“Gandhi’s Influence on Two Contemporary Indian Women Leaders”

The two aspects of Gandhi’s approach that I want to bring forward to this discussion on nonviolent economy is his belief that there is a unity of all things especially as seen through the constructive program; and secondly, that people have the capacity to transform conflict nonviolently. In terms of the unity of all things, some scholars posit that behind this, was Gandhi’s religious and spiritual beliefs, which gave him a sense of truth and moral vision that he brought into economic affairs. Although he did not pretend to be an economist, he looked at the underlying relationships of economic life such as the removal of untouchability; the production of khadi; economic equality; the importance of the farmers, and labourers; as fundamental to building an economy based on justice and peace.

The second learning is how he used transformative nonviolence as a way to handle economic conflicts. His main technique was trusteeship. As was seen in the Textile workers’ strike in 1918 in Ahmedabad, he Gandhi solved conflict by having the workers and the management come together. He worked on changing the perspectives of both parties of their interrelationship and dependency. He appreciated that conflict could not be solved by giving a lop-sided judgment to one side forcing the other side to accept what they did not believe to be just, for this would only work to undermine the situation. For Gandhi nonviolent conflict transformation was conversion not as coercion.

My contention in this paper is that there are people working with Gandhian principles in constructing an alternative economy. The two women that I want to draw attention to, are both well-known leaders: one Ela Bhatt, the founder of the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in India, and currently the Chancellor of the Gujarat Vidyapith University in Ahmedabad; and the secondly Vandana Shiva, ecologist and anti-GMO crusader, and visionary of creating a world where seed, food, women producers and organic agriculture come together in a holistic form of development.

Ela Bhatt is well known in India and also worldwide for her work in giving women dignity of labour and livelihood opportunities. Founded in 1972, SEWA in turn created SEWA bank that became one of the largest cooperatives in the world, not only profitable but also managed mostly run by poor non-literate women, as well nine unions and 120 cooperatives. The bank has helped hundreds of thousands of self-employed women to access capital for creating sustainable livelihoods for their families and meeting their basic needs and getting out of debt --one of the scourges of the poor. The unions and cooperatives have brought poor women into the center of decision-making and
participatory planning, and the women have advocated for many policy changes in creating a greater enabling environment.

Ela Bhatt has been viewed by some of the political pundits in her own state of Gujarat with a certain amount of suspicion. Gujarat is a state in India, although the birthplace of Gandhi has been a nesting ground for Hindutva politics. SEWA was built cutting across religious and caste divides. Today SEWA is 30% Dalit, 30% Muslim and 30% other caste groups. During the Bhuj Earthquake in 2001 or the communal riots of 2002, SEWA responded to assist women who faced problems, whatever their backgrounds.

What is interesting is how Ela Bhatt had been trained in a Gandhian union known as the Textile Labour Association or TLA (Majoor Mahajan Sangh) in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. Anasuya Sarabhai, her associate, who founded the TLA in 1921, ran this union for fifty years. The TLA trade union was based on trusteeship and not on class differences. This meant that the goal was to gain shared understanding between management and the workers, based on both parties’ recognition of their interdependence, and also on common goal formation, which helped them to sort out their differences over wages in negotiation.

Ela Bhatt said that Anasuya Sarabhai (Motabehn) was “a forward looking, and able to ‘agree-to-disagree’, rooted in her life and philosophy as a woman”. Motabehn’s leadership was full of humility and modesty, and according to Ela Bhatt, she was repeatedly successful in claiming the high moral ground in disputes and resolving what seemed to be intractable conflicts. Unfortunately the Trade Union Leader was not widely recognized, partly because she was a woman, but also because Gandhi’s assistance with one of the trade union disputes in 1918, made it look like he was the founder of the trade union. Her fame was eclipsed to some extent. To rectify this, Ela Bhatt put together an exhibition on Motabehn in 2013, at the time of SEWA’s 40th anniversary, and this is a permanent exhibition demonstrating her unique leadership.

Ela Bhatt had been deeply inspired by Motabehn, and her influence encouraged her to get involved with women workers that were affected by the textile layoffs in the 1970s. This led to the setting up of SEWA. In 1981 SEWA separated from the TLA, because Ela Bhatt supported the reservation of Dalits for medical school and the TLA did not want to take a stand and disrupt its high caste members. At the same time they were not in favour of Ela Bhatt gaining so much space in organizing women and increasing her notoriety within TLA. They asked her to resign from the union. She did so in 1981 and then SEWA was set up autonomously as a women’s only organization. Ela Bhatt saw that by working with poor women and for them to gain autonomy through their labour was one way to deal with a very hierarchal and male dominated society. Ela Bhatt said:

“Women want stability. Women want roots for her children. Then they happily share their verandah; women are communicators, networkers, so they are good at linking in relationship of different kinds and at different levels within the community and outside the community. Because of having children and her biology, women are more futuristic. Her leadership is natural leadership”.
In the process of this split with TLA, the women learned how to manage an economic program, and they did so nonviolently.

When the 2002 communal riots in Gujarat, happened and fifty-eight Hindus were burned in a railway boggie on their return from Ayodhya on the 27th of February 2002, with three days of communal riots occurred, which resulted in three months of mass killing, rape and pillaging where thousands of people were murdered, SEWA’s women positively responded. They supported five relief camps and gave sewing machines to women that had lost their homes so that they could immediately earn income through the sewing of garments that were then sold at the SEWA shops. This was to assist affected women with the trauma and to have them gain some dignity, and also to get back on their feet.

Ela Bhatt did not get cynical after this episode. She continued to reaffirm her belief in a common humanity. She said:

“So people are good at heart. They have a conscience. If we remain conscious, they have a conscience. Your own conscience guides you all through at all time. Your conscience always knows what you have done is wrong. It will always tell you.”

So what Ela Bhatt brought values to the economic work which was unique.

“I have great faith in our women and our people. Not everything is lost. That basic culture is still there. That faith is there. They know what is truth and what is not. So in the final stage when it comes to trust, then it succeeds. You do whatever but keep this credibility. That is our biggest capital”.

Ela Bhatt, like Gandhi and Ansuya before her, had developed methods of carrying out nonviolent conflict resolution that seemed to keep SEWA together as an organization, and also it enabled them to work in unfavorable environments. But more importantly it was an experiment with Trusteeship. Trusteeship was a way that producer and investor could work together to forward an economy that was beneficial to both.

Let us now turn to the second woman that is, Vandana Shiva. In 1993, Shiva received the Right Livelihood Award for her work in setting up Navdanya and for raising the issue of hazards of biotechnology both environmental and human health. In the process Shiva challenged the policies of GATT and WTO and worked to raise public awareness in India. When Monsanto’s Bt cotton was given entry in 2002, Vandana advocated vociferously against GMOs drawing attention to farmer suicides as a result of farmers being forced to grow genetically modified seeds.

What is interesting about this work is that she in fact is speaking about a violent economy. She maintains that the green revolution in Punjab led to the Khalistan
movement. The only way out of the current economic violence is to make peace with the earth. Without reversing the destruction of eco-resources people cannot make peace with themselves.

Johann Galtung (1969) had spoken about direct and indirect violence, and showed how structural violence was indirect violence seen as: “unintended structure-generated (rather than actor-generated) harm done to human beings”. He shifted conflict from East-West (Cold War) to the North-South. Galtung at the time of globalization began to write about cultural violence (1990). This is where people’s cultural milieu is contaminated with violence and they see structural or direct violence as legitimate or normal. Galtung was deeply influenced by Gandhi.

Vandana also influenced by Gandhi through Mirabehn, Sarlabehn and the Chipko movement, has had the courage to deconstruct the violent economy. She began writing on the violence in Punjab in the mid-1980s, where she writes:

“Discontent that had expressed itself in Punjab in the 1980s was the result of centrally controlled agricultural production and the resulting economic and political crisis. It was located in the Centre-state politics and the political economy of the Green Revolution” (Shiva, 1989B, p. 129)

Vandana showed through different resource struggles that land grabs, water extraction, seed manipulation and privatizing common property forests, would invariably lead to civil strife because of people’s dependence on these resources are for survival. Vandana had the courage to make connections between the economy and the violence that few policy makers are willing to admit.

She tells an interesting story about how she went to a meeting of chemical companies in Europe and realized that they were going to the business of patenting seeds. She says:

“On my flight back I made this matrix. First industrial revolution is coal what did coal give us? Industries and what did industries first mechanize, textile making. What did they grab for it, markets and cotton and indigo. How was it fought back. Gandhi and the spinning wheel. Second Industrial revolution. Chemicals and Rachel Carson. There was not a concentrated response. Now we have the third industrial revolution where they are trying to industrialize life. These GMOs in 1987 did not exist. There was no BT cotton, there were no round up ready, but the industrialization of life was so clear. What is the spinning wheel of today? Seed”.

Vandana saw how agrochemical seed corporations could slowly dismantle human life. She made these connections in terms of the convergence of globalization and terrorism that led to many Dalits and subsistent farmers being displaced by biotechnology, seed patents, and impounding water in large dams, dispossession from land –basically when people are internally displaced, this leads to structural violence.
What also became apparent is that Vandana was raising structural issues, that cannot be proved on the same empirical reasoning that creates what she called the “paradigm of separation and fragmentation”. Empiricism does not allow one to see the connections between these phenomena. Vandana showed the cultural violence differently than Galtung had, for while he depended on traditional, Vandana uses interrelational reasoning. She wanted people to make connections between the violence of modern development and scientific reductionism. This was found in her works Staying Alive and Ecofeminism, and was based on the scientific work.

Micheal Specter in the Annals of Science magazine (August 25, 2014) made a critique of her arguments and he maintained that her conclusions about GMOs were not based on scientific inquiry. Again Specter did not understand the larger epistemological argument that Vandana was making. Specter was looking at how gene manipulation helps produce more food for poor people without the consequences on people and the earth. Indeed causality is not easy to prove, but this does not dismiss Vandana’s arguments. She has shown in 17 books that the economic structures are violent to people and the earth, and there are many ways she arrives at this conclusion.

But Vandana did not stop there. She also tried to show the ways forward. If you look at the manifestos On the Future of Food, On the Future of Seed (2007) or the Terra Viva: Our Soil, Our commons, Our Future (2015), these are roadmaps for future action. Terra Viva was done in the year of the soils in 2015 and again, the book linked ecological rights with human rights so people can correlate these phenomena. In this work she also showed that the present economy is linear and extractive and it is based on the logic of exploitation, threatening ecological and social collapse. She contrasts this with the circular logic of the Law of return, of mutuality reciprocity, and regeneration.

Vandana like Gandhi before her was trying to give a holistic vision, where there was a unity of all things, in which to measure the diverse particulars.

To conclude then, these two women are examples of how they have been influenced by Gandhian economics in their work. More importantly they have extended Gandhi’s knowledge to deal with contemporary problems and resolve conflict by building a better future.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=50SH5sPc_9o
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3EAVbQNBpq4