



REVISITING GANDHI

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Gandhiji's Views on Students Participation in Freedom Movement and Party Politics of India

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Student movements in India developed in different phases in 19th and 20th centuries. In the first half of the 19th century, Indian society experienced many social reform movements in which some students participated, and associations involving them were formed with social reforms as their main objectives. After the first war of independence in 1857, political consciousness developed in Indian society, which influenced students also. In 1875, Anand Mohan Bose established a student organisation in Bengal called 'Student Association'.¹

Students were already drawn in political life of country prior to Gandhiji's return back to India in 1915 from South Africa. They got involved in freedom struggle in both violent and non-violent formats. *Swadeshi* movement saw huge participation of students against British decision of Bengal's partition. Vinayak Damodar Savarkar and his followers adopted revolutionary approach, which involved many students.

Gandhiji accepted to ancient tradition of India, where students were called *brahmacharis*, who observed strict rules and had fear of God. They were honoured by kings and elders. They were a voluntary charge on the nation, and in return they gave to the nation a hundred-fold strong souls, strong brains, and strong arms. To Gandhiji, students in the modern world, wherever they are to be found among fallen nations, are considered to be their hope, and have become the self - sacrificing leader of reforms in every department.²

Gandhiji had divergent views regarding student's participation in political movement of a country and party politics in a country. He considered the participation of students in the political movement of the country as their duty. He gave the examples of China and Egypt to the students, where national movement became possible only by their participation. Every revolution of modern times has found students in the forefront.

Gandhiji wanted students to learn without fear. To him freedom can never be won by those who are afraid of rustications, poverty and even death. The knowledge gained in educational institutions must lead the students to freedom.³ He advocated students to lose one year, not at a stretch, but spread it over their whole study. They will find that one year so given will not be a waste of time. This will add to their equipment, mental, moral and physical and they will be able to make a substantial contribution to the freedom movement.⁴

Gandhiji did not favour withdrawal of students from schools and colleges for *satyagraha* as a strategy but instead asked those to leave schools and colleges who could resolve to devote themselves to the nations service even after the struggle is over. He believed in the sacrifice which is sacred in natural and not imposed one.⁵

Gandhiji advocated boycott of schools and colleges during the Non Cooperation Movement. The students became the most

enthusiastic *satyagrahis*, and many of them got expelled from schools and colleges for joining the protests. As a result, national schools and colleges were opened by the Congress. Among them were the Kashi Vidyapeeth in Varanasi, Gujarat Vidyapeeth in Ahmedabad, Bengal National University in Calcutta and Jamia Millia in Aligarh.⁶

Responding to the question of government putting up conditions before the students and parents, Gandhiji answered that the world produced brilliant students before schools and colleges came into being. Now there are national institutions open to the students and if they do not like these, they can study at home.⁷

The impact of the Gandhiji's message was the formation of a 'National Student Federation' in India. The first All India College Students conference was held in Nagpur in 1920 under the presidentship of the Lala Lajpat Rai to provide coordination for the growing student political movement. Regional student federations were also formed in Bengal, Punjab and in other areas. Students' conferences were presided over by personalities like Lala Lajpat Rai, Sarojini Naidu, Chittaranjan Das, Madan Mohan Malviya and Jawaharlal Nehru. Bhagat Singh and Sukhdev had formed 'Lahore Students Union' in 1928.⁸

There was a difference in Gandhiji's strategy for students in the Civil Disobedience Movement. While replying to a question being asked by students for participation in it, he asked students to help in following ways : by learning the art of voluntary discipline, fit themselves for leadership in the various branches of the nation's work; they can aim not at finding lucrative careers but at becoming national servants after completing their studies; they can set apart for the national coffers a certain sum from their allowances; they can promote inter-communal, inter-provincial and inter-caste harmony among themselves and fraternise with *Harijans* by abolishing the least trace of untouchability from their

lives, they can spin regularly and use certified *khadi* to the exclusion of all other cloth as well as *Khadi*; they can set apart a certain time every week, if not every day, for service in a village or villages nearest to their institutions and during the vacation devote a certain time daily for national service. However, Gandhiji kept the idea open to call out students, if necessary.⁹

During the Civil Disobedience Movement many of the youngsters at the ashram joined the freedom struggle, including grandson of Gandhiji, Kantilal and Vitthal Thakkar, who at sixteen was the youngest marcher to Dandi. 'Vanar Sena' of teenagers raised slogans and marched openly. Once in Nasik when the police took away their flags, the boys got shirts stitched of flags and wore them to the next demonstration. Similarly, girls formed the 'Manjari Sena'.¹⁰

One of the consequences of the agitation of 1930 was the formation of 'All India Students Federation' in 1936. Founded with the support of the congress, it was looked upon as student wing of the Congress for National Movement. The AISF addressed a host of academic demands to the seven state governments that were placed under the congress rule: a reduction in fees, the introduction of free and compulsory education, elimination of anti-national ideas from text books, the use of vernacular languages as media of instruction, recognition of the student unions by the universities, student representation on the governing body of the university, more vocational training, relief for the unemployed and a ban on communal student organisation. Under the banner of the AISF, Gandhians, Socialists, Communists and independent radicals inside congress were effectively united and worked in harmony.

In addition to the mainstream nationalist student movements, other important trends existed within the student's community. The 'All India Muslim Students Federation' founded in 1937 under the auspices of the All India Muslim League and 'Hindu

Students Federation' drew students on different lines. 'Samajwadi Yuwak Sabha' by Socialists, 'Progressive Students Union' by Marxists offered another platform to students.

The climax of the student's political participation in the freedom movement was achieved during Quit India Movement in 1942. The student movement succeeded in the closure of most of the campuses for an extended period and involved the student masses in to the nationalist struggle. Student radicalism stimulated by the Quit India Struggle continued, although on a reduced scale until the end of the freedom struggle. By and large, student movements during the freedom struggle had a noble and precise goal, namely, achievement of political freedom for the motherland.¹¹

On party politics, Gandhiji instructed students to keep themselves aloof from it. To him, students can't afford to have party politics. They hear all parties, as they read all sort of books, but their business is to assimilate the truth of all and reject the balance. They may openly sympathise with any political party they like. But they may not have freedom of action while they are studying. A student can't be an active politician and pursue his studies at the same time. Power politics should be unknown to the student world. Immediately they enter in that class of work, they cease to be students and will, therefore, fail to serve the country in its crisis. Different political groups have sought to catch the students as if they were shoals of fish, and students have run in to the net spread for them.¹²

To him student's first duty is to study the various problems that require solution. His time for action comes after he finishes his studies. Student's first business is to think about the type of education, which the children of a free nation should receive. They must not allow themselves to be deceived in to the belief that it is the function only of the elders in the University Senates. They must stimulate the faculty of thinking. Gandhiji favoured

public opinion or enlightened criticism rather than strikes to the students for their demands.

Gandhiji favoured one national organisation for students, including Hindus, Muslims, and the others. Students should not be partitioned as they are the makers of the future. Neither they thought for themselves nor have the leaders left them to their studies, so that they can become good citizens. If there is one compact student organisation, it can become a mighty instrument of service. Their objective can only be one: never for the purpose of finding a lucrative career but fitting themselves for the service of the motherland. If they were to do so, their knowledge would attain a great height.

One purpose of the organisation should be to discover the defects of the present education and seek to remove them, so far as possible in their own persons. By their correct conduct they will be able to convert to their view, the heads of education. If they do so, they will never be entangled in party politics. In the revised scheme, constructive and creative programme will naturally have its due place. Indirectly, their action will keep the politics of the country free of the spirit of exploitation.¹³

After independence it was expected that student organisations will follow a programme of Gandhian constructive services, but it could not happen in majority cases. In 1950, the congress leadership called upon students to depoliticise themselves by severing affiliation with political parties and groups and to harness their energies for nation building activities. The 'Student Congress' dissolved itself, urged the 'Student Federation' to do likewise and called for the creation of a 'National Union of Students', which will be a non-political federation of various students. The efforts of Jawaharlal Nehru and Jay Prakash Narayan failed in this direction due to suspicion of the opposite parties about the move of the congress.¹⁴

We have incorporated Gandhian ideas on village panchayat, agriculture and animal husbandry, cottage industry, promotion of educational and economic interest of weaker sections of the society, prohibition of intoxicating drinks and drugs in Directive Principles of State Policy, part IV of Indian constitution. But we have left Gandhiji's instruction that students should not participate in party politics. We should seriously think on the issue, and as the inheritors should take the steps to rectify the errors of the past.

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