

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



# Indian anarchism

Geoffrey Ostergaard

August 1964

TO A SUPERFICIAL OBSERVER OF THE INDIAN POLITICAL SCENE an article on Indian anarchism might promise to be as brief as the celebrated chapter on snakes in the natural history of Ireland: there are no anarchists in India. Other Western ideologies, such as liberalism, nationalism, communism, democratic socialism and even fascism, have clearly taken root in modern India but anarchism appears to be conspicuously absent. The recent publication of Adi Doctor's book, *Anarchist Thought in India* (Asia Publishing House, Bombay, Rs. 8.50), however, shows the error of this view and at the same time accounts for it. If there appear to be no anarchists in India, it is because they are ranged behind another banner imprinted with the word used by Gandhi to symbolise his social philosophy: Sarvodaya, the Welfare of All<sup>1</sup>. The Indian anarchists whose theories Doctor expounds and criticises are, in fact, the Mahatma himself, his major contemporary disciple, Vinoba Bhave, and other leading figures in the Sarvodaya movement

Geoffrey Ostergaard  
Indian anarchism  
August 1964

Retrieved on 4<sup>th</sup> March 2021 from [libcom.org](http://libcom.org)  
Published in *Anarchy* #042: India

[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)

---

<sup>1</sup> The term "Sarvodaya" was first used by Gandhi as the title of his translation into Gujarati of Ruskin's *Unto This Last*—one of the important Western influences on his thought.

such as Jayaprakash Narayan, Dada Dharmadhikari and Dhirenda Mazumdar.

To pin the anarchist label on these men may appear to be the provocative act of a critic before leading them to the slaughterhouse reserved for utopians. Few, if any, of them would use the label themselves and Jayaprakash Narayan, the most Westernised and sophisticated social theorist among them, would certainly prefer to be known as a “communitarian socialist.” However, as Doctor is well aware, “a rose is a rose is a rose”: when the Sarvodaya doctrine is analysed, it clearly emerges as a species of the anarchist genus. And, if Western anarchists wish to know why their Indian counterparts prefer another label, part of the answer may lie in the persistent and not wholly unwarranted association in the popular mind between anarchism and violence. Sarvodaya anarchism is, of course, an anarchism of nonviolence and, like Tolstoy, its exponents prefer a label which bears no traces of dynamite.

It is not the whole answer, however, because it is doubtful whether more than a handful of Sarvodayites have found it necessary to define their philosophy in relation to the ideology of Western anarchism. To most of them the Sarvodaya doctrine appears to be very much an indigenous creed; universalistic, no doubt, in its implications but as distinctively Indian in its origins and colouring as the Mahatma himself. The Sarvodaya worker dressed in his home-spun, hand-woven dhoti and shirt and striving for the uplift of his country’s 550,000 villages, feels himself to be working within the mainstream of the Indian tradition. If, under Vinoba’s tutoring, he does not reject outright Western influences but seeks rather a synthesis of (Western) Science and (Indian) Spirituality, his object is to preserve and to revive what he sees as the Indian heritage that has been dangerously impaired by two centuries of Imperialist rule.

Of all the competing social ideologies in Indian today, there can be little doubt that Sarvodaya is the most distinctively Indian. The Marxism of the Communist Party and the free enterprise of

to deny it that legitimacy. In this connection, its firm commitment to non-violence and its present lack of militancy referred to above help to preserve this status. As I see it, its possession of legitimacy is both a strength and a weakness; but whether it gains more than it loses by it, is difficult to judge. There is no doubt, however, that its legitimate status involves it in postures which the average Western anarchist, accustomed to thinking of himself as “outside” the dominant social ethos, would find puzzling, to say the least.

Sarvodaya is not yet a mass movement, despite the millions who have been touched by it at some point or other, and its future remains problematical. It is, however, the largest and most effective movement now working for anarchist goals in any country in the world. Its existence proves the continued vitality of anarchist ideas. Today, when there is in the West a revival of interest in these ideas, those anarchists who are alive to the need to find fresh inspiration for a renewal of their great tradition from Godwin to Malatesta would be well advised to study carefully the theory and practice of Sarvodaya. It may be that we require to call in the East to redress the balance of the West.

sence, the actions of the Sarvodayites often seem to be somewhat remote from harsh realities. In defence of the Sarvodayites it may be said that they have enjoyed some spectacular successes in appealing to the wealthy and powerful classes. Sneering critics in India are always emphasising the large proportion of rocky, uncultivable and legally disputed land given in bhoodan. But what is truly remarkable is that land-gifts including much valuable land, should be given at all. It should also be remembered that the Sarvodaya movement is operating in a social context still very different from that of even 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe: the Marxist and anarchist models may not be all that relevant to rural India. (The industrial urban sector is another matter but, to date, Sarvodaya theory has failed to encompass this.)

After the defence of Sarvodaya has been made, however, this observer at least would still sympathise with that minority in the Indian movement which favours more militant action against the possessing classes. Such militancy, based on realistic social analysis, would not involve a rejection of the theory of non-violent revolution. It would mean, rather, a reversion from what Vinoba calls the “gentle” satyagraha of the gifts-movement to the “tough” satyagraha associated with Gandhi—but applied this time against India’s newly emerging ruling class instead of the Imperialist masters. In the country of Gandhi it is odd that the first large scale satyagraha campaign since 1947 among the peasants—that now taking place in Andhra Pradesh—should be promoted by the Communist Party rather than by Gandhi’s own followers,

In cataloguing some of the major resemblances and differences between Indian and Western anarchism, I have confined myself to the realm of ideology. Comparison and contrast in sociological terms would be essential for a deeper understanding of Sarvodaya. There is no space to consider this aspect here but one point at least may be made. Indian anarchism, unlike Western anarchism, is a movement bestowed with legitimacy. Founded by Gandhi, “the Father of the Nation,” few political leaders are willing or prepared

the Swatantra Party are clearly exotic creeds. The socialism of Congress claims to be peculiarly Indian but is patently Fabian in character, except to the extent that it has been influenced by the Gandhians. It is rather surprising, therefore, to find Doctor devoting a chapter of his book to prove that Sarvodaya anarchism has no basis in ancient Indian political thought. Passing references to an ideal stateless society are to be found in Vedic, Buddhist and Jaina literature but these represent no more than allusions to a mythical “golden age” contrasted with man’s present sinful lot. Hindu political theories, in fact, start from an assumption of the inherently wicked nature of man and paint a Hobbesian picture of the strong preying on the weak—“like the fishes in shallow water”—until men see the wisdom of placing themselves under the protection of the king. Kingship, tempered and moderated by (the law of right conduct), was regarded as both natural and necessary if anarchy in the sense of chaos was to be avoided. Doctor concludes: “If one can single out any country in which the political philosophy of anarchism was placed in a coffin, the coffin tightly packed and nailed, and then buried full six feet deep, then that country was ancient India.”

Doctor is undoubtedly right in his main contention that a philosophy of anarchism is absent in ancient Indian political thought but his argument misses the central point about Sarvodaya: its emphasis on non-violence. The anarchism of Sarvodaya is, in fact, arrived at largely, if not wholly, by swelling out the social and political implications of the principle of non-violence. Once this is appreciated, the indigenous roots of the doctrine become manifest. Now, while nonviolence has been preached and to some extent practised by many individuals in many countries and at every stage of culture, it cannot be denied that it has been a deep rooted and continuous element in the Indian cultural tradition. Some, indeed, would argue that nonviolence or *ahimsa* is “India’s greatest contribution

to world-thought<sup>2</sup>. The apparent paradox of an emphasis on non-violence combined with an absence of a philosophy of anarchism in ancient Indian thought is explained by the fact that, until recent years, ahimsa was seen simply as an ethical principle for the self-realisation of the individual. It was Gandhi's great contribution to make it a principle of social ethics and to insist on its application to all social relations. Just as he transformed the old principle of individual passive resistance into the new principle of satyagraha by showing how it could be used as a form of social protest and resistance against institutions defined as evil, so he transformed the old principle of ahimsa into the new social philosophy of non-violent revolution. Gandhi's autobiography, *My Experiments with Truth*, is essentially a record of the process of transformation of these two closely related ideas.

Gandhi's insistence that ahimsa is a principle of social as well as individual ethics undoubtedly involved a rejection of the ancient Hindu assumption of the inherent wickedness of mankind. This rejection, however, was not based on a simple-minded assertion of the contrary assumption that man is naturally good. "Every one of us," he asserted, "is a mixture of good and evil"<sup>3</sup>. But he did believe, most firmly, that all men have a potentiality for goodness, that "no soul is beyond redemption," and that the nature of man is not static or could ever be made perfect but he did believe that they were perfectible. Indeed, he seems to have posited an inevitable evolutionary process by which men, as they gained increasing insight into spiritual "Truth," would become progressively less violent. In the era of Belsen and Auschwitz—to cite only the most glaring symbols of modern bestiality—it has become fashionable to deride this kind of belief and, not unexpectedly, Doctor's criticisms of Sarvodaya doctrine begin by challenging its assumptions about human

---

<sup>2</sup> G. Dhawan, *The Political Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi*, (Navajivan: Ahmedabad), 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 1957, p.8.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Dhawan, *op. cit.*, p.104.

here and now to live the values of the future society. Since the new values are difficult to practise, a phased programme is contrived so that ordinary men are able to advance by easy steps towards the new society. Gradually, through cooperative effort the people proceed to create new institutions and new forms of social life. The theory is a theory of social change and not merely a plea for individual regeneration (like Moral Rearmament for which Gandhi's grandson is now campaigning in India) because it does involve changing the social structure. But the Sarvodayites place greater emphasis on transforming individuals because they insist that it is individuals who start the process of revolution and because they believe that the desired social structure can be achieved and maintained .only if individuals are adequately developed morally. In seeking individual conversion, they direct their efforts to all men and women, without discrimination by sex, caste, creed or class.

In comparison with classical anarchism (and, of course, with Marxism), it is the absence of any appeal to class which most distinguishes the Sarvodaya theory of revolution. In the West, anarchism as a social movement developed in part as a critique of the Marxist theory of revolution. From a narrow perspective, the anarchism of Bakunin, Kropotkin and the syndicalists may be seen as a form of deviation from Marxism. Not surprisingly, therefore, classical anarchism has much in common with Marxism, especially in its analysis of capitalist society. Anarchists, other than the syndicalists, have not assigned to the industrial proletariat the central role assigned to it by Marxists but they have always directed their revolutionary appeal primarily to the oppressed and the dispossessed. They have not expected to enlist the oppressors, the powerful and the privileged in the cause of revolution.

This is not the place to argue the merits and demerits of either the Marxist or classical anarchist theory of revolution. But, to a Western social scientist, it appears a weakness in Sarvodaya theory that it has neglected the valuable insights into the mechanics of power structures provided by both Marxists and anarchists. In their ab-

in a bureaucratic world by the passionate slogan, "Incinerate the documents!" But the asceticism of Indian anarchism extends far beyond anything found in the West. The loin-clad figure, carrying all his worldly possessions in a small bundle and without a penny in his purse, is the Indian ideal. Among the ethical principles, besides ahimsa, enunciated by Gandhi as necessary for self-realisation are: brahmacharya which involves not merely sexual continence but complete control over the senses; aparigraha or non-possession; aswad or tastelessness which implies looking upon food and drink as a kind of medicine, to be taken only in the limited quantities necessary to maintain the body; and asteya or non-stealing which is related to non-possession since it involves not only not taking that which does not belong to us but also refraining from taking anything of which we have no real need. The free and easy relations that characterise anarchist circles in the West and especially, since Godwin and more particularly since Freud and Reich, the emphasis on sexual freedom find no echoes in Indian anarchism. And it is perhaps significant that the only satyagraha campaign of any importance sanctioned by Vinoba since Independence was directed against the use of "obscene" cinema posters in Indore.

Finally, in their theories of revolution there are significant differences between Sarvodaya and mainstream Western anarchism. The Sarvodayites see the revolution as in essence a revaluation of values.<sup>21</sup> The first step in the revolution is to convert individuals, if possible on a mass scale, to the new point of view by appealing to both their intellect and their emotions. The new values chosen for emphasis are those which have a direct bearing on some major problem such as the plight of the landless labourers, so that their acceptance is likely to lead to radical social change. As with Tolstoy, the revolution takes place as a result of individuals beginning

---

<sup>21</sup> For the substance of this paragraph, I am indebted to V. Tandon, *The Social and Political Philosophy of Sarvodaya after Gandhiji*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis. Agra University, 1963.

nature. It is worth reminding ourselves, therefore, that the balance of good and evil is not permanently lop-sided and that the history of mankind does provide some evidence of what most of us would regard as moral progress. Moreover, while it must be admitted that presuppositions about the "goodness," "badness" or "perfectibility" of human nature are not susceptible to scientific proof, the Gandhian ones do at least possess the virtue of not inhibiting the quest for moral progress in the way that the contrary ones do. What it is possible for men to become, we do not fully know but the presupposition of perfectibility ensures that men will continue striving to prize open the limits of the possible. Anarchism is grounded on at least one indisputable fact. Some men (though not necessarily all those who have styled themselves anarchists) have found it possible to develop to a stage where they could live peacefully without the coercive apparatus of the state. The question then is: If some, why not all? If Gandhi or Vinoba (and many less saintly men), why not you or me?

Doctor's failure to bring out the essential relation between the principle of non-violence and the anarchism of Sarvodaya stems from his desire to relate the doctrine to the body of Western anarchist thought. No doubt, to an Indian political scientist the similarities between the ideas of Sarvodaya and those of the great classical anarchist thinkers is the most interesting question<sup>4</sup>. To the Western anarchist, however, it is more interesting and illuminating to consider the dissimilarities.

The extent of the common ground between Sarvodaya and Western anarchism is quite considerable. Both aim, in Woodcock's general definition of anarchism, "at fundamental changes in the structure of society and particularly ... at the replacement of the authoritarian state by some form of non-governmental

---

<sup>4</sup> Even so, Doctor's first chapter on Western anarchism pays scant attention to the one great classical anarchist figure whose thought is closest to Gandhi's: Leo Tolstoy.

co-operation between free individuals”<sup>5</sup>. Both see the modern state, with its claim to a monopoly of the legal instruments of coercion, as the great obstacle to a free co-operative order in which men will really practise self-government. Echoing the familiar anarchist critique of what now passes as selfgovernment, 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”<sup>6</sup>. For both the anarchist and the Sarvodayite, the duty of the individual to obey his own conscience is the supreme norm, taking precedence over the state’s claim to political obedience. Neither school, with the possible exception of the Stirnerite egoists, envisages a society without some restraints on the individual but both demand that the restraints necessary to maintain an ordered society be submitted to voluntarily. Both emphasise the factor of moral authority in maintaining social control and cohesion and believe that, given the appropriate social institutions, it could entirely replace political and legal authority.

In their conceptions of the necessary conditions for the realisation and maintenance of a society of free, self-governing individuals, again, there is close agreement. First and foremost is the abolition of the institution of private property in the means of production. As in the family, so in society, property is to be held in common, each contributing according to his capacity and each receiving according to his needs. For the Sarvodayites in present India this implies the pooling of the ownership of the village land through gramdan and, for those outside the villages, a full accep-

---

<sup>5</sup> George Woodcock, *Anarchism*, (Penguin Books), 1962, p.11.

<sup>6</sup> Vinoba Bhave, *Democratic Values*, (Sarva Seva Sangh: Kashi), 1962, pp.13-14.

end of his highly critical evaluative chapter, Doctor comes to the same conclusion with regard to Sarvodaya. But this, surely, is an extremely myopic judgment. Protest, there certainly is but the Gandhians have never been satisfied with mere protest. “Be ye also do-ers of the word!” has always been their text. Bhoodan followed by gramdan and Santi Sena (Peace Army) are only the latest additions to the Constructive Programme initiated by Gandhi. This constructive programme includes such items as: communal unity, removal of untouchability, prohibition, khadi and other village industries, the emancipation of women, the promotion of provincial and national languages, the uplift of the peasantry, the establishment of economic equality, and service to the adivasis or tribal people.<sup>19</sup> Although Gandhi is best known in the West for his satyagraha campaigns, he himself attached more importance to constructive work. “If you make a real success of the constructive programme,” he once told his followers, “you will win Swaraj for India without civil disobedience.”<sup>20</sup> It is not possible here to evaluate the constructive work of the Sarvodaya movement but its importance cannot be denied. The public image of the Gandhian disciple in India is, in fact, very much that of a social worker. In reality he is more than that because the motive behind the work is not merely to relieve suffering but to remove its causes, i.e., it is social service with a radical objective.

The item of prohibition in the constructive programme suggests: another difference between Sarvodaya and Western anarchism: its severely ascetic character. Western anarchism has had its puritans and “simple lifers”: indeed, from one perspective, all anarchism may be seen as a plea for the radical simplification of life—a plea symbolised.

---

<sup>19</sup> M. K. Gandhi. *Constructive Programme*, (Navajivan : Ahmedabad), 2<sup>nd</sup>, ed., 1945.

<sup>20</sup> Pyarelal, *The Last Phase*, (Navajivan: Ahmedabad), 1956, I, p.44.

it is usually assumed to be), it seems reasonable to hold that “the end justifies the means.” Gandhian thought, however, rejects the dichotomy: means and end are part of a continuous process; the means precede the end temporally, but there is no question of one being morally superior to the other. Put in another way, means for the Gandhians are never merely instrumental; they are always end-creating. It follows, therefore, that the choice of means determines the end and that from immoral or even amoral means no moral end can result. It is essential to grasp this point since it provides the key to Gandhi’s philosophy of action and represents his most illuminating insight for social theory.<sup>18</sup>

Applied to the point under discussion—the ultimate goal of a stateless society—the fusion of means and end implies that there is no transition period or, what amounts to the same thing, every period is one of transition. With non-violence as both the means and the end, the Sarvodayite acts now, according to the principle and as far as he is able, and thereby achieves the goal he is striving for. For him, as for Bernstein and Sorel, “The movement is everything; the goal is nothing.”

Commitment to this philosophy of action accounts for yet a further difference between Sarvodaya and Western anarchism. It would be incorrect to say that Western anarchists have shown no interest in constructive activity. The anarcho-syndicalists certainly believed that, in building up their trade unions, the workers were constructing the social organisation of the new society. But, in the main, Western anarchism has been satisfied to echo Bakunin’s famous dictum: “Destruction is itself a form of creation!” In historical retrospect, classical anarchism—even syndicalism, now that the unions have proved broken reeds in their hands—appears essentially as a movement of protest: a protest against the whole social and political structure of modern industrial society. At the

---

<sup>18</sup> Gandhi’s views on the means-end question and its importance for social theory is admirably discussed in Bondurant, *op. cit.*, Ch.VI.

tance of what Gandhi called the principle of trusteeship—the idea that any private property one may possess, including one’s talents, is held on behalf of, and is to be used in the service of, society. With the abolition of private property goes the abolition of the inequalities it engenders. Both Sarvodayites and anarchists envisage a society in which individuals are at the same time free and equal. Absolute equality is, of course, not a feasible idea, but as Vinoba puts it, the inequality that may be permitted will be no more than that which exists between the five fingers of one’s hand. The important point stressed by both Sarvodayites and anarchists is the need to recognise the equal value, moral, social and economic, of the various types of work performed by different individuals. Echoing Kropotkin’s plea for integrated work, Gandhi and Vinoba call for the abolition of the distinction between intellectual and manual labour and for the recognition of the dignity of work done with the hands. Part, at least, of the Sarvodaya emphasis on the charka or spinning-wheel stems from its symbolisation of the kind of productive work that all men and women should rightly be expected to perform.

A further important condition of a free society stressed by Sarvodayites and anarchists alike is decentralisation: social power must be widely dispersed if tyranny is to be avoided. For the 19<sup>th</sup> century anarchist-communists this condition could be achieved if the local commune were recognised as the basic unit of social organisation. Enjoying complete autonomy with regard to its internal affairs, it would be linked on a federal basis with other communes at the regional, national and international levels for the administration of business involving relations with other communes. For the Sarvodayites the villages, in which 80 per cent of India’s population still live, would be the basic units. Each village would constitute a miniature republic and be linked with other villages not, as Gandhi put it, in a pyramidal fashion “with the apex sustained by the bottom.” Rather, the structure will be ‘an oceanic circle whose centre will be the individual always ready to perish for the

village, the latter ready to perish for the circle of villages, till at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals never aggressive in their arrogance but ever humble, sharing the majesty of the oceanic circle of which they are integral units. Therefore, the outermost circumference will not yield power to crush the inner circle but will give strength to all within and derive its own strength from it.”<sup>7</sup> Such a decentralised polity implies a decentralised economy. Large-scale industry and its concentration in vast megapolitan centres is to be avoided or reduced to the absolute minimum. Industries are to be brought to the villages so that it will be possible for a village, or rather a group of villages, to constitute a practically self-sufficient agro-industrial community. The present generation of Sarvodayites do not see this scheme as an attempt to put back the clock. Less ambiguously than Gandhi, Vinoba does not reject modern technology. On the contrary, he welcomes it as a means of avoiding drudgery and increasing production : he insists only that technology be applied for the welfare of all instead of being used to bolster a system of human exploitation.

In working for their goal the Sarvodayites join with the classical anarchists in condemning political action. No good service can be rendered by the state and those who seek political power, even for beneficent ends, will inevitably be corrupted. The seat of power, argues Vinoba, casts a magic spell over those who occupy it. “If instead of those at present occupying it, we were to occupy it, we would do things very similar to what they are doing now. The seat of power is such. Whoever sits on it becomes narrow in outlook. He develops fear and desires to safeguard himself by keeping a large army”<sup>8</sup>. Parliamentary democracy stands condemned for several reasons. Despite “the sham device of voting,” it does not really result in state policy being guided by public opinion. It involves also the principle of majority rule which can

---

<sup>7</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *Sarvodaya*, (Navajivan: Ahmedabad), 1954, pp.70–1.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Doctor, *op. cit.*, pp.57–8.

which the masses, inspired by the heroic endeavours of dedicated revolutionaries, would shortly rise to throw off, once and for all, the artificial chains of the state. Today, some Western anarchists are prepared to countenance “gradualism” but only *faute de mieux*, in the absence of a revolutionary situation. The Sarvodaya anarchists, however, are convinced “gradualists” : they see the anarchist goal in much the same way as Godwin did, as something to be reached only after men have become more perfect than they now are. This position, known in the West as “philosophical anarchism,” partly explains the apparent inconsistencies of the Sarvodayites towards the institution of government. Until all men, or at least a large proportion of them, are fit for non-governmental society, government, as a matter of fact, will continue to exist. It seems reasonable, therefore, to try to ensure that society gets the best government it is presently capable of. For the Sarvodayites this means at least a democratic government, with all its faults. Vinoba’s gradualism is quite apparent in his statement envisaging three distinct stages : first, a free central government; second, the decentralised self-governing state; and third, pure anarchy or freedom from all government.<sup>17</sup>

This kind of anarchism seems to come close to the anarchism of the Marxists with their idea of a transitional stage of socialism between capitalism and complete communism. Some of Vinoba’s statements in which he compares his views with those of the Marxists but challenges their notion that the dictatorship of the proletariat is a step towards the stateless society, would seem to bear out this interpretation. This, however, would be a mistake, as can be clearly seen when we consider the celebrated Gandhian stance on the question of ends and means. Marxist theorising, like most Western theorising, is in terms of the dichotomy of ends and means: the end is pure anarchist communism, the means to it is the dictatorship of the proletariat. Moreover, if the end is good enough (as

---

<sup>17</sup> Cited by Doctor, *op. cit.*, p.65.



is very different in theory, if not in practice, from accepting non-violence as a categorical imperative. The latter, though not the former, involves a willingness to suspend the rational mode of thinking in terms of cause and consequence, the mode which now dominates the Western mind.

To complicate the matter still further, the Sarvodayites combine an absolute commitment to non-violence with a flexibility which, on occasions, even to Western sympathisers, appears to be outrageously inconsistent. In part, this flexibility stems from Gandhi's insistence that absolute truth cannot be known to the as yet unfulfilled human mind. He claimed only to be a seeker after Truth, not to have found it.<sup>16</sup> A human being, however good, can arrive only at relative truth. Since non-violence is deemed to be the way to Truth, it follows that no human being can ever achieve perfect non-violence: a person is always, more or less non-violent; the ideal is achieved only in death. The combination of this premise with the premise of an evolutionary tendency towards non-violence which is unevenly distributed among mankind leads to the conclusion that non-violence resistance, in the Gandhian sense, is not always possible as a practical policy. It was not possible, for example, in the Sino-Indian border war of 1962 because the Indian people, for all Gandhi's efforts, were not strong enough to adopt ahimsa.

And since genuine ahimsa is a doctrine of the strong and violence is preferable to non-violence adopted for cowardly reasons, armed resistance was justifiable, although of course the Sarvodayites themselves could not participate in it.

This kind of reasoning leads to a further difference between Sarvoday and mainstream Western anarchism. The latter is predicated on the assumption not only that it is possible for men to live an ordered existence without the state but that it is possible for them to do so now. In its extreme form, this assumption finds expression in the Bakuninite theory of spontaneous revolution according to

---

<sup>16</sup> See Joan Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence*, (O.U.P.), 1959, pp.16-7.

only mean the tyranny of the majority over the minority, not the welfare of all. For the Sarvodayites, decisions consistent with the latter can be reached only through strict adherence to the principle of unanimity which compels the search for a consensus. Again, parliamentary democracy involves political parties which are divisive forces and which seek power by hook or by crook, by vilification of their opponents and by bribes and threats. "Difference of views is a healthy sign," says Vinoba, "and I regard it as necessary and inevitable. But when parties are formed on the basis of different views, they are less concerned with ideology than with organisation, discipline and propaganda. The party is an instrument for attaining political power. And power predominates while ideas become mere convenient trade-marks used for power and political rivalry"<sup>9</sup>.

In place of political action the Sarvodayites, like the anarchists, advocate direct action by the people themselves. The politics of the people must be substituted for the politics of the power-state. People must become aware of their own strength and learn to solve their own problems. The revolution can be made only from below, not from above. The Sarvodaya workers do not constitute a revolutionary party appealing to the people for support and promising to usher in the millennium. They exist only to give help and advice: the people themselves must take the initiative and work out their own salvation.

These and other parallels between Sarvodaya and Western anarchist thought are important aids to understanding what the movement initiated by Gandhi and taken further by Vinoba is all about. For an anarchist evaluation of the movement, however, the divergencies are more illuminating.

---

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Suresh Ram, *Vinoba and His Mission*, (Sarva Seva Sangh: Kashi), 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., J 962, pp.385. This is the fullest and best history of the movement for bhoodan and gramdan.

Compared with the mainstream of the Western anarchist tradition, the most obvious difference is the Sarvodaya attitude towards religion. Of the great anarchist thinkers discussed by Eltzbacher<sup>10</sup> and Woodcock, only one, Leo Tolstoy, based his anarchism on religion. Many, perhaps the majority, of Western anarchists have followed Bakunin in coupling God and the State and rejecting both for the same reason: their denial of the sovereignty of the individual. In the West, atheism and anarchism appear as natural bedfellows, the twin off-spring of Protestantism when taken to its logical conclusion. Sarvodaya anarchism, however, is fundamentally religious. “At the back of every word that I have uttered since I have known what public life is, and of every act that I have done,” declared Gandhi, “there has been a religious consciousness and a downright religious motive”<sup>11</sup>. An unshakable faith in God and an insistence on the primacy of spirit constitute the core of the philosophy of most Sarvodayites. But, when this has been said, it is important to note the catholicity of their religious views. Gandhi and Vinoba are Hindus but they claim no special status for the Hindu religion: all religions are merely different ways of finding God. Moreover, according to the Gandhian conception of religion as that “which changes one’s nature, which binds one to the truth within and which ever purifies,”<sup>12</sup> even the sincere atheist qualifies as a religious man.<sup>13</sup> If the atheist subscribes to a “belief in the ordered moral government of the universe”<sup>14</sup>, then, despite his denials, he has the essence of religion in him. As if to make it easier for those who boggle at metaphysics, Gandhi reversed the famil-

---

<sup>10</sup> P. Eltzbacher. *Anarchism*, 1908.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Dhawan, *op. cit.*, p.38.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> At least one prominent Gandhian is an avowed atheist—Gora (G. Ramchandra Rao). For an account of his discussions with Gandhi on this question, see his *An Atheist with Gandhi*, (Navajivan: Ahmedabad), 1951.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Dhawan, *op. cit.*, p.38.

iar equation and asserted, “Truth is God”—adding that this was the most perfect definition of God as far as human speech could go.<sup>15</sup>

Clearly, for the Gandhians the importance of religion lies in its buttressing of the belief in an objective moral order. Belief in God rules out ethical relativism and moral injunctions, therefore, take on the character of absolutes. This ethical absolutism provides a further contrast with the main Western anarchist thinkers who, like Godwin and Kropotkin, have attempted to provide rational and naturalistic foundations for their ethical codes. The consequences of this different approach to ethics are vividly apparent when one considers the contra! moral principle of Sarvodaya, non-violence. For the Sarvodayites, nonviolence is not something one argues for or against: it is something one either accepts or rejects. It is most certainly not a subject for utilitarian considerations. In this connection, it is necessary to recall Gandhi’s distinction between passive resistance and satyagraha. The former is a technique of non-violent resistance which may be, and often has been, adopted by those who do not rule out the use of violence in certain circumstances. The choice of this technique may be dictated by the fact that the resisters have no other effective means of resistance at their disposal. This kind of non-violence Gandhi regarded as the non-violence of the weak. Satyagraha, in contrast, is the non-violence of the strong, a method of resistance adopted because it is felt to be the only morally right course of action and which would be used even in those circumstances when the resisters had superior physical force on their side. As a result of the sorry history of the use of violence by anarchists in the past and under the impact of the current campaign for nuclear disarmament, many Western anarchists would now be prepared to admit the futility of violence but few would accept non-violence as an absolute moral injunction. At the most, the new pacifist anarchists would argue that they can foresee no circumstances in which the use of violence would be justified. This

---

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p.42.