

Quest for an Alternate Vision

M P Mathai

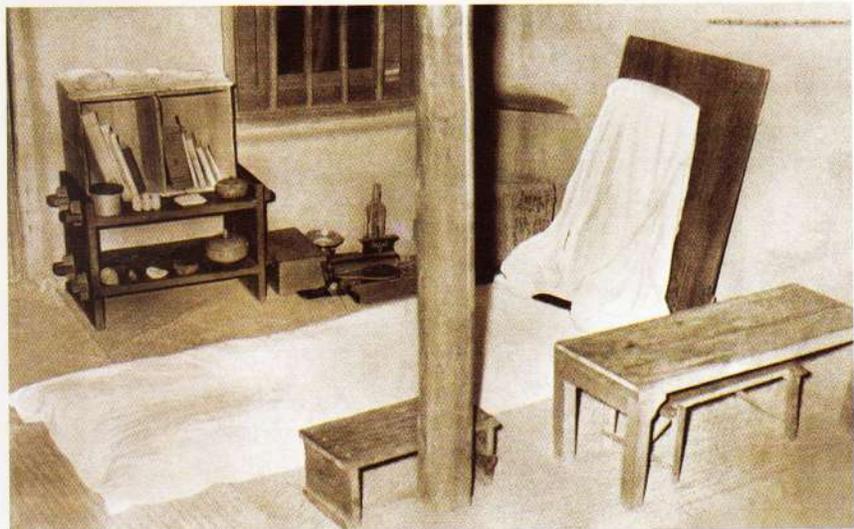
Outlining the challenges humanity is facing right now, the author emphasises that this is a man-made crisis. Delving deep into various dimensions of the challenges posed by modern society, the author concludes 'that the prognosis is evidently clear and survival of humanity is threatened by such real dangers as climate change and resultant natural calamities, human beings, though beguiled by self-aggrandisement and sensuous enjoyment, have started a process of rethinking.'

R*eturn to Gandhi* is an expression we hear often repeated in the general discourse on Gandhi, particularly in the context of celebrating his 150th birth anniversary. One is constrained to comment that it has almost become a cliché; not only uncritical admirers but even serious students of Gandhi use it almost as a refrain while affirming that the only way to solve the pressing problems confronted by humanity today is to 'return to Gandhi'. As 'return' suggests going back to a place where you have been before or a situation that existed before, to apply the term 'return' to Gandhi does not seem very accurate. It is well-known that the central aim of the Gandhian programme of action is the attainment of Swaraj and Sarvodaya which in general parlance mean the all-round, (w)holistic development of humanity. A critical look at the principles and programmes of Gandhi indicates that he was a revolutionary reformer and guide with a prophetic vision and perspective and, therefore, our duty is to go forward to him, accept his vision and programme of action and work for their realisation for building a true and sustainable civilisation.

We know that humanity today is passing through critical times; it

is confronting probably the worst-ever crisis in its existence, with its survival hanging in the balance right in front of us. Contemporary society has been characterised as knowledge society; it is an age of explosion of and access to information and knowledge based on information, particularly through Internet connectivity. But in spite of such easy and widespread access to information and knowledge, in daily living we confront natural phenomena which are practically incomprehensible, inexplicable and hence mind-boggling to most people. It is true that scientists like Michio Kaku aver that (three) scientific revolutions

in the fields of quantum mechanics, bio-genetics and artificial intelligence are dramatically reshaping the destiny of humanity positively. But they too are not sure about the fate of our universe and the intelligent life in it. Although astrophysicists had long thought that the universe will expand forever, present scientists are not certain about that scenario. One possibility they visualise is that the universe will eventually die no matter whether it is through what they call a Big Crunch by which the universe dies in fire or the Big Chill or entropy death in which the universe dies in ice. What quantum physicists tell us is that either way the universe



Gandhiji's room in Babu Kutir, Sevagram

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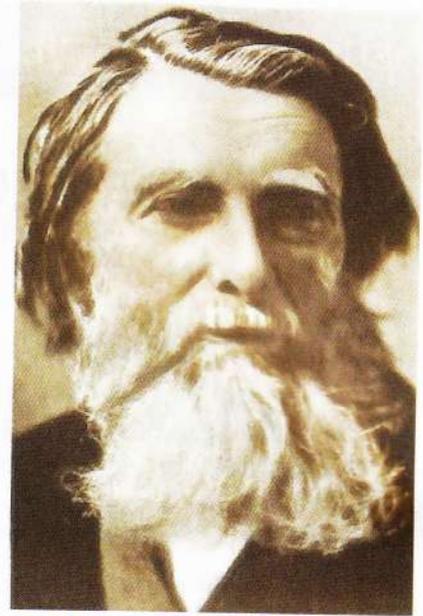
Leo Tolstoy inspired Gandhiji in his South African Struggle (in 1910)

and intelligent life will eventually die with it. Of course, they also speak about the remote possibility of human beings manipulating the fourth pillar of science, the space-time continuum, expand the microscopic wormholes that connect the various universes and using them tunnel their way through and escape the death of the universe. What the scientists speak about relates to the far distant future, billions of years into the future. Ordinary human beings are concerned and worried about what is happening right in front of them and now, affecting their lives and life-support systems directly and destructively.

It is obvious that the crisis we face today is well recognised as a manmade crisis in the sense that is the natural outcome of the terrible atrocities that powerful humans have committed against Mother Earth and our weaker fellow human beings. We know that it was the scientific revolution (of the seventeenth century) and subsequent European Enlightenment that led to a paradigm shift at all levels of human existence. The traditional worldview that guided human life in all its aspects was replaced by the so called scientific worldview. For example, in the traditional or pre-enlightenment

worldview, which is also characterised as Spiritualistic Worldview, it was assumed that life has a dimension of transcendence and there was a Divine Order behind existence. Earth was understood as a living organism and human life was to be organised on the basis of this understanding, respecting and even adoring every aspect of nature and trying to live in tune with its laws. But as physical sciences enabled humans to understand the working of the laws of nature more accurately, human attitude changed dramatically and drastically. In the arrogance of the newly-acquired fund of knowledge, they developed an instrumental/utilitarian view of nature and desacrilised Mother Earth. The earth came to be viewed merely as a giant machine and a repository of material resources for human consumption. Humans were here to dominate, control and manipulate nature using science and technology. The meaning and purpose of life were redefined and physical welfare and sensuous enjoyment were elevated as the ultimate purpose of human existence. A brand of materialism evolved and it replaced religion and spirituality. Knowledge, traditionally viewed as an aid to service, came to be considered a mere instrument for the attainment of power and domination. Sir Francis Bacon put it succinctly: 'knowledge is power.' In the new scientific secular civilisation, physical comfort and craving for sensual enjoyment were encouraged beyond measure, and it naturally resulted in the discounting of morality and spirituality from the fabric of life. Utilitarian values acquired precedence over moral and spiritual values and religion was

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John Ruskin's 'Unto This Last' inspired Gandhi to live an austere life in a commune

dubbed and dismissed as nothing but sheer superstition.

The idea that unlimited physical comforts and sensuous enjoyment could be chased and realised developed into a new theory and ideology known as developmentalism. Development at any cost has become the motto of modern civilisation, irrespective of the divergent political ideologies followed by different nation states. Developmentalism has assumed the dimension of a new political religion, so to say, and like most religions has become superstitious and fundamentalist.

From the hindsight of this decade of the twenty-first century, the devastating nature of contemporary civilisation is as clear to us as daylight but it was not so in the beginning of the last century. On the contrary, modern civilisation with its uni-dimensional focus on physical comforts and sensuous enjoyment, developed by the West, in the West, and thrust upon the rest (of the world) by them, was glorified by the elite classes around the world as the ideal way of life to be aspired and attained by all. Ironically, a small group of intellectuals of the West, like Edward Carpenter,

Leo Tolstoy, John Ruskin, (Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson from the U.S.) et al. often characterised as exponents of 'the Other West' questioned and critiqued that civilisation and characterised it as a disease. Gandhi, who got personally acquainted with some of them and studied their works during his student days in London (1888 – 1891), later continued his intellectual and moral dialogue with them. He developed a worldview thus and enunciated them, though not in sufficient detail, in his first book *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home-Rule*, rightly characterised by some as a seminal Gandhi text and by certain others as 'the Gandhian Manifesto'.

As is well-known, Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* contained, among other things, a severe critique of modern western civilisation. He diagnosed the

root cause of the disease of modern civilisation as **violence**. It was rooted in and sustained by violence both direct and structural, and consequentially, it generated and escalated more violence. The other dangers that Gandhi identified in modern western civilisation were that it dismissed religion and morality from human life and transactions as redundant and elevated physical comfort – he termed it as "bodily welfare" – to the level of the ultimate goal to be sought after in life. In keeping with the Marxian perspective, it measured the level of human civilisation on the basis of its increased technological capacity to dominate over, manipulate and control nature. Gandhi warns in *Hind Swaraj* that as modern civilisation functions on the basis an instrumental view of physical nature and human beings, it will turn out to be a nine

days wonder or even take humanity eventually to its doom, unless checked and corrected. Further studies he did during his post-*Hind Swaraj* period and his several experiments and experiences convinced him of the veracity of the findings he presented in *Hind Swaraj*. Accordingly, answering all those including Jawaharlal Nehru who thought and wrote that the ideas laid down in *Hind Swaraj* were unscientific, reactionary, outdated and romantic, Gandhi, in a communication to Jawaharlal Nehru in 1945, reaffirmed that he stood by everything he wrote in his first book and did not think it necessary to make any correction therein. We know that several thinkers from different parts of the world examined the critique and alternative vision presented in *Hind Swaraj*, some of them acknowledging their indebtedness to Gandhi and



Manufacture of charkhas at Nalwadi (Maharashtra) – ready for despatch to village centres

others without doing so. Studies like Rachael Carson's *The Silent Spring* (1962), Marilyn Ferguson's *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (1980), Dennis Meadows, Donella Meadows and Jorgen Randers' *The Limits to Growth* (1972), E.F. Schumacher's *Small Is Beautiful* (1973), *A Guide for the Perplexed* (1977), Alvin Toffler's *The Third Wave* (1980), to mention only a few, have enumerated graphically the havoc wrought by human aggression on physical nature and on various other aspects of human life leading to a crisis of existence. These studies, while warning humanity against the impending possibility of a total global catastrophe, also present alternative visions of a sustainable future civilisation and it is fascinating that these visions are mostly in consonance with the Gandhian alternative. The authors of these studies also share Gandhi's view that the present civilisation is totally unsustainable and unless we take a U-turn and start building an alternative world

order on the basis of the principles of sustainability, non-violence, justice and peace, it will prove to be a nine-days wonder and crumble down like a pack of cards, as warned by Gandhi.

Now that the prognosis is evidently clear and survival of humanity is threatened by such real dangers as climate change and resultant natural calamities, human beings, though beguiled by self-aggrandisement and sensuous enjoyment, have started a process of rethinking. When the United Nations Organisation discussed the issues relating to climate change and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), some of the world leaders referred to Gandhi, his vision and programme of action for building an alternative, sustainable civilisation. The UN Declaration Document clearly states that the focus of the programme is on people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership, points repeatedly emphasised by Gandhi on many occasions. It also states that the member nations are determined to take steps

which are urgently needed to shift the world onto a sustainable and resilient path. But it appears that no serious steps are taken by most nation states to implement such important covenants and protocols. Look at the state of the Kyoto Protocol, for example.

Modern civilisation with its glitz and glamour continue to entice gullible people and the majority of humanity, is caught within its trammels even today. It is not without reason that Gandhi called it a nine days' wonder. As the UN, rightly posed it, the question before us is simple and obvious: Are we ready to read the clear signs on the horizon and change on to a sustainable path. This was, precisely, what Gandhi had asked in his *Hind Swaraj* and it was the basic principles of a sustainable civilisation that he enunciated in it. Our responsibility is to translate them into reality. And that would be the true tribute to his revered memory too. ■

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YE-1262/2019