

## **Key concepts of the philosophy of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi\***

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*Dezső Szenkovics:*

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In recent decades, the religious and cultural trends of the Indian subcontinent have continuously appeared in Central Eastern Europe arousing broad public interest. Numerous civil society organizations with Indian spirituality were registered, various churches opened their gates and yoga schools became available to improve the quality of life. As a result of globalization, syncretism became a quasi self-evident trend, and thus it is no wonder that an Indian topic generates scientific interest in Central Eastern Europe. Moreover, due to technological development, “spatial contractions” occurred in the pulsating world: answering social, and in particular economic and political questions without some kind of a universal knowledge base and only relying on the experiences of our own geographical and cultural region is virtually impossible. A simple example can illustrate this well: Zoltán László, a trade union officer caused some amusement among the rows of his audience at his presentation, when he told about the intercultural gap widening between the management of the Indian-owned car parts producer Samvardhana Motherson Reflectec (SMR) and the Hungarian party when launching the producer’s plant in Mosonmagyaróvár. On the one side, measures that seemed inconceivable for the rational European eye were taken when the sacral “energy barrier” was created to compensate for the inadequate location of the plant or when furniture was arranged. The Indian owners were at least as shocked when their Hungarian counterparts served them a grey beef speciality with the best intentions.

Even if we accept the importance of intercultural dialogue, we have to stop for a moment before examining the professional-academic focus of this work and ask the question: do we really need another academic experiment, with such ample literature on Gandhi?<sup>2</sup>

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The answer is clearly yes. To prove that the answer is not simple axiomatic, one need merely read the following review of the work by Dezső Szenkovics. It is worth discussing the author himself for a moment. In consideration of the “sine ira et studio” maxim by Tacitus, the author of a review must apply the principle of impartiality in his paper with double emphasis, owing to his friendship with Szenkovics and his deepest respect for Gandhi.

As a background, it should be noted that, thanks to the particular attention paid to the life of Sándor Kőrösi Csoma, which is more typical in Transylvania than in Hungary, Szenkovics – a Hungarian academic from Romania – arrived India in the 1990s for the first time for some weeks, following the route of the renowned Hungarian orientalist.

His personal account tells that right at the moment of his arrival to the subcontinent, he was faced with a country image campaign that offered two extreme alternatives regarding the attitude towards India: “love it or leave it”. His decisions led to his everlasting bonding to India, its culture and spiritual heritage/creators. Among the creators, the personality of Mahatma (Tagore gave him this attribute, which later formed into a name) particularly caught his interest. All this is attested in his innumerable presentations and publications, as well as the publication and supervision of Gandhi’s major work “*Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*” (in Hungarian “*Hind Szvarádzs, avagy az indiai önkormányzat*” (Kriterion Könyvkiadó, Cluj-Napoca, 2010)). This academic background led Szenkovics to author his own book (which in turn earned him a doctoral title). The question might arise: why doesn’t it cause dissonance in an author with a Protestant cultural background to find a model in Hindu morality? Perhaps, the review indirectly answers this question, too.

When reading the book, it is clear that it has a logical structure: we wander from one topic to another, from a person through Indian social history to the interpretation of the key concepts of the Great Teacher, as a well-constructed spiritual path, which is much more than an exegesis or a set of semantic distinctions. The greatest merit of the work is that it synthesises and comparatively presents the relevant Gandhianistic literary without concealing works having a critical tone of Mahatma. The way the sequence of events essential for the topic is not a notorious reiteration of India’s social history as written many times before, but form an integral part of the epistemological foundation of the book. Naturally, Kant’s *priori* concepts (space and time) define political actions, however, it seems that Gandhi’s ideas of social philosophy blast these frameworks into pieces. In the spirit of the “*historia est magistra vitae*”, a thinker of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe has to pay distinguished attention to these parts, since the Indian subcontinent had to face challenges such as poverty, cultural diversity, unemployment, a counter-productive educational system, corruption, inertia across the bureaucracy, a structure that strangles

small and medium-sized entrepreneurs, the impact of multinational economic operators, etc.

One cannot ignore the fact that the Indian subcontinent is considered the birthplace of several world religions. The philosophical literature of these religions unfolds a theoretical activity that had an effect on the definition of optimal political and economic structure for millennia. The unique theoretical bases have complementary theories attached to them, to a great extent as a result of the eastward expansion of Western European powers. However, the western Christian universe and the ideology of enlightenment could be nest into the world of the Indian caste-system, and mainly only affected a narrow collaborating elite with British (re-)education. The “isms” of the west in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (liberalism, conservatism, communism/socialism, nationalism) only reached the subcontinent with considerable delays. The colonisers established intermediary institutions in vain, they failed to achieve anything beyond “cultural mimicry”, since the lack of receptive ability prevented total identification with the theories of western civilization. The constitutional structure of India after it gained independence in 1947 follows the pattern of Western European democracies in procedural terms, but in a substantive comparison it still differs from the model system. It is unquestionable that the Indian subcontinent and Western Europe do not belong to the same framework of civilization, which means an irresolvable structural difference.

The essence of the book is the analysis of key concepts in Gandhi’s philosophical concepts (social, religious and political). It is important to point out that the groundwork of Gandhi’s social thinking are of religious nature virtually in their entirety (justice – satya; nonviolence – ahimsa, devotion to the truth – satyagraha). However, it is not the central role of a single religion (in this case Hindu with its Vaishnava branch Gandhi was affiliated with) that the author dwells on and calls our attention to. Instead of the dogmatic interpretations of religions, Gandhi focused on their essence. This is how he found coinciding conceptual frameworks in the teachings of Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Jesus Christ, and used them after selecting, adapting and modifying them. Through this recontextualising-reinterpreting experiment by Gandhi, conceptual entities were extended with new semantic contents and embedded into new sets of correlations, which resulted in a new political and economic pattern as well. This all happened while the contents construed by Gandhi became available for decoding for all segments of the social-political-economic field, and hence could be introduced into public thinking.

Gandhi is a meta-historic philosopher; however, it is true that his ideas related to the political events of a given political time and space, but his compass points to the direction of the absolute objective. Gandhi can implement a *sui generis* change of paradigm, because he takes on theo-political attributes. What Gandhi does,

goes beyond politics: his political thinking bears universal features. His ideology does not restrict itself to actions bound to particular situations, the content and meaning of his teaching cannot only be interpreted in the specific context, but eruptively speaks to everyone, regardless of time and space. This does not mean that Gandhi disregarded periods of world history; on the contrary, his receptors perfectly signalled him the changes in economy and political history that seemed irreversible.

The central point of Gandhi's ideology is the concept of justice that goes beyond any megalomania of our world. This results in a paradigm that bursts others in the same a priori time and space structure, that is, the Justice postulated by Gandhi allows the existence of parallel paradigms. Since however, the relation and communication between them remains unencoded, diverse paths of development occur in the paradigmatic interpretation of dominant economic and political relations. The reason of antinomy can be found in the base formulas of interpretation. While the political notion of the British is guided by the Machiavellian principle (with a consequential impact on the arrangement of social reality), the means and aims of action for Gandhi are in harmony, they are directed towards Justice. This is the root of the irreconcilable conflict between the British and the Gandhian opinion. While, notwithstanding the spiritual heritage and life of Thomas More, the leaders of Great Britain deemed inconceivable the fact that politics could be motivated by religious-moral views, Gandhi saw politics as "applied religion" (Szenkovics 2014:102). By the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the asymmetric political and economic relations between India and Great Britain became unsustainable, since the dominant party only viewed India from a special demand and supply relationship: practically it exploited it. No wonder that Gandhi had strong criticism for the West, since its economic and political solutions were in direct opposition to the theses and antitheses of Jesus Christ's Sermon on the Mount.

In consideration of the level of development and the general conditions in India at Gandhi's time, it might be interesting to read and interpret Szenkovics' book by putting Thomas More's *Utopia* (Cartaphilus Könyvkiadó, 2011) in parallel, which gives a judgment of the capital production and social conditions of contemporary England (first decade of the 16<sup>th</sup> century). The three problems I have arbitrarily selected underline the similarities:

*i.* The situation of insecure social groups:

Ruining the agricultural workers and small and medium-sized entrepreneurs as regards food production and light industry in More's time: 'The increase of pasture,' said I, 'by which your sheep, which are naturally mild, and easily kept in order, may be said now to devour men and unpeople, not only villages, but

towns... The price of wool is also so risen that the poor people, who were wont to make cloth, are no more able to buy it; and this, likewise, makes many of them idle.' (*More 2011:26-29*) In Gandhi's time: 'the flatlands of India were all white with the bones of wool-weavers' (*Szenkovics 2014:47*).

ii. The Oikos-type subsistence:

The subsistence of the utopistic *Nowhere* island: 'Every family makes their own clothes ... and throughout the island they wear the same sort of clothes.' (*More 2011:68*) In Gandhi's time: 'A constructive programme was also designed that symbol of it being domestic spinning and weaving, which after all stressed the highest level of subsistence of micro-communities.' (*Szenkovics 2014:77*).

iii. Recruitment of leaders:

More's '*politeia*' (meritocracy) programme: 'Out of these [learned men] they choose their ambassadors, their priests, their Tranibors, and the Prince himself, anciently called their Barzenes, but is called of late their Ademus.' (*More 2011:72*) Gandhi's gnostic theory: '...those who have not only sworn an oath to practice the ahimsa, but also went through a comprehensive spiritual and moral education... Since only in possession of knowledge, learning and intellectual skills is it possible to prevent that the ahimsa from becoming a "fixed and spiritless dogma" for them...' (*Szenkovics 2014:147-148*).

The examples could go on much longer. Although the scope of this review does not allow for a detailed analysis, the parallel examination of these two book can without doubt shed light on new sets of correlations, and bring the reader to a more complex understanding.

In the closing sections of his book, Szenkovics emphasises the relevance of Gandhian principles, and then draws conclusions. Perhaps, the message of the whole book is given the following teaching of Bapu, which might sound quite familiar to Hungarian society with strong Christian roots: "*abhaya*", that is, lack of fear. This is made even stronger by the programme of absolute transparency that covers the perfect harmony of the thought, the word uttered and the action. In light of the above, Gandhi's teaching can potentially be the antithesis of postulates in Samuel P. Huntington's "*The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*" (Simon & Schuster, 1996) in the constellation of the values proclaimed by Hinduism and world religions (Jewish-Christian, Islam, Hinduism). The reviewer has a sense of something missed in one aspect only: it would have been interesting to compare Gandhi with the Quran, since the greatest failure of Mahatma's life was the inability to reach a compromise with the Muslim League and its leader Muhammad Ali Jinnah that eventually led to the fragmentation into a "multi-regional" India.

Although Gandhi knew well that the “*sarvodaya*” (new moral and welfare society) is very difficult to realise, still he worked enthusiastically and unswervingly to accomplish it – just as the author of this volume desires for a more moral present and future. This work is clearly an *ars poetica* and creed for Szenkovics, who may have faith in a spillover effect, i.e. that his book will gradually shift from the academic realm to all areas of life. As Gandhi could not conceive how a religious man could refrain from political and economic challenges, the author is likewise a real “*homo politicus*”. And the message is addressed to everyone who think that either the Hindu ideology or the values of the Bible have validity in our present, or possibly accept Kant’s categorical imperative as reality.