Tracing the Idea of 'Political' in Gandhian Social Movements: A Study of Ekta Parishad

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INTRODUCTION

"Political line ek aisi line hai ki jesse daldal…usmein paer rakhte hi logo ki vichar dhara badal jati hai…koi kitna bhi kahe ki hum gareebon ke liye kaam karenge, mujhe lag raha hai aise bahut kam log hai…jitne bhi sansad vidhayak bane hain, kiya kisi ne aaj tak palat ke ghareebon ke beech mein jake pucha hai ki aap ki kya pareshani hai, ki apke gaon mein kis cheez ki kami hai jinka humne aap se wada kiya tha."

English translation:

[The political realm is like a quicksand out of which, once trapped, you cannot get out. The motive for entering the political realm changes once they get established in this sphere. No matter how much a political representative claims to be pro-poor, none return to the villages to heed their needs and inquire about their problems or fulfil their promises made during their elections.]

(A social activist from Non-Profit Ekta Parishad, 2018)

This quote is not from a scholar but a simple woman living in a village in Tilda, Chhattisgarh, struggling for her land rights. Probing deeply into her response, it could be realized how the political sphere has been dissociated from the rest of the society. The kind of political power that today's politicians hold lacks a humane, ethical base. But, why did our Constitution makers incorporate this very idea of the 'political' if that is the case? What was the reason for Gandhi's 'political' to be given a backseat? Anuradha Veeravalli answers this question by observing that:

The opposition to the theory of political power was enough reason for Gandhi to make enemies of all those who had a stake in independent India. The Congress was the first to dissociate itself from Gandhi. Jinnah with the Muslim League, the *Hindu Mahasabha* and Ambedkar were not far behind. Common to each of them was a belief that political power was the solution to all problems, offering, at least, the only practical solution. The Congress wanted to establish a sovereign state and a constitution which made it clear that peace, not non-violence nor truth was its goal. Jinnah and the Hindu Mahasabha each had their own dream of a heady mix of religion and political power, the one in establishing Pakistan as a 'pure' Islamic state and the latter in affirming India as a Hindu state. Ambedkar was clear that he wanted political power for the depressed classes. He did not care much for the *Harijan*

Sewak Samaj's constructive work amongst the depressed classes, arguing that it merely duplicated work that the state was already doing.[1]

The above sentences corroborate how Congress, *Hindu Mahasabha*, Jinnah and Ambedkar conceived a 'political' that catered to their interests, formal peace, a Muslim country or a pro-minority state, respectively. It was, and I think it still is, considered apt that political power was/is the solution to all problems. The Nehruvian kind of 'political' is widely accepted as the panacea for all ills. Hence, today, 'political' is interpreted as one based on vote bank politics, elections, and the party system. This kind of 'political' has established itself as a permanent and single idea of how politics should be understood. However, *Ekta Parishad*, a Gandhian social movement, challenges such a narrow definition of 'political'. This movement, which forms the case study of the present paper, emphatically believes in a kind of 'political' inspired by Gandhi. Thus, it practices a 'political' based on 'people's power' and gives space to dialogue, struggle and constructive work influenced by the moral edifice constructed by Gandhi's understanding of 'political'. Further, the paper argues that Gandhi's idea of 'political' could be interpreted as an 'embedded political.' After explaining the nuances and implications of Gandhi's 'embedded politics', the paper focuses on the dilemma that Gandhians started facing post-Gandhi, which obscured this idea in the long run. The last section of the paper delineates how *Ekta Parishad,* a Gandhian movement, endeavors to keep hope alive by adapting Gandhi's 'embedded political' in the present century when versions of 'political' espoused by Gandhi's critics hold a prominent place.

Considering the above points, the paper is divided into three sections. The first section attempts to present Gandhi's idea of 'political.' The second section explains the dilemma the present Gandhian movements have faced. The third

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[1] Orwell. G, *A Collection of Essays*. Doubleday Anchor, 1954, p. 180.

part of the paper throws light upon how Gandhian movements like *Ekta Parishad* make sense of Gandhi's idea of 'political.'

I. GANDHI'S IDEA OF 'POLITICAL'

In my view, the reason behind understanding Gandhi's idea of 'political' is that we are trapped in the divisive and discriminating idea of 'political' operating today. This idea that, no doubt, came mainly from stalwarts like Nehru and Ambedkar must have had a moral core, but as it was mixed with the Western liberal values that inclined more towards profit-making, individualism and selfish interests, the moral fabric started exacerbating. Further, our colonial mindset made us accept it without any opposition. This, in turn, pushed us to concede to those negative aspects of the liberal framework that damaged our culture, society and politics, too. It is now normalized to such an extent that only a few dare to go beyond this frame. The cost of such passive acceptance is that today, we witness many communities getting disillusioned by the entire political system, as evidenced by the quote mentioned at the beginning of this paper. It is time to find alternatives so that those who have lost touch with the collective consciousness and 'spiritual self' may find an anchor that supports them and their surroundings.

Especially during the later decades of his life, Gandhi had experienced how liberal politics was divisive, viewing everything in binaries and also eschewing the notion of a 'spiritual self.' The seeds of such a divisive approach is apparent in the binary created between the natural and human world. Here, it is crucial to note Akeel Bilgrami's views. In one of his articles, he asks, "How and when did we transform the concept of nature into the concept of natural resources? in response to which he elaborates-

   From anima mundi, there were built-in constraints to what one could take from nature, and such taking as was often accompanied by rituals of respect

shown to nature and the divine presence within it before cycles of planting and hunting. Now, without such metaphysical constraint, they argued, things were openly being set up to take from nature with impunity. They presciently saw that this would make the hitherto fitful practice of forced enclosures, a systematic and legally backed practice, depriving the poor of the collective cultivation of the commons and generating the future that pointed to what we today call "agribusiness", thereby destroying the local forms of egalitarianism that radical sects had envisioned ("Gandhi's Radicalism: An Interpretation," 2016, 221).

Moreover, in his analysis, Bilgrami shows that Gandhi's conception of nature was closely associated with the divine, with *atman* (soul) that resided not only in nature but in all its inhabitants. Therefore, this conception of divinity connected every living being with nature. Gandhi's understanding of a sacred bond with nature coincided with the interpretation of the 'Early Dissents' of Europe in the seventeenth century, according to whom a conception of an inert and brute nature had been spread by the orthodox figures in the Royal Society.

The Royal Society had allied with the commercial and mercantile interests and with the Anglican orthodoxy to control and master nature. They followed the deliberately constructed ideology reflected in the remarks made by one of the prominent members of the Royal Society, William Petty, who had said in his work dating from 1682 that, "What may be the meaning of the glorified bodies, in case of the place of the blessed shall be, without the convex of the orb of the fixed stars, is that the whole system of the World was made for the use of our earth's men" ("Gandhi's Radicalism: An Interpretation," 2016, 218). Thus, Bilgrami describes the evisceration of divinity from nature due to the ploy manufactured by the early modern thinkers of the Royal Society, which destroyed the ethical value of nature and treated it as a mere commodity. Gandhi rightly predicted the same fate for nature in his times since, with

colonization, the modern duality between nature and humans had already crept in. This had started transforming nature into natural resources, a process that Akeel Bilgrami elucidates.

In contrast to such a divisive political framework, Gandhi looked at the idea of 'political' from a holistic lens. Gandhi's holism in formulating the idea of 'political' can be observed at two levels. The first is the interconnectedness of the social, economic, spiritual, and political realms. The second is developing an inextricable link between self, truth, and nonviolence.

This section argues that this kind of holism led Gandhi to conceive the idea of the 'embedded political.' The concept of 'embedded political' signifies that, for Gandhi, all realms of life, political, social, economic, environmental, ethical, and spiritual, are ultimately interconnected. All realms are firmly attached. Because of such embeddedness, the meaning of each sphere becomes enhanced as it is seen through the lens of other spheres as well. The idea is thus dialectical, each realm being linked with the others and none working in isolation. Therefore, one can claim that the term 'embedded political' presents a totalised ontology that Gandhi advocated while framing his political philosophy, and how this kind of understanding of 'political' manifested in real life needs to be explained. This is shown in the following subsections that delineate the practical implications of Gandhi's 'embedded political' through three examples.

I.I. 'EMBEDDED POLITICAL' IN PRACTICE

At the very outset, we need to remember that Gandhi's idea of 'embedded politics' was not just a theory or a philosophy; it had practical implications as well. The examples below highlight how Gandhi unified different spheres of life to define his idea of 'political.'

A. HINDU-MUSLIM UNITY

For Gandhi, the spiritual and the political realms were closely connected. He explains seeing the political sphere from a religious lens in the following words:

"I could not be leading a religious life unless I identified myself with the whole of mankind and that I could not do unless I took part in politics. The whole gamut of man's activities today constitutes an indivisible whole… I do not know of any religion apart from activity. It provides a moral basis to all other activities without which life would be a maze of sound and fury signifying nothing." [2]

From the above lines, the inextricable link between religion and politics in Gandhi's understanding of what is political becomes clear. According to him, the active realm of politics is founded upon the moral bedrock laid by the religious sphere. Religion, not in the sectarian sense, unifies mankind, as it shows all the path to *swaraj*, while politics, not based upon selfish interests, paves the way for building such a *swaraj.* He writes, "If India adopted the doctrine of love as an active part of her religion and introduced it in her politics, *Swaraj* would descend upon India from heaven."[3] Three things can be observed from this single sentence. One is that Gandhi's religion was all-encompassing, and hence he called for establishing a religion of India. It did not limit itself to just one category. The second point is that, for Gandhi, politics could not be separated from religion. Another important point is his articulation of *Swaraj* or freedom. The modern value of freedom is understood in-depth by Gandhi, whose project of obtaining India's freedom from colonial

[2] Orwell. G, *A Collection of Essays*. Doubleday Anchor, 1954, p. 180.

[3] Gandhi, M. K, *What Jesus Means to Me*, Navajivan Publishing Trust, 1959, p.14.

rule had nonviolence and truth as its base. These two values, i.e. nonviolence and truth, were, in turn, the lenses through which Gandhi developed his religious philosophy. This connection can be noticed in the following sentences that Gandhi reiterated for the *Gandhi Seva Sangh*:

"I am quite sure that no one would have cared for my politics, if I was not pledged to truth and non-violence. Truth and non-violence are synonymous with God and whatever we do is nothing apart from them."[4] Thus, religion, nonviolence, truth and freedom were united in Gandhi's framework which forms an 'indivisible whole.'"

This explains why Gandhi's idea of 'political' underscored the importance of breaking down barriers between Hindus and Muslims and between Indians and the British - which lucidly describes how he connected the idea of 'us' and 'them.' Contrastively, Jinnah tried to profit from religious differences between Hindu and Muslim communities. Unlike Gandhi, who reinforced inclusive nationalism based on the legacy of Indian civilisation, Jinnah gave significance to religious nationalism. Although Gandhi ultimately had to accept the partition of the subcontinent, he was right in foretelling that.

"It would lead to much bloodshed and permanently sour the relations between the two countries."[5]

Today, religious differences have tainted politics and adversely impacted the relations between Hindus and Muslims, not only across borders but within the country as well. Gandhi envisaged a future embedded in the glorious past of Indian civilisation, which embraced multiple races and religions in harmony. The eruption of violence within and outside the country could have been avoided if Jinnah had heeded Gandhi's point of view. In contemporary times,

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[4] Jawed, D. A. (2016). *Gandhi: Study of a Saint Politician*. Faizbooks.com publication, p. 178.
[5] Parekh, Bhikhu, *Gandhi: A Very Short Introduction.* Oxford; New York, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 27.

to resolve the bitterness in Hindu-Muslim relations, increasing platforms for democratic dialogue could be a substantive option. Mr Ramesh Sharma, the National coordinator of Ekta Parishad, views dialogue as a significant factor driving democracy in the right direction and therefore insists on *Ekta Parishad* supporting such dialogue. He says, "Nobody is 'enemy', it is 'opponent.' Democracy moves through dialogue with the opposition, while enmity stops this." (Sharma, 2018). From these sentences it is clear that Gandhian social movements, like *Ekta Parishad* today, have succeeded in erasing the difference between the 'self' and the 'other'. This kind of Gandhian approach to conducting a dialogue can pave the way for a sustainable solution to the issue in question.

Just as Gandhi saw an inextricable link between religion and politics, similarly, he envisaged a 'political' which would connect humans with plural life goals instead of just *Artha*, as discussed in the following subsection.

B. PLURALITY OF LIFE GOALS

Gandhi's political framework had a solid philosophical base. His idea of 'embedded political' is reflected in how he creates a seamless link among the life goals of Hinduism, termed *purushartha*, namely ethics (*dharma*), economic benefits and democratic politics (*artha*), pleasurable activity (*kama*), and the pursuit of spiritual transcendence (*moksha*).

To understand this argument in depth, attention needs to be paid to Anthony Parel's Pax Gandhiana: The Political Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi. In this book, Parel asks a pertinent question:

"Whether politics and economics deal with the real issues of daily life, and whether the material basis of life can be maintained without undermining life's ethical basis and spiritual aspirations."[6]

The book suggests that one could engage in this quest by focusing on a political philosophy based on an organic, holistic framework of ideas.

Anthony Parel endeavors to present a holistic picture of Gandhi's political philosophy and asserts that Gandhi himself emphasized building up Pax Gandhiana: "Pax Gandhiana stands for a peaceful and nonviolent political order, both domestically and internationally."[7] Parel explains that such a peaceful order cannot be established with political means alone. It calls for the confluence of the four canonical ends of life: ethics (*dharma*), economic benefits and democratic politics (*artha*), pleasurable activity (*kama*), and the pursuit of spiritual transcendence (*moksha*).

By reviving the *purusharthas,* Gandhi emphasizes the need for a plurality of life-goals. According to Gandhi, *Purushartha* is what distinguishes humans from animals. As an intelligent purpose associated with human life, our struggle is distinguished from that of animals. Our purpose, thus defined, seeks much more than bodily material well-being, namely moral and spiritual well-being. Pursuing *purushartha* helps in making such a transcendence from our mere bodily conditions towards achieving the moral and spiritual goals.

Gandhian organizations like *Ekta Parishad* understand the value of plural life-goals. In this movement, each member is trained to look inward and rejuvenate the inner ethical self through different spiritual exercises like morning and evening prayers. Members are encouraged to be morally strong so they are not waylaid by greed, anger and jealousy; thus, poor but not

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[6] Parel. A, *Pax Gandhiana: The Political Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi,* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016, preface.

[7] Ibid.

helpless members gain power from their ethical strength and struggle only to attain their rightful share in society. They do not covet excessive land holdings, but only that which is needed to live a dignified and peaceful life. The movement sees *kama* as being fulfilled through various constructive and creative activities, such as participating in plays that make people aware of their cause, singing songs to communicate their issues, and using art forms that connect people. Concerning *moksha*, the movement, in like manner to Gandhi, believes in attaining it through working and struggling for genuine causes pertaining to oneself and other fellow human beings. As mentioned earlier, Gandhi aimed for a life that would connect *artha* with *moksha*, and hence wanted to establish an economy based on ethics as explained in the section below.

C. ETHICAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

For Gandhi, the 'social' is closely related to the political as he focused on cultivating social values that would transform the individual from within and define the latter's political role. In short, he wanted a 'political' embedded in moral or ethical values, which, in turn, were embedded in the social. In other words, a society that has imbibed moral or ethical values will form a political system to support and further such values. As the 'self' starts adhering to moral values and society starts to adopt the path of selflessness, the economic sphere also begins to redefine itself. This redefinition becomes essential because the foundation of economic values starts building on the base laid by moral values that inform the social. Therefore, the profit motive gives way to the motivation of doing good for all and selfless service takes precedence over selfish activities. This also explains why Gandhi focused more on indigenous products and small-scale co-operatives rather than big industries. Nehru, on the other hand, had a very different idea. In one of the letters, Nehru says to Gandhi that:

"You misjudge greatly I think the civilisation of the West and attach too great an importance to its many failings. You have stated somewhere that India has nothing to learn from the West and that she has reached a pinnacle of wisdom in the past. I entirely disagree with this viewpoint and I neither think that the so-called *Rama Raj* was very good in the past, nor do I want it back. I think the Western or industrial civilisation is bound to conquer India, maybe with many changes and adaptations, but nonetheless, in the main, it is based on industrialism. You have strongly criticized the many obvious defects of industrialism and hardly paid any attention to its merits."[8]

These sentences speak volumes about Nehru's inclination towards Western civilisation. Being highly influenced by socialism, he adhered to a modern path laid down by the West, which is why he supported industrialisation, representing modern development. He did not go deeper into the evils of industrialism that amassed profits at the center. Gandhi had gauged the consequences of the Western development model and rightly believed that it would weaken the moral fabric of society. Despite Nehru's opposition, Gandhi insisted upon a morally righteous model of development that would be defined by an ethical sense of responsibility exercised by local communities rather than a centralized state. That is why he emphasized creating or rejuvenating Ram Rajya as a symbol of moral governance. *Ram Rajya* denoted a political order that ensured an ethical polity and society and an ethical economy. Vinoba provided the blueprint of a just society and an ethical economy. Along with *sam patti-dan,* he supported *samiti-dan,* which, according to him, meant the gift of approval, i.e. declaring one's belief in *Sarvodaya, Shanti-Sena, Gram Dan* and *Khaki*. This approval was to be shown by putting aside something every day for the welfare of society, like a daily handful of grain from every household, as a token of faith in nonviolence. Such practices can be taught successfully in society only when the education system also focuses

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[8] Uma Iyengar and Lalitha Zackariah (eds.), *Together They Fought: Gandhi-Nehru Correspondence, 1921-1948.* Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2011, pp. 50-52.

on strengthening the moral values of young students who, as adults, will be able to lead their region, state, country and world on the path of substantive equality, liberty and fraternity.

With these few examples, I have tried to show that Gandhi's inclusive, holistic 'embedded political' contained seeds of substantive transformation. However, the reader may rightly ask why this impactful idea has not been implemented and remains dormant. The answer lies in the dilemma that Gandhians faced after Gandhi, about which some light will be thrown in the subsequent section.

II. THE DILEMMA

The dilemma faced by Gandhians today can be elucidated by referring to two interpretations of Gandhi's 'political', coming from two Gandhians, Vinoba Bhave and Jayaprakash Narayan [JP]. Interestingly, although JP and Have adopted the social movement route after independence, they responded differently during the emergency. Bhave considered Indira Gandhi a great leader, and her declaration of emergency was a necessary correction for the future of democracy. In contrast, JP was highly critical of her dictatorial traits and hence led a nationwide political movement against the regime.

In this context, Thomas Weber observes that while the contrasting elements, the spiritual and the political, were integrated in Gandhi's praxis, these same elements were separated in the movements led by Jayaprakash Narayan and Vinoba. Weber asserts that, while JP adhered to Gandhi's techniques which proved politically successful, Vinoba followed Gandhi's ideals. Accordingly, in early 1958, Vinoba laid down the four principles of *Satyagraha*, namely:

 1. Satyagraha is positive, not negative;
2. It should proceed from gentle to gentler to gentlest;

3. Happiness should arise merely from hearing the word *'satyagraha'*.

4. There should be no insistence on the part of the *satyagrahi* as insistence should come from truth itself.

Like Gandhi, Vinoba placed high importance on '*swaraj'*, or 'self-rule', a concept both defined in terms that encompassed far more than the mere political. For Vinoba, the term meant ruling the self which, according to him, was impossible if one was under some other person's command. Inoba clarifies that to neutralize violent forces and to arouse the world's conscience,Gandhi's nonviolence had to take on 'more subtle and finer forms.' *Satyagraha* could no longer afford to 'create agitation or tension in the minds of the opponent'; it had to avoid a 'collision of minds and seek harmony in thought.' Until change was brought about through understanding and acceptance, rather than through imposition, 'the seeds of violence, imperialism and world wars would not be rooted out'. The explanation so far makes it clear that Vinoba followed Gandhi in terms of his ideals, representing a spiritual path. He condemned the party system incidental to his distrust of government, in general.

Vinoba is convinced that the state is a synthetic artifice imposed on society. From here, he rejects the whole apparatus of parties and elections, so basic to parliamentary democracy. Vinoba perceives political parties as institutions that place loyalty to party interests above loyalty to truth or conscience, as institutions that maneuver for power at any cost, and, worst of all, as institutions that exacerbate differences between castes and creeds in such a way as to make it difficult for people to come together even for a good cause. As for elections, they amount to giving the sheep the right to choose their shepherd. According to Vinoba, such a process did not bring about any change in the condition of the sheep.

In contrast to Vinoba, Jayaprakash Narayan had spent most of his life as a

major actor on the political stage. At one point of time, Jayaprakash Narayan joined Vinoba's *Bhoodan* Movement, but unlike Vinoba, he soon embraced the position of Gandhi as a politician rather than as a saint. Being disillusioned with Vinoba's interpretation of Gandhian activism as being confined to constructive work, JP began defining *Satyagraha* as something different from persuasion and conversion. It now became a 'powerful weapon' to be used when those methods failed. His assessment of the progress of the *bhoodan*/<u>gramdan</u> campaigns, following his work at the grassroots, made him comment that 'conditions seem to be ripening in the context of our present programme that may necessitate larger-scale *Satyagraha*'. Like Gandhi before him, he was now ready to place civil disobedience before constructive work. JP noted that although Vinoba seemed to hold that 'systematic change in the political order could be brought about without a struggle', even a peaceful struggle had not succeeded. JP pointed out that although he had renounced power politics to join Vinoba, he 'did not rule out the possibility of a nonviolent, non- cooperation movement or *satyagraha* on the lines of civil disobedience, if the *Bhoodan* movement did not attain its targets'. While Vinoba strove for perfect nonviolence, JP spoke of social change through a mass movement of peaceful people's power.

As their respective definitions of *Satyagraha* became so divergent, problems were bound to arise for the Gandhian movement they dominated. Gandhians did not have to confront problems   inherent in the dichotomy between the spiritual and political while Gandhi was alive, holding them together, and yet did not successfully grapple with them in his passing. Although Vinoba's gentle/gentler/gentlest form of nonviolent action seemed to be the only one that was completely consistent with   Gandhi's spiritual ideal, unfortunately this method did not satisfy those who wanted to act on a more political and immediate plane. They were of the view that Vinoba's approach, in some respects, did not apply   to problems in the 'real' world. Also, it is possible that this approach was doomed to be seen as an objective failure, while

subjectively being a complete success. The assertion that subjective success is the same as objective success, because of the underlying unity of all, is not satisfactory to many who consider it to be only partially true or only true in a long time-frame. Given that the world is moving so fast, our ideals must undergo some subordination to the 'need of the hour.'

Gandhi, given his emphasis on means over ends, would not agree in principle, but this is exactly what he did in practice time and again. And here, in this unresolved contradiction lies one of the main reasons for the still unhealed split in the Gandhian movement. It is possible to see Vinoba's gradualist approach as being ultimately correct in a deep Gandhian sense, while still maintaining a desire for tangible results. The path of ignoring the government, of working outside its structures and letting it wither away, can only be achieved if enough people follow this path, not merely the lone saint. The result-oriented confrontational approach has a far better chance of mobilizing the masses and seems to have a better chance of at least limited success, as well as a greater chance of ultimate failure. Its success cannot make the government wither away or achieve the 'otherworldly' ideals inherent in 'pure' *Satyagraha*; it can only replace the political structure with a less oppressive one.

Confronting the power structure directly, however, means that the government cannot ignore its antagonist and hence ensures that all the forces at its disposal will be directed at crushing any direct opposition. Some opted for JP's political approach, hoping it would succeed, while maintaining the feeling that it could usher in Gandhian ideals, in the long run. Since the failure of the Total Revolution, the conundrum of 'this-worldly' vs the 'other-worldly' manifestations of *Satyagraha* is still being pondered over. It is vital to explore this question now as, in today's India, leaders of Gandhian social movements increasingly believe that political intervention is required. However, they are not sure whether to join a formal political party. So, the dilemma persists.

Although Gandhians themselves may have criticized one or the other aspect of Gandhi's 'political', this interpretation may not be entirely appropriate. For taking into consideration the transformed context of present-day Gandhians from that of the Freedom struggle when Gandhi had to contend with a colonial power, it becomes apparent that such churnings are inevitable. Now, to understand how Gandhian movements have grappled with Gandhi's idea of the 'political', the next section will focus on the activities of a Gandhian Social Movement called *Ekta Parishad.*

III. EKTA PARISHAD AND GANDHI'S IDEA OF THE 'POLITICAL'

Ekta Parishad, as a Gandhian movement, is well aware of the bifurcation drawn between the social and political spheres just after independence. The movement considers that strengthening conventional politics represented by political parties (who have introduced a kind of exclusivity to the political sphere) is responsible for creating such a division. Blame is lodged against the elitism of politicians who consider themselves superior to the common masses, at the grassroots. *Ekta Parishad* leaders found that politicians, nowadays, only pay lip service to Gandhi's 'political' and never deliver what their election promises have articulated. Yet these same leaders, whilst highlighting rising corruption and criminalisation of conventional politics, themselves become involved in negotiations that make them agents of corrupt governance. Thus, they are acutely aware of the contingencies that hamper substantive political change in the present scenario.

Next, they explain what distinguishes the Gandhian Movement from conventional politics. Their faith in people's power is seen to be the linchpin on which Gandhian politics stands. Questions of dignity, self-confidence, independence, respect, self- worth, gender equality, and social equality matter to them. This vision basically highlights that politics needs to incorporate those

values that have been overlooked for so long. For instance, in respecting people from the grassroots, one leader points out that in *Ekta Parishad* it is forbidden to ask for any information related to caste and the qualification of people. This helps in accepting everyone as equal, whereby horizontal relationships rather than vertical relationships in society are stressed. Caste-based atrocities have been a controversial issue since pre-independence. Gandhi, just like *Ekta Parishad*, wanted to strike at the roots of such atrocities, which he deemed did not originate in the caste system but were a result of people's social attitudes. He desired a change of heart in the case of the upper castes and emphasized that the lower castes need to look inwards to find their strength. However, Ambedkar wished to have a political solution. Gandhi acceded to Ambedkar, but not entirely. Many criticize Gandhi for his decision, yet, he seemed to have had a rationale behind it, as elucidated by Bhikhu Parekh:

When the British government ignored his [Gandhi's] protest and granted the separate electorate in the Communal Award of August 1932, Gandhi, who was in prison, took the only course of action open to him, namely to embark on a fast. The 'untouchable' leader Babasaheb Ambedkar condemned the fast as a 'political stunt', a 'vile and wicked act'. [...]After five days of hard bargaining by Ambedkar, a compromise was reached. The demand for a separate electorate was dropped, and in return, the 'untouchables' received far more seats than the Award had given them and special sums of money for their educational uplift. Gandhi realized that Hinduism was 'on the brink of an active volcano', and threw himself into his anti-untouchability work with greater zeal and commitment than before.[9]

The explanation above makes it clear that Gandhi was deeply concerned with the caste issue. Similarly, *Ekta Parishad* ensures that its members do not experience discrimination based on socio-political factors. The movement

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[9] Parekh, Bhikhu, *Gandhi: A Very Short Introduction.* Oxford; New York, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 24.

highlights structural issues such as the marginalization and discrimination of women, tribals, scheduled castes, and the poor—conditions that have been normalized or blamed on these groups, especially within economic narratives that attempt to portray their plight as self-inflicted. As a Gandhian movement, *Ekta Parishad* addresses these socioeconomic and political challenges in ways it considers meaningful, nonviolent, and sustainable. While adhering to Gandhi's path of nonviolence, the movement also acknowledges the need to adapt Gandhian methods to include vulnerable sections in the change-making process. For example, when possible, they seek a middle path instead of viewing the state, its institutions, and its representatives as adversaries. They, like Gandhi, recognise that both the state and the people share responsibility for the current hardships. As a result, the movement focuses on instilling moral values in its grassroots members while engaging diplomatically, strategically, and practically with the state.

In this context, Mr. Ramesh Sharma, the National Coordinator of *Ekta Parishad,* emphasizes the importance of mastering the art of negotiation. He explains that negotiation aims to reach a 100% solution, achievable only when both parties understand that they must jointly reach that goal. Unfortunately, the current approach often involves each party coming to the table with their own solutions, seeking a 100% outcome from their side alone. According to him, this mindset leaves little room for genuine negotiation and change. Therefore, it is crucial that both parties be truly willing to negotiate, meaning that they must listen to and respect each other's views. When both sides identify points of mutual importance, they should incorporate them and be willing to compromise on some of their own stances. This farsightedness and faith in finding a middle ground, as suggested by Mr. Ramesh Sharma, is vital.[10]

The movement does not seek to overthrow the state but aims to walk alongside it as an equal partner. Consequently, much like Gandhi, its leaders

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[10] Sharma, R., Quoted from an interview with the researcher at 12.30 pm in Tilda, Chhattisgarh, India on 23/5/2018.

are not interested in calling for the government to 'Quit India.' Instead, the movement focuses on creating democratic spaces for constructive change. This democratic space is built upon three pillars: *samvad* (dialogue), *rachna* (constructive work), and *sangharsh* (struggle), which bring the movement closer to the Gandhian quest for self, truth, and *ahimsa* (nonviolence). These three components, seen as the foundations of *Ekta Parishad's* idea of the 'political,' reflect the movement's long-term vision. The movement aims to build a politics based on substantive negotiation, democratic dialogue, and nonviolent struggle, where constructive work remains integral.

From my understanding of the movement and based on insights shared by Mr Anil, the Bhopal Ashram Coordinator, it is evident that these three elements are deeply interconnected. The first step, as Mr. Anil mentions, is to initiate dialogue with state representatives. This phase involves communicating grievances, assessing the stance of the opposing party, and, if possible, co-creating sustainable solutions through joint efforts. Highlighting the importance of dialogue, Mr. Anil notes that *Ekta Parishad* excels in this art and advocacy. However, when the dialogue stage does not yield results, the movement proceeds to the next phase: *sangharsh* (struggle). At this point, *Ekta Parishad*, as a nonviolent movement, begins preparing its members for resistance and protest, focusing on education about political issues and the critical role the grassroots play in the Gandhian movement. In this way, the concept of struggle intertwines both the 'social' and the 'political.'

The second approach, rooted in *rachna* (constructive work), addresses overlapping societal problems. Mr Anil explains with an example: if land rights are contested in an area and the middle-class sides with the government rather than grassroots farmers, *Ekta Parishad* focuses on issues of mutual concern, like road construction. When the middle-class witnesses the movement's efforts on issues affecting them, they become more likely to support it. Today, initiatives such as *Khadi Gram Udyog* attract people from

various social classes, fostering neutrality and support. Thus, *rachna* works within the social sphere to address political issues.

The movement is grounded in nonviolence and seeks to shape a politics that adjusts to the realities of the context in which it operates. This approach allows for experimentation and innovation with Gandhian techniques, fostering trust in the movement as the leaders seek neither power nor undemocratic authority. The movement draws its strength from the people, from the grassroots, in line with Gandhi's principles. For this reason, *Ekta Parishad* avoids becoming a political party. Its concept of the 'political' contrasts sharply with that of conventional politics dominated by party agendas.

Ekta Parishad envisions a 'political' framework that operates within the constitutional bounds of the nation but also creates space for meaningful dissent to address the injustices faced by marginalized communities in independent India. This foundation of 'political nonviolence' is key to the movement's strategy. Rather than participating directly in all political processes, such as elections, the movement mobilizes people in the social sphere, grounded in their political identity and focused on political issues. 'Political nonviolence' seeks truth through nonviolent tools such as dialogue, dharnas (sit-ins), and *Satyagraha* (nonviolent resistance), aiming to bring justice to the marginalized and hold unjust systems accountable—without the intent to topple the government. I believe 'political nonviolence' is indispensable to contemporary social movements.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while Gandhi's idea of the 'embedded political' has not yet fully manifested, movements like *Ekta Parishad* are actively pursuing its realization. The historical neglect of Gandhi's 'embedded politics' must be addressed, mainly because his critics' alternative visions have not produced a unifying effect in the country. Today, we still grapple with civil conflicts, religious riots, disillusionment, exploitation, environmental degradation, and

poverty. In this context, focusing on Gandhi's 'embedded politics' is urgently needed. Though Gandhian movements have made significant progress toward shaping a framework of 'political nonviolence,' many challenges remain in fully realizing the idea of an 'embedded political.' Academics, researchers, and political and social scientists are responsible for studying and bringing forth Gandhi's political philosophy, ensuring it is not overlooked as it has been in the past.

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