“The question of questioning is no longer a part of our everyday social and political grammar”

Ramin Jahanbegloo

Written by Ramin Jahanbegloo, The Disobedient Indian: Towards a Gandhian Philosophy of Dissent is a book about the history, philosophy and necessity of disobedience. The core idea of Gandhi’s philosophy of resistance, Jahanbegloo argues, is his unshakeable conviction that it is no longer possible to organise political action without disobedience. Democracy, to be worthy of obedience, he says, must be structured so that every citizen can question and disobey unjust laws and institutions. The following is an excerpt from the chapter "The Disobedient Indian".
The question of questioning is no longer a part of our everyday social and political grammar in recent times. One of the most serious and frequent opinions against the act of questioning is the absurd belief that if everyone questions everything, the result would be chaos and the destruction of human civilization. However, if there is only one point which is true in this assertion, it is the reference to the fact that human civilization is walking dangerously on a tightrope. But there has certainly not been any excess in exercising the art of questioning. In today’s world, a dissenter who questions the establishment is a lonely hero. This is a point of anguish when it is no longer questionable to rely on false convictions rather than on true questions. Whether that anguish is fundamentally ridiculous or respectful will depend upon one’s vision. But this should remind us of what Gandhi says about the five stages in every movement: first comes indifference; second, ridicule; third, abuse; fourth, repression and fifth, respect. And he adds, if a movement does not survive the fourth stage, it has no real chance of securing respect. This is why we can continue to believe that the spirit of questioning will take time and no civilization can live without practising the art of questioning.

Another question which is raised at this level of the discussion concerns the dignity of suffering in a just questioning. It goes without saying that, like civil disobedience, philosophical questioning too must not be undertaken without a scrupulous moral concern—simply because the common factors in civil disobedience and philosophical questioning are reliance upon moral conscience and civic virtue. Gandhi knew that both are needed. The appeal to one’s conscience is necessary in the Socratic act of questioning, but it is limited when it comes to the creative institution of a political community. An individual cannot have a conscience as a whole, no more than society as a whole can have a conscience, without self-examination and self-transformation that are morally enhanced. As such, the Gandhian philosophy of resistance at its best represents a vindication of the empathic capacities of human beings in the face of evil. Gandhi’s theory of resistance and disobedience is distinctive in that he sought to incorporate in it the right to be disloyal. In an article entitled ‘The Duty of Disloyalty’ he writes, ‘There is no halfway house between active loyalty and active disloyalty... In
these days of democracy there is no such thing as active loyalty to a person. You are, therefore, loyal or disloyal to institutions. When, therefore, you are disloyal you seek not to destroy persons but institutions.’

Here, the resistance is made possible by an ethical voice and an implicit questioning of the social and political institutions. From a Gandhian perspective, critique of the political represents a challenge to the idea of authority. Therefore, the underlying principles of Gandhian nonviolent resistance are the very notions of moral agency, in terms of insistence on truth and learning to listen to the voice of one’s conscience, and nonviolent political intervention in the public realm, in the direction of self-government. Gandhi further thought that the means of achieving the political as the art of organizing the society—in contradistinction from politics as the greed of power (which encircles us like the coil of a snake)—needed to be examined and practised in a different consideration. From Gandhi’s point of view, there would always be a need for spiritual intervention in the domain of the political. Far from being a religious attitude or a divine intervention in the sovereignty of human beings, the Gandhian principle of ‘spiritualization of the political’ can be regarded as a form of interconnecting the political to the ethical. This is where Gandhi’s experiments with the political are defined by him as his ‘experiments with truth’. He discovered as the result of his experiments with the political that ‘the good will, combined with self-sacrifice, was intended to “open the ears” of opponents and lead them to a truthful dialogue.’

Gandhi’s insistence on an empathic dialogue with the Other was, for him, a call on multiple perspectives on truth or what the Jains called Anekantavada. This is well exemplified by his ban on violent resistance. In other words, speaking of his ‘experiments with truth’ Gandhi points us to the political essence of this truth which is both multiple and shared. For Gandhi, truth as a shared political value is examined and adopted through the exercise of dialogue. Here, Gandhi’s model is Socratic par excellence. ‘Gandhi saw Socrates as sharing his own cause of telling the truth and he called his paraphrase “Story of a satyagrahi” (translated as “soldier of truth”). Socrates told the truth to his compatriots about their own defects... Gandhi presented Plato’s Socrates in 1908 as a practitioner of satyagraha, by 1909 in Hind Swaraj he had analyzed his own practice further, and recognized soul-force as imposing the constraints of hurting no one else.’

It goes without saying that the critical question for Gandhi is to try to bring about the mandatory coordination of the Socratic questioning on truth and the ethical means of the political. It is only through such a coordination that the civic virtues of the citizens gain the power and the legitimacy to put into question the legitimacy and authority of the State. Therefore, Gandhi’s
philosophy of resistance in its depth is concerned more with the practice of the civic virtues of the citizens rather than the raison d’état. Thus, what we see in Gandhi’s theoretical and practical approach to the question of the political is an epistemological inversion of the key principles of modern political thought which dismisses civic friendship in the name of the guarantee of individual liberties in the private sphere. As Anthony Parel discusses, ‘Gandhi’ s political philosophy is not only a means of understanding the fundamental truths about political phenomena, but also a means of realizing, or at least attempting to realize, these truths in action. The realization of political truths should occur not only in the lives of individual citizens but also in the operations of the political and economic institutions... Those who truly understand Gandhi’s political philosophy feel an obligation to put it into practice.’

Turning to Gandhi’s own words, the teleological framework of his entire philosophy of resistance is based on his understanding of what he underlines as ‘democratic swaraj’. ‘It must be remembered,’ affirms Gandhi, ‘that it is not Indian Home Rule depicted in the book [Hind Swaraj] that I am placing before India. I am placing before the nation parliamentary, i.e. democratic swaraj.’ Elsewhere he describes swaraj as ‘a capacity to declare independence at will...totally consistent with national self-respect and it provides for the highest growth of the nation.’ As basic as it is in Gandhi’s philosophy of resistance, swaraj is not a neutral concept. It is a mode of ‘political self-hood’. Therefore, swaraj is more a duty to resist, rather than a right to be free. According to Gandhi, to resist is to be autonomous. An individual is autonomous when she dares to think differently. Therefore, swaraj, in the Gandhian sense of the term, is an enlightened self-rule. Gandhi calls it a ‘disciplined rule from within.’ We can find herewith the reference to the Socratic questioning of the political, followed by the Gandhian conception of civic virtue. However, the secret of the Gandhian self-rule lies in ‘one’s rule over one’s own mind’. Then and only then, self-rule or autonomy brings self-awareness and consciousness of one’s political obligations towards the others. Because of this, thus, individual self-transformation is tied to the self-transformative nature of the political. ‘If we become free, India is free. And in this thought you have a definition of swaraj. It is swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves.’

2. Sorabji, Gandhi and the Stoics, 199.
3. Ibid., 151-2.
5. Gandhi, The Essential Writings, 149.
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