but the politics of love.[6]

EDITOR'S NOTE: Geoffrey Ostergaard (1926–1990) was Professor of Political Science, University of Birmingham (England). A more extensive biographical note can be found at the end of our previously posted article by him.

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[3] NARAYAN, Shriman. *Vinoba: His Life and Work*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1970; p 129.

[4] OSTERGAARD, op cit pp. 39—40

[5] Ibid, p. 40

[6] Ibid, pp. 179–80

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