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A suggestion for adapting Gandhian “bread labour” to current circumstances

by Mark Lindley*

Gandhiji upheld and adapted to contemporary Indian circumstances a moral precept of “bread labour” which he had found in Tolstoy’s writings (I should mention the well-established fact that Tolstoy had found the idea in an essay by a peasant in Siberia named Timofei Bondarev) and the precept is still familiar in Indian culture. The basic idea was that every able-bodied person ought to do some physical work in order to deserve (with or without monetary payments) his or her daily portions of food. Gandhi said, in 1925, “It means that everyone [at Sabarmati Ashram] is expected to perform sufficient body labour in order to entitle him to [his food]. It is not therefore necessary to earn one’s living by bread labour, taking the word ‘living’ in its broader sense. But everyone must perform some useful body labour. For me at the present moment, spinning is the only body labour I give.” [1] Tolstoy’s daily bread labour had consisted mainly of agricultural work done in collaboration with some of his hundreds of serfs (he was a rich landowner) [2], but a typical day’s activity in Gandhi’s ashrams at Sabarmati and Sevagram would more likely include spinning with a charkha than farming with a hoe or the like. Spinning had salient relevance to great political issues in India in Gandhi’s day; learning how to spin thread is easier than learning how to farm or garden successfully; and you can readily say or sing religious prayers while spinning, whereas physical work in a garden or on a farm is normally so taxing that if you like to pray you have to set aside some other moments for it.

The first Gandhian economist, Joseph Kumarappa, spent most of the last half-dozen years of his life (he died in 1960) in a Gandhian ashram near a village some 50 km southwest of Madurai. The ashram was dedicated to Gandhian-type “basic education” for villagers, and this is displayed in a 15-minute video [at Basic Education](#) [Ctrl+Click to follow link] by [Gandhi Niketan Ashram](#). The first three minutes of the video include historically precious footage of Kumarappa speaking to youngsters there; the last five minutes are about production of khadi as “the fundamental craft around which [Gandhian] basic education is centered” — i.e., was intended to be centered in the villages where some 70% of India’s citizens lived in those days.

However, among the several matters about which Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore had disagreed in the course of their long and mutually reverential friendship (they called each other “Mahatma” and “Gurudev”) was the spiritual value of spinning. While Gandhi extolled it, Tagore was skeptical; an article by him entitled “The cult of the charkha” appeared in *Modern Review* in 1925, and he contributed in due time a follow up piece to the same journal. Gandhi replied in *Young India* in two pieces, entitled “The Poet and the charkha” and “The Poet and the wheel”.

It seems to me that notwithstanding the remarkable virtues of khadi clothing, and notwithstanding the spiritual value, to some people, of prayerful spinning with a simple charkha, a different kind of everyday physical work throughout the year should be regarded, now in the 21st century, as far more vitally fundamental to India’s most urgent present and future material needs. That other kind is: discriminating waste-disposal, in the towns and cities as well as in the villages.

Half of India’s citizens are urban nowadays, and they generate waste at a higher per capita rate than do their rural cousins. Everyone knows that dumping waste indiscriminately in local rivers or lakes or landfills has become, for many cities, a dangerous way to get it out of sight; and so, ever more vast amounts of the stuff are being transported to more-or-less distant places. But still a great deal of this clearing away of it is indiscriminate inasmuch as it is far less thoroughly sorted into different types of stuff subject to different kinds of processing, recycling etc. than ought to be the case. I see here a great and indeed urgent

opportunity for bread labour. Able-bodied members of households (male as well as female) could take part daily in attentive, hands-on sorting of the stuff into intelligently conceived categories — defined by municipal or district authorities who have studied the relevant local problems and re-processing facilities — so as to eliminate the appalling damage, ecology-wise, of careless waste-disposal.

Gandhi's notion of "constructive work" included a precept that "all ... rubbish ... should be classified. There are portions which can be turned into manure, portions which have simply to be buried, and portions which can be directly turned into wealth." [3] But not even in his worst dreams could he have imagined how urgent the need for elaborating upon this precept, karma-wise as well as conceptually, would become.

One of the arguments in Tagore's 1925 article was that "By doing the same thing day after day,^[1] mechanical skill may be acquired; but the mind like a mill-turning bullock will be kept going round and round a narrow range of habit. That is why, in every country, man has looked down on work which involves this kind of mechanical repetition." That argument harmonizes with Gandhiji's occasional remarks in the vein of "If everybody thinks about the work he is doing, and so works intelligently, he would ... find his work interesting ... and make inventions and improvements which would benefit the world" [4] and "Intelligent bread labour is any day the highest form of social service. ... The adjective 'intelligent' has been prefixed to 'labour' in order to show that labour to be social service must have that definite purpose behind it." [5] I admire these precepts about work, and it seems clear to me that "inventions and improvements" and dedication to social service are, in the 21st century, more the need of the day in regard to waste management than in regard to clothing.

China and Germany are among the countries where governmentally enforced separation of household waste into four (or even more than four) intelligently defined categories has become during the first two decades of this century an aspect of the citizens' way of life in many cities. A review article, published in 2020, about how certain recently developed German technologies could be applied to help achieve "sustainable waste management for zero waste cities

in China” says that the robust “existing strategies [in China] of waste reduction, *waste separation* [my italics] and waste utilization via energy recovery” will have to be complemented with “recycling strategies such as mechanical pre-treatment and chemical recycling”. [6] In regard to India, however, history has shown not only that the best native masters of biochemical technologies are as good as the best anywhere in the West [7], but also that, in general, techniques developed in the West may prove in the long run to be poorly suited to conditions here. I don’t know to what extent such might be the case in regard to the German techniques of “chemical recycling” discussed in the article, but I am pretty certain that purely “*mechanical pre-treatment*” [my italics] of waste is inadequate and that a certain amount of direct human perception and physical refinement of its sorting is invaluable for the sake of efficiency. So I hope that thoughtful Gandhians may help India progress toward better waste management by touting the bread-labour precept anew and focusing a nationwide NGO bread-labour campaign on household waste-separation.

* (Author: Mark Lindley is Professor of Eminence at Mahatma Gandhi Mission University in Aurangabad, Maharashtra.)

[1] *Young India*, 5 November 1925.

[2] Gandhi in his study of Tolstoy found that Tolstoy though “accustomed to the comforts of wealth” had “started doing physical labour ... [and would] work on the farm or do other labour for eight hours a day”. (Translation, in Gandhi’s *Collected Works*, vol.43, p.9, from a Gujarati talk by Gandhi published in *Navajivan* on 16 September 1928.)

[3] *Harijan*, 1935, p.416.

[4] *Harijan*, 1933, p.296.

[5] *Harijan*, 1935, p.125.

[6] See <https://academic.oup.com/ce/article/4/3/169/5918339>.

[7] See, for two readily accessible batches of evidence, the 20-page “Brief history of vaccines & vaccination in India”, in vol.139 (2014) of the *Indian Journal of Medical Research* (accessible at www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4078488) and the numerous mentions of research achievements in the historical account of CIPLA posted by the journal *Business Standard* at www.business-standard.com/company/cipla-114/information/company-history.