

## Letter from the President Gandhiji and Labour

R. Venkataraman

**Gandhiji preached dignity of labour in the following words:**

**“I pride in calling myself a scavenger, weaver, spinner, farmer. I am pleased to identify myself with the labour classes because without labour we can do nothing”.**

**W**e cannot eliminate machinery and heavy industries because the villager wants buses for travel, electricity for lighting and fertilizer for crop production. At the same time we cannot blindly mechanise everything sweeping the rural folk into depth of unemployment and poverty. We have to hammer out a system suited to our conditions, needs and skills.

Trade unions, like the party system, are a Western innovation. Our ancient culture regards work as worship. The Bhagavad Gita says:

*Sarirayatra api cha the  
Na prasiddyath akarmanah*  
Even the mere maintenance of your body

Would not be possible, without work.

The Bible tells us:

In the sweat of thy brow  
Thou shalt eat thy bread

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However until the advent of

the industrial revolution, workers did not gain status in society and were regarded as inferior persons.

Employment of a large number of workers under one roof, having common wages and conditions of work brought them together under the Trade Union organization and enabled them to collectively put forward demands for better wages, service conditions and fringe benefits. The worker ceased to be an individual and acquired a collective personality.

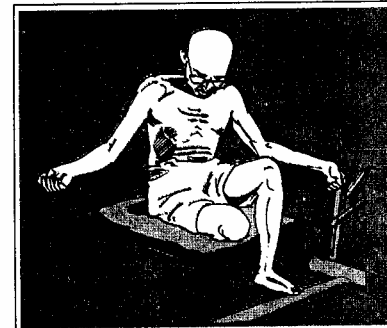
Trade Unions endeavoured to narrow the gap between the value added by labour and the price paid for it. This necessarily led to conflict and confrontation leading to sour

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industrial relations.

Gandhiji spiritualised every aspect of life, political, social, domestic and industrial. In contrast to the Marxist doctrine of confrontation between labour and employer, Gandhiji said: “My ideal is that Capital and Labour should supplement and help each other. They should be a great family living in unity and harmony. Capital and Labour

need not be antagonistic to each other”. He further said that in India a class war is not only not inevitable, it is avoidable. He said that the employer must



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regard himself a trustee of the welfare of the labouring classes under him.

Gandhiji was convinced that the textile workers of Ahmedabad deserved the wages demanded by them. He pleaded with the Mill Owners who were also his friends to come to a settlement with their labour.

Gandhiji himself stated, "I am in a most delicate situation. The millhands case was strong. Smt. Anusuyabai had to battle with her own brother Sri Ambalal Sarabhai who led the fray on behalf of the mill owners. My relations with them were friendly... I had consultations with them and requested them to refer the dispute to arbitration but they refused to recognize the principle of arbitration". Therefore Gandhiji led the strike of the Ahmedabad textile mill

workers in February 1918. He clearly enunciated the principles on which a strike should be conducted. These were:

1. Never to resort to violence
2. Never to molest blacklegs
3. Never to depend upon alms during strike, and
4. To remain firm no matter how long the strike continued and to earn bread during the strike by any other honest means".

When after two weeks, the strikers showed signs of weakening, Gandhiji resorted to a fast not to coerce the mill owners to relent but to strengthen the morale of the workers.

Let me now turn to the relevance of the Gandhian approach to the present state of industrial relations in the

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changing economic scenario.

The Marxist doctrine of class conflict has evaporated and the Marxist governments of East Europe have themselves cast it out of the window. Time was when they spoke of world Communism. The fact is that Marxism is in its last throes of existence.

A revolutionary change has overtaken the world. Regimented and controlled economies have yielded place to free market economies.

One cannot enter the export market which is fiercely competitive unless:

1. the quality of goods is comparable to the best in the world and
2. Prices are competitive.

In this context the Gandhian concept of the duty of Labour assumes importance. Gandhiji told Labour, "Your duty is to work to the best of your ability for the wage you receive".

From time immemorial, the Indian artisan had striven to

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produce the best. He was proud of his skill and achieved excellence in his chosen field. It is that spirit that Labour should recapture if we have to be competitive in the global market. He also called on Labour "not to destroy the mill property with a view to squaring your quarrel with the mill owners". He inculcated the spirit of service in production and non-violence in dealing with the employer. In the market economy, the efficiency of Labour, its skills, its quality consciousness and innovative ideas assume very great importance in improving the competitive edge.

But labour can be enthused to improve productivity only if it is

assured that improved productivity will not result in unemployment. The oft-repeated argument that improved

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productivity would bring higher wages which in turn will unleash demand for consumer goods and durables and thus create more jobs, though correct at the macro level, can hardly bring any solace to the worker who faces redundancy as a result of higher productivity. This theory has relevance to countries with shortage of manpower and little unemployment. In countries with astronomical figures of unemployment, it is difficult to enthuse workers in productivity schemes unless they are assured of job security.

For instance, the earliest agreement between TISCO workers and the Management contained a provision that there shall be no retrenchment as a

result of rationalization schemes in the TISCO. This can be achieved by matching expansion or starting new schemes

along with schemes of rationalization, induction of labour saving equipment etc.

Where, however, such schemes are not feasible, voluntary retirement schemes acceptable to the workers should be framed and persons on the verge of retirement should be chosen for it. The rule that "last come first to go", causes greater hardship to younger people.

The policy of unbridled freedom to hire and fire may suit countries with shortage of manpower and not those with huge unemployment. That is why Gandhiji emphasized that we should substitute mass production with production by the masses.

The gains of productivity

should be shared with the labour, so that their enthusiasm may be kindled and interest sustained. Incentive schemes have been devised by many industrial establishments with great success. It is advantageous to frankly discuss with labour the incentive schemes to be introduced so that their fears may be allayed and their helpful suggestions adopted. Consultations with labour also gives them a sense of participation and a feeling of partnership, a thought which Gandhiji felt should prevail in industrial relationships. Good industrial relations can always find solutions for all problems. According to Gandhiji, such relations develop where:

(a) the employer and labour have mutual respect for each other and treat each other as equal partners in the common endeavour for increasing goods and services.

(b) there is free and frank discussion of the issues and negotiations are conducted in good faith with neither side trying to take unfair advantage over the other.

(c) there is an attitude of give and take and accommodation of each other's point of view.

(d) there is no violence either to persons or to property of the unit

(e) the demand put forward by Labour is just and reasonable and,

(f) strike is resorted to only as the very last weapon of the labour.

Gandhiji urged that "all industrial disputes should be settled by mutual consultation, negotiations and arbitration. They should not resort to direct action so long as they have not exhausted all avenues of peaceful settlement. They should however be prepared to strike if the employer refused arbitration or does not carry out the award of the arbitrators".

In a market economy, industrial peace and harmony must receive the highest priority. Anything that affects quality and cost will spell ruin to both the Employer and Labour.

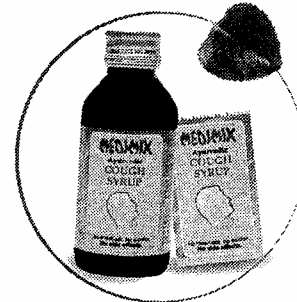
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