The act of renunciation of everything is not a mere physical renunciation, but represents a second or new birth. It is a deliberate act, not done in ignorance. It is, therefore, a regeneration.

MAHATMA GANDHI

For India, the most critical issue involves the current rethinking of Mahatma Gandhi’s philosophy. Gandhi said that soon after his death India would bypass and betray his ideas, but that thirty years later India would be compelled to restore them. Events have begun to validate his prophecy, and the trend will accelerate.... When India fully accepts that it cannot conceivably emulate Japan without harnessing its own indigenous values and providing new motivations, and when out of necessity its leadership recognizes that it can no longer inflate the token symbols of Gandhi or the facile slogans of socialism, she will be forced to ask more fundamental questions. Only then can the real social revolution emerge, which could have a strong radical base and also borrow from ancient traditions as well as modern movements. While it would be difficult to predict the changes themselves, they will require serious reassessment of Gandhi’s questions relating to the quantum of goods needed for a meaningful and fulfilling way of life.

Parapolitics–Toward the City of Man

Mahatma Gandhi held that all human beings are implicitly responsible to God, the Family of Man and to themselves for their use and treatment of all goods, gifts and talents that fall within their domain. This is so because Nature and Man are alike upheld, suffused and regenerated by the Divine. There is a luminous spark of
divine intelligence in the motion of the atom and in the
eyes of every man and woman on earth. We incarnate our
divinity when we deliberately and joyously nurture our
abilities and assets for the sake of the larger good. In this
sense, the finest exemplars of trusteeship are those who
treat all possessions as though they were sacred or deeply
precious beyond any worldly scale of valuation. Thus, it is
only through daily moral choice and the meritorious use of
resources that we sustain our inherited or acquired
entitlements. For this reason, the very idea of ownership is
misleading and, at root, a form of violence. It implies rights
and privileges over Man and Nature that go beyond the
bounds of human need—although not necessarily beyond
the limits of human law and social custom. It obscures the
generous bounty of Nature, which provides enough for all
if each holds in trust only what he needs, without excess or
exploitation.

Gandhi sensed that all our resources and possessions, at
any level, are not merely fragments of the Divine but are
also inherently mortal and mutable. The Divine in its
active aspect is ceaselessly creative and ever fluid in form.
By analogy, human needs and material circumstances alter
even while cultural patterns and social customs purport to
maintain temporal continuity through established
traditions. Ownership, from this standpoint, is truly a
costly and illusory attempt to ensure permanency and
succession. It gives birth to unwarranted attachments and
insupportable expectations. The selfish grasping for
possessions of any kind not only violates the deeper
purposes of our human odyssey but eventually breeds
possessiveness and greed, exploitation and revenge. This
appalling moral malaise leads to inordinate self-assertion
and self-projection which can only yield distrust, sorrow
and "loss of all". But when we attain the sacred mental
posture of the trustee who regards all possessions as held
in trust for the good of all, we can progressively approach
the high spiritual state of mental renunciation. We can, in
the Upanishadic phrase, "renounce and enjoy". It is only
when we voluntarily relinquish our unnatural claims and
consecrate ourselves to a higher purpose that we can freely enjoy what we have. Thus, self-satisfaction is a natural outcome of a generous perspective and a greater purity of heart. It is truly a function of the harmonious cultivation of our spiritual, mental and material resources. In Gandhian terms, guilt-free enjoyment is inseparable from ethical probity. The real issue, then, is not how much or how little we possess in the way of property or talent, but the reasons and motives behind their allocations and uses.

Gandhi approached the concept of trusteeship at four different levels. First of all, trusteeship, as the sole universalizable means of continuously redistributing wealth, could be seen as a corollary of the principle of non-violence and simultaneously assure the generation and intelligent use of wealth.

*No other theory is compatible with non-violence. In the non-violent method the wrongdoer compasses his own end, if he does not undo the wrong. For, either through Non-violent Non-co-operation he is made to see his error, or he finds himself completely isolated.*

Even if wealth could be coercively redistributed, the resulting greed and inexperience on the part of many and the resentment on the part of the dispossessed would lead to economic instability and rapid decline. More likely than not, it would lead to class war, anomic violence and widespread self-alienation. Trusteeship, however, encourages owners to see themselves as vigilant trustees of their accumulated wealth for the larger community without threatening them.

Secondly, Gandhi’s practical psychological intuition allowed him to see that fear would prevent other means of economic distribution from succeeding in the long run. A fundamental change in the concepts of activity and courage is needed to overcome passivity and cowardice. Courage must be detached from violence, and creativity must be dislodged from the self-protective formulations of
entrenched élites. This involves rooting new notions of noetic activity which are creative, playful and tolerant, and new notions of moral courage which are heroic, magnanimous and civil, in a search for universal self-transcendence. An individual must feel, both abstractly and concretely, a secure sense of joyous eros in fellowship, and a positive sense of solidarity with hapless human beings everywhere. He must feel at one with the victims of incomplete revolutions, with the understandably impatient and occasionally mistaken pioneers of great revolutions, and even more with those willing to defy every presumptuous criterion and form of authority which trespasses upon individuality.

The fearful man tyrannizes others: forced redistribution would bring fearful responses from owners, who would see their lives and futures threatened, and fearful masses would deal with excess wealth incompetently. For Gandhi, the ever-present possibility of social change must be approached from a position of truth and courage, whereas fear is weakness which leads to violence. Strength should not be mistaken for the modalities of violence, which are instruments of fear and always lead to varying degrees of self-destruction. Since strength rests on human dignity and respect, workers must approach exploitative capitalists from a position of self-respect based on the capital of labour, for "labour is as much capital as metal". To abolish fear and even failure itself requires a fundamental change in the social structure. The feasibility of this social transformation does not lie in denying the judgements of others, but rather in regarding them as partially relevant though in no sense compelling. Individuals can commit themselves to increasing their own capacity for self-transcendence of external criteria of differentiation, and thereby attain liberation from the self-perpetuating iniquities and horrors of the System.

*Therefore, workers, instead of regarding themselves as enemies of the rich, or regarding the rich as their natural enemies, should hold their labour in trust for those who are*
in need of it. This they can do only when, instead of feeling so utterly helpless as they do, they realize their importance in human economy and shed their fear or distrust of the rich. Fear and distrust are twin sisters born of weakness. When labour realizes its strength it won"t need to use any force against moneyed people. It will simply command their attention and respect.3

Gandhi discerned the critical role acceptability plays in legitimating a social order, and distinguished between a people's tacit acceptance and active dislike of an economic regime. So long as any society finds its socio-economic system acceptable, that system will stand even if a militant minority detests it. But should a significant number of individuals find it unacceptable, it is shaken to its foundations, regardless of the complacency of privileged élites.

Thirdly, Gandhi contended that the idea of trusteeship could be put into practice non-violently, because it could be instituted by degrees. When asked if such "trustees"—individuals who possessed wealth and yet saw themselves as stewards for society—could be found in India in his day, he rejected the question as strictly irrelevant to the theory, which can only be evaluated by extensive testing over time.

At this point I may be asked as to how many trustees of this type one can really find. As a matter of fact, such a question should not arise at all. It is not directly related to our theory. There may be just one such trustee or there may be none at all. Why should we worry about it? We should have faith that we can, without violence or with so little violence that it can hardly be called violence, create such a feeling among the rich. We should act in that faith. That is sufficient for us. We should demonstrate through our endeavour that we can end economic disparity with the help of non-violence. Only those who have no faith in non-violence can ask how many trustees of this kind can be found.4
Gandhi knew that he sought the widespread realization of a forgotten ideal, but he repudiated the conventional notion that an experiment is unworthy to be tried simply because it stems from an exacting ideal. Even if one argued that trusteeship was doomed to failure, it ran no greater risk than the conventional social proposals of the day. Committed to principles but flexible in policies, Gandhi saw no reason to neglect ideals and to institute social reforms from a defeatist standpoint. Such an approach only guaranteed that structural faults would be built into the new social order. Rather, he emphasized, it is better to move towards the ideal and make appropriate adjustments necessitated by the specific failures encountered in attempting to reach it. In doing so, principles would remain uncompromised and the possibility of improvement would always remain, whereas in a system which assumes cupidity and corruption in human nature, nothing encourages their eradication.

Gandhi not only had faith that it was possible for human beings to become trustees of their resources for the sake of all, but also that many in fact were already and had always been trustees. They are the preservers of culture and tradition, who show their ethical stance through countless daily acts of graciousness and concern for others. To treat man as man requires not so much the acceptance of the equal potentialities of all men, let alone the infinite potentialities of all men, but rather the acceptance of the unknown potentialities of all human beings. Given scarce resources and the limits of productivity and of taxable income, there are definitely limits to what the State can do, but is there any reason why voluntary associations should not be entrusted with the task of extending the avenues of opportunity available to the disinherited? The socialist could argue that by an indefinite extension of opportunities (not always requiring State action) and by changing not only the structure but the entire ethos and moral tone of society, new social values could slowly emerge and usher in an era in which men show mutual respect which is not based on skills and
The minimal goal of basic economic equity is easily stated, yet it is the fundamental first stage for the uplift of the whole.

Everybody should be able to get sufficient work to make the two ends meet. And, this ideal can be universally realized only if the means of production of elementary necessaries of life remain under the control of the masses. These should be freely available to all as God’s air and water are, or ought to be; they should not be made a vehicle of traffic for the exploitation of others. Their monopolization by any country, nation or groups of persons would be unjust. The neglect of this simple principle is the cause of the destitution that we witness to-day, not only in this unhappy land, but other parts of the world, too.5

The principle of trusteeship in its application to the equitable distribution of wealth, as well as to the non-violent socialist reformation it underpins, is practicable because it does not require everyone to undertake it all at once. Unlike most socialists who reason that they must seize the power of the State before instituting effective reforms, Gandhi held that enlightened individuals could initiate the process of divesting themselves of what is unnecessary while becoming true trustees of their own possessions.

It is perfectly possible for an individual to adopt this way of life without having to wait for others to do so. And if an individual can observe a certain rule of conduct, it follows that a group of individuals can do likewise. It is necessary for me to emphasize the fact that no one need wait for anyone else in order to adopt a right course. Men generally hesitate to make a beginning, if they feel that the objective cannot be had in its entirety. Such an attitude of mind is in reality a bar to progress.6

Once the barrier in consciousness is broken, the principle
of trusteeship can be made to work by letting go of the demand for a mechanically equal distribution, something Gandhi doubted could ever be realized. Instead, he held to the revolutionary ideal of equitable distribution, which would not only be possible but necessary in the non-violent socialist State.

Should attempts to encourage the abandonment of exploitation through misappropriation of the means of production fail, trusteeship could be made to work through non-violent non-cooperation, wherein workers realize the capital worth and collective strength of their labour. Should it succeed, ideas which arise out of narrow acquisitive thinking would vanish because they were rooted in unacceptable and illusory assumptions.

_If the trusteeship idea catches, philanthropy, as we know it, will disappear.... A trustee has no heir but the public._

Gradually, statutory trusteeship could be introduced in which the duties of the trustee and the public could be formalized. The trustee may serve so long as the people find his services beneficial. He may even designate his successor, but the people must confirm it. Should the State become involved, the trustee’s power of appointment and the State’s power of review will strike a balance in which the welfare of the people will be safeguarded.

Fourthly and finally, Gandhi believed that social conditions were ripe for imaginative applications of the principle of trusteeship. The collapse of Western imperialism, the spiritual and social poverty of fascism and totalitarianism, the psychological failure of capitalism, the moral bankruptcy of state socialism and the ideological inflexibility of communism all indicate an ineluctable if gradual movement towards a reconstitution of the social order which will compel some form of redistribution.

The limits to growth make themselves felt through the undermining of social virtues like trust and truthfulness, restraint and mutual acceptance, as well as a sense of fraternal obligation, all of which are essential to individual
initiative in a contractual economic system. If such virtues are treated as public goods necessary to universal welfare, then unrestricted individualism faces noticeable limits, lest the social justification and viability of the whole system be destroyed. C.B. MacPherson went so far as to predict that the time will come when it will no longer be feasible to put acquisition ahead of spiritual values, and that national power will become a function not of market power but of moral stature. Although we have to confront scarcity, the emphasis on Hobbesian self-preservation alone is adequate.

The rich should ponder well as to what is their duty today. They who employ mercenaries to guard their wealth may find those very guardians turning on them. The moneyed classes have got to learn how to fight either with arms or with the weapons of non-violence.... I see coming the day of the rule of the poor, whether that rule be through force of arms or of non-violence.8

Even though the war against poverty will take a long time to win, it is necessary for the State to adopt various measures to reduce the sharp economic inequalities that undermine the working of mass democracy, and to strengthen the organizing power of peasants, artisans, and industrial and clerical workers. In addition to fiscal and monetary measures to reduce income ceilings, it would be desirable to assist wealthy landlords and industrialists in parting with portions of their wealth, property and earnings as public contributions towards specific local schemes and plans. The more the redistributive process can be extended beyond legal compulsion and political action, the more democracy is strengthened at the social level. The more the State can bring together representatives of richer and poorer groups, stronger and weaker sections of society, in planning local programs, the better it will be for all.

At this point the socialist's faith as well as his integrity are tested, and so are his ultimate premises. Does he
believe in perfectibility or in original sin? If, like Condorcet, he believes that the historical process and the progress of humanity involve an increasing equality among nations, equality within nations and the perfectibility of man, how much emphasis does it put on human growth and perfectibility rather than on inherent flaws and weaknesses? If committed socialists are not imbued with atavistic or original sin, if they hold to a truly open view of human nature, then they could adopt a different parapolitical standpoint.9 They could say that it is because they believe in the unknown possibilities of every human being that they are concerned to extend the idea of human excellence to a point where external social distinctions do not matter, but where trusteeship is honoured wherever it is witnessed in human beings.

Owing to his unshakeable conviction that violence can never produce permanent results, only Gandhi’s modesty prevented him from asserting that his ethical solution would come to be seen as the only feasible alternative to wholesale misery and destruction, if not now, then in the foreseeable future. He deliberately avoided elaborating a complete system of statutory or voluntary trusteeship out of the conviction that structural and organizational details necessarily varied with the social and political context and with the personnel, whilst the essential core of the ideal was universally applicable. Thus he could gain a serious hearing from those who would be most affected by the implementation of his proposals without threatening them.

I am not ashamed to own that many capitalists are friendly towards me and do not fear me. They know that I desire to end capitalism almost, if not quite, as much as the most advanced Socialist or even Communist. But our methods differ, our languages differ. My theory of ‘trusteeship’ is no make-shift, certainly no camouflage. I am confident that it will survive all theories.10

by Raghavan Iyer
Footnotes

5M.K. Gandhi, "Economic Constitution of India", *Young India*, November 15, 1928.