

The Future of the Gandhian Movement in India:

Constructive Nonviolence

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“Gandhi was fully committed to the belief that while nonviolence had an impressive power to protest and disrupt, its real power was to create and reconstruct.”

— Michael Nagler, *The Search for a Nonviolent Future*

Dr. M.P. Mathai, a world-renowned Gandhian scholar and professor at the School of Gandhian Thought and Development Studies at the Mahatma Gandhi University, Kerala, India, recently came to speak at UC Berkeley about the history and future of the Gandhian movement in India. His talk encompassed the far-reaching possibilities of constructive nonviolence, including a positive international response to 9/11 and different strands of Gandhian thought in India. Mathai continues to work with those who directly contributed to the independence movement and hopes to replicate the same type of liberation from centralized, authoritarian power for the villages of India. Fully embracing Gandhi’s idea of self-sufficient improvement, he wants to bring development and personal empowerment back into the hands of the people.

Mathai opened with a historical overview of the Gandhian movement. At the beginning of India’s fight for independence, all members of the *Satyagraha* (holding fast to truth) campaign were united under the common goal of ending British colonialism. There were those, of course, who were more active in the political realm, practiced civil disobedience, and led the direct nonviolent resistance against the British. The other stream of the movement, who Mathai called “the silent service,” helped pull the rural population, bereft of resources, out of extreme poverty. Gandhi’s Constructive Program at the time of independence had over 80 arms and included aiding the cause of the untouchables, women, the elderly, and educating the youth in the methods of nonviolence.

However, the movement began to split and the members of the Indian National Congress distanced themselves from Gandhian ideas of social justice and the duties of the *Satyagraha* in favor of political and public

life. So before his death in 1948, Gandhi expressed his vision for a nonviolent, peaceful, egalitarian Indian society and set up the *Sarva Seva Sangh* to carry it out. The organization, whose name means, “to serve all people,” was to coordinate, provide funding for, and carry out all aspects of the Gandhian movement.

When Gandhi said, “corruption and hypocrisy ought not to be inevitable products of democracy, as they undoubtedly are today,” he expressed his faith in self-rule but was cautious of the political process itself. Corruption on the national and local level soon began to wear away at the social fabric of India. Mathai explained that Gandhi had always been wary of the National Congress, perhaps because he foresaw a conflict between the government and his vision of development. Although, initially, *Sarva Seva Sangh* actively participated in the political process, in the atmosphere of rapid industrialization and economic progress, it was quickly marginalized.

Amidst the political emergency of the early 1970s, the Gandhian movement surged to the forefront of national debate. When Indira Gandhi began to centralize power in response to economic instability, opposition parties began to rally en masse. People took to the



Gandhi wanted all Indians to spin their own clothes and engage in other forms of “Constructive Program” (self improvement).

streets, union workers began to strike and plunged the country into a state of emergency. However, despite draconian government measures that attempted to stamp out popular resistance, Gandhi's influence could be seen everywhere. The right-leaning Janata power called on the police to resist the call of breaking up protests, and a huge rally surrounded Indira Gandhi's residence, demanding accountability and her resignation. Fearing the nonviolence movement's perceived radical nature, the government instituted a "commission of inquiry," what Mathai called a witch-hunt, to persecute the movement's supporters.

However, those in the "silent service" never ceased to serve the population of India and they became the base of the movement's second revival. Workers struggling for economic opportunity, farmers organizing for sustainable agricultural practices, and

women coming together for social justice formed pockets of resistance to an increasingly deregulated market. Mathai expressed his apprehension about the economic growth that the government promised as the main channel to eradicate poverty and

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adamantly professed his fear that this would leave the rural population without any recourse to activate civil society organizations and reclaim access to their resources. To give these people a political voice, the Gandhian movement was reborn in the countryside. Organized officially in 1994, the National Alliance of Peoples' Movements struggled on behalf of those people who had been pushed to the periphery by economic globalization. The most triumphant victory for the movement was the closing of a Coca-Cola production facility that was poisoning river waters, draining underground reserves, and polluting the environment in Kerala, one of the most densely populated and poorest states of India.

However, the movement again began to lose steam without the guidance of a leader and a set of goals to which to aspire. This was when Mathai said he realized the problem plaguing any kind of progressive development was the lack of participation on the part of the younger generation. The trouble is not that they are apathetic or lazy; the trap that the youth falls into, he says, is the desire to live a propitious career life. Wanting to



Activists from the National Alliance of Peoples' Movements in India meet for a conference to build solidarity in anticipation of struggles such as the one against Coca-Cola.

make a difference, they join political parties and are then co-opted by the system of power and corruption and forget their desire to change the system itself. He says that many people pay lip service to the movement but refuse to associate themselves with it. Radical intellectuals and Gandhian scholars sit comfortably in professorships or publishing houses and refuse to connect with the people they are trying to help. He derided this kind of armchair activism, saying that the most important part of the nonviolence movement was the practice of constructive work.

Mathai's greatest hope for the movement is what he called a global nonviolent reawakening. He wishes for the Gandhian movement to mark the point in history when a transformation begins to take place and people will unite under the goal of ending poverty and suffering all over the world. Mathai left us with the example of several students he knew that, immediately after graduating from one of the top engineering universities in India, moved to villages in rural India to work on water conservation and bringing renewable electricity directly to the people. These students contributed a couple years of their lives for the betterment of the world around them and embodied the Gandhian model of development.

His speech carried a resounding message for college students today: To make a difference in the world, one may have to sacrifice superfluous material things, "live simply so that others may simply live," and commit yourself to what you believe in.

Resources:

National Alliance of Peoples' Movements: www.napmindia.org
 Dr. M.P. Mathai Speech (webcast, Oct. 19, 2006):
http://webcast.berkeley.edu/course_details.php?seriesid=1906978360
 Mahatma Gandhi's Worldview by M.P. Mathai
 Mahatma Gandhi University: www.mguniversity.edu