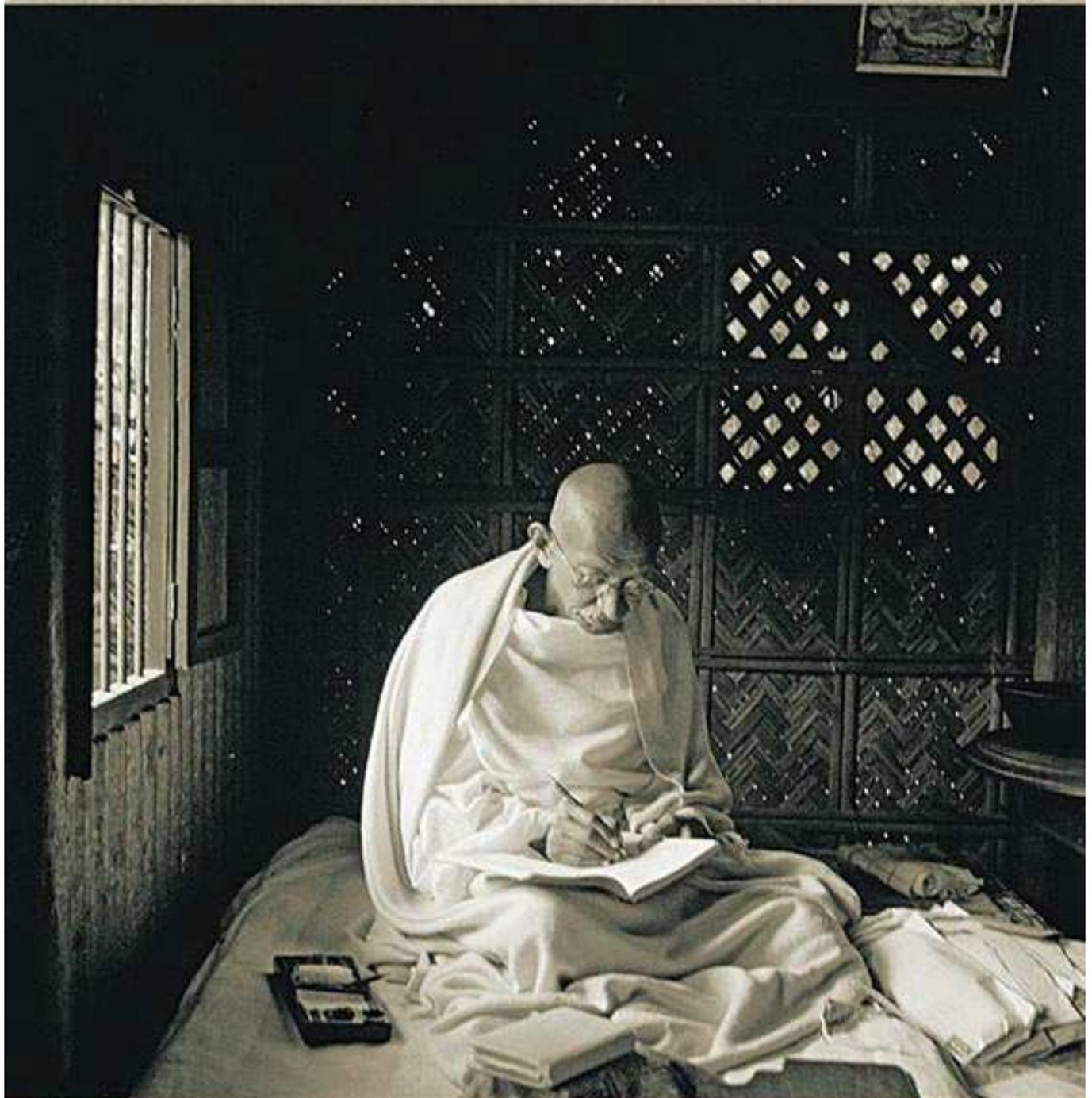


THE MIND OF MAHATMA GANDHI



Compiled and edited by
R. K. Prabhu & U. R. Rao

The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi

Encyclopedia of Gandhi's Thoughts

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42. STRIKES: LEGITIMATE AND ILLEGITIMATE

Arbitration First

I KNOW that strikes are an inherent right of the working men for the purpose of securing justice, but they must be considered a crime immediately the capitalists accept the principle of arbitration. (YI, 5-5-1920, p. 6)

Strikes and Politics

Strikes are the order of the day. They are a symptom of the existing unrest. All kinds of vague ideas are floating in the air. A vague hope inspires all, and great will be the disappointment if that vague hope does not take definite shape. The labour world in the India, as elsewhere, is at the mercy of those who set up as advisers and guides. The latter are not always scrupulous and not always wise even when they are scrupulous. The labourers are dissatisfied with their lot. They have every reason for dissatisfaction. They are being taught, and justly, to regard themselves as being chiefly instrumental in enriching their employers. And so it requires little effort to make them lay down their tools. The political situation too, is beginning to affect the labourers of India. And there are not wanting labour leaders who consider that strikes may be engineered for political purposes.

In my opinion, it will be a most serious mistake to make use of labour strikes for such a purpose. I don't deny that such strikes can serve political ends. But they do not fall within the plan of non-violent non-co-operation. It does not require much effort of the intellect to perceive that it is a most dangerous thing to make political use of labour until labourers understand the political condition of the country and are prepared to work for the common good. This is hardly to be expected of them all of a sudden and until they have bettered their own condition so as to enable them to keep body and soul together in a decent manner.

The greatest political contribution, therefore, that labourers can make is to improve their own condition, to become better informed, to insist on their rights, and even to demand proper use by their employers of the manufactures in which they have had such an important hand. The proper evolution, therefore, would be for the labourers to raise themselves to the status of part proprietors. Strikes, therefore, for the present should only take place for the direct betterment of the labourers' lot, and, when they have acquired the spirit of patriotism, for the regulation of prices of their manufactures.

Conditions for Success

The conditions of a successful strike are simple. And when they are fulfilled, a strike need never fail:

- (1) The cause of the strike must be just.
- (2) There should be practical unanimity among the strikers.
- (3) There should be no violence used against non-strikers.
- (4) Strikers should be able to maintain themselves during the strike period without falling back upon union funds and should, therefore, occupy themselves in some useful and productive temporary occupation.
- (5) A strike is no remedy when there is enough other labour to replace strikers. In that case, in the event of unjust treatment or inadequate wages or the like, resignation is the remedy.
- (6) Successful strikes have taken place even when all the above conditions have not been fulfilled, but that merely proves that the employers were weak and had a guilty conscience. We often make terrible mistakes by copying bad examples. The safest thing is not to copy examples of which we have rarely complete knowledge, but to follow the conditions which we know and recognize to be essential for success. (YI, 16-2-1921, pp. 52-

53)

Political Strikes

Obviously, there should be no strike which is not justifiable on merits. No unjust strike should succeed. All public sympathy must be withheld from such strikes.

The public has no means of judging the merits of a strike unless it is backed by impartial persons enjoying public confidence. Interested men cannot judge the merits of their own case. Hence, there must be an arbitration accepted by the parties or a judicial adjudication.

As a rule, the matter does not come before the public when there is accepted arbitration or adjudication. Cases have, however, happened when haughty employers have ignored awards, or misguided employees, conscious of their power to assert themselves, have done likewise and have decided upon forcible extortion.

Strikes for economic betterment should never have a political end as an ulterior motive. Such a mixture never advances the political end and generally brings trouble upon strikers, even when they do not dislocate public life, as in the case of public utility services, such as the postal strike.

The Government may suffer some inconvenience, but will not come to a standstill. Rich persons will put up expensive postal services, but the vast mass of the poor people will be deprived, during such a strike, of a convenience of primary importance to which they have become used for generations. Such strikes can only take place when every other legitimate means has been adopted and [has] failed.

Sympathetic strikes must be taboo until it is conclusively proved that the affected men have exhausted all the legitimate means at their disposal.

It follows from the foregoing that political strikes must be treated on their own merits and must never be mixed with or related to economic strikes.

Political strikes have a definite place in non-violent action. They are never taken up haphazard. They must be open, never led by *goondaism*. They are calculated never to lead to violence. (H, 11-8-1946, p. 256)

Non-violent Strikes

A pacific strike must be limited to those who are labouring under the grievance to be redressed. Thus, if the match manufacturers, say, of Timbuctoo, who are quite satisfied with their lot, strike out of sympathy for its mill-hands who are getting starvation wages, the match manufacturer's strike would be a species of violence. They may and should help in a most effective manner by withdrawing their custom from the mill-owners of Timbuctoo without laying themselves open to the charge of violence.

But it is possible to conceive occasions when those who are not directly suffering may be under an obligation to cease work. Thus, if in the instance imagined, the masters in the match-factory combine with the mill-owners of Timbuctoo, it will clearly be the duty of the workers in the match-factory to make common cause with the mill-hands. But I have suggested the addition purely by way of illustration. In the last resort, every case has to be judged on its own merits. Violence is a subtle force. It is not easy always to detect its presence though you may feel it all the same. (YI, 18-11-1926, p. 400)

A strike should be spontaneous and not manipulated. If it is organized without any compulsion, there would be no chance for *goondaism* and looting. Such a strike would be characterized by perfect co-operation amongst the strikers. It should be peaceful and there should be no show of force.

The strikers should take up some work either singly or in co-operation with each other, in order to earn their bread. The nature of such work should have been thought out beforehand. It goes without saying that in a peaceful, effective and firm strike of this character, there will be no room for rowdyism

or looting. I have known of such strikes. I have not presented a Utopian picture. (H, 2-6-1946, p. 158)

In no case can I be party, irrespective of non-violence, to a universal strike and capture of power. (H, 28-7-1946, p. 237)

Capitalism and Strikes

How should capital behave when labour strikes? This question is in the air and has great importance at the present moment. One way is that of suppression, named or nicknamed 'American'. It consists in suppression of labour through organized *goondaism*. Everybody would consider this as wrong and destructive. The other way, right and honourable, consists in considering every strike on its merits and giving labour its due--not what capital considers as due, but what labour itself would so consider and enlightened public opinion acclaim as just....

As time progresses, the labour world is getting more insistent in its demands which are daily increasing, and it does not hesitate to resort to violence in its impatient enforcement of those demands. New methods of enforcing them are being employed. Workers do not hesitate to injure the property of the employers, dislocate machinery, harass old men and women who would not join the strike, and forcibly keep out blacklegs. In these circumstances, how are the employers to behave?

...My advice to the employers would be that they should willingly regard workers as the real owners of the concerns which they fancy they have created. They should further regard it as their duty to equip the employees with sound education that would draw out the intelligence dormant in them and gladly promote and welcome the power that this combination of the workers gives them.

This noble work cannot be done in a day by the employers. Meanwhile, what should those do who have to face the destruction wrought by strikers in their

concerns? I would unhesitatingly advise such employers that they should at once offer the strikers full control of the concern which is as much the strikers' as theirs. They will vacate their premises not in a huff but because it is right, and to show their goodwill, they would offer the employees the assistance of their engineers and other skilled staff.

The employers will find in the end that they will lose nothing. Indeed, their right action will disarm opposition and they will earn the blessing of their men. They will have made proper use of their capital. I would not consider such action as benevolent. It would be an intelligent use by the capitalists of their resources and honest dealing in regard to the employees whom they would have converted into honourable partners. (H, 31-3-1946, p. 60)

Sympathetic Strikes

Any premature precipitation of sympathetic strikes must...result in infinite harm to our cause. In the programme of non-violence, we must rigidly exclude the idea of gaining anything by embarrassing the Government. If our activity is pure and that of the Government is impure, the latter is embarrassed by our purity, if it does not itself become pure. Thus, a movement of purification benefits both parties, whereas a movement of mere destruction leaves the destroyer unpurified, and brings him down to the level of those whom he seeks to destroy.

Even our sympathetic strikes have to be strikes for self-purification, i.e., non-co-operation. And so, when we declare a strike to redress a wrong, we really cease to take part in the wrong, and thus leave the wrong-doer to his own resources, in other words, enable him to see the folly of continuing the wrong. Such a strike can only succeed when behind it is the fixed determination not to revert to service....

A strike may fail in spite of a just grievance and the ability of strikers to hold out indefinitely, if there are workers to replace them. A wise man, therefore, will not strike for increase of wages or other comforts if he feels

that he can be easily replaced. But a philanthropic or patriotic man will strike in spite of supply being greater than the demand, when he feels for and wishes to associate himself with his neighbour's distress. Needless to say, there is no room in a civil strike of the nature described by me for violence in the shape of intimidation, incendiarism or otherwise. (YI, 22-9-1921, p. 298)

...What about the blacklegs, you may ask. Blacklegs unfortunately there will be. But I would urge you not to fight them, but to plead with them, to tell them that theirs is a narrow policy and that yours has the interest of the whole labour at heart. It is likely that they may not listen to you. In that case you will tolerate them, but not fight them. (H, 7-11-1936, p. 311)

The fundamental reason for this spreading strike fever is that life here, as elsewhere, is today uprooted from its basis, the basis of religion, and what an English writer has called 'cash nexus' has taken its place. And that is precarious bond. But even when the religious basis is there, there will be strikes, because it is scarcely conceivable that religion will have become for all the basis for life. So, there will be attempts at exploitation, on the one hand, and strikes, on the other. But these strikes will then be of a purely non-violent character.

Such strikes never do harm to anyone. It was such a strike perhaps that brought General Smuts to his knees. "If you had hurt an Englishman," said Jan Smuts, "I would have shot you, even deported your people. As it is, I have put you in prison and tried to subdue you and your people in every way. But how long can I go on like this when you do not retaliate?" And so he had to come to terms with a mere 'coolie' on behalf of 'coolies', as all Indians were then called in South Africa. (H, 22-9-1946, p. 321)