

‘Gandhi Works, Always’*

(Excerpts from an interview with Shri Lakshmi Chand Jain by Shri Ashok Gopal.)

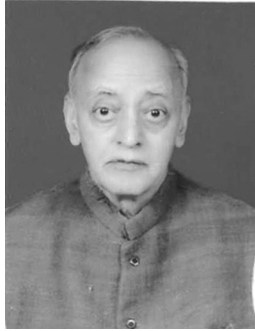
Ashok Gopal

A unique body exists in our country known as the Sarvodaya Samaj. Sarvodaya means good of all. This word is also a gift of Gandhi to the nation. The main qualification for anyone to be a member of Sarvodaya Samaj is to believe in the principles of truth and non-violence. It is a loose brotherhood of like-minded people. There are no office bearers in this organization. The responsibility of managing annual conferences is entrusted to a coordinator. It is expected to meet once in a year in any part of the country from where the invitation is received. It is generally a two or three days affair. The elders of the Gandhian fraternity and constructive workers spread out in different parts of the country share their experiences and concern during this conference. At the end of the conference, a consensus statement is adopted. A practice also exists to invite an eminent personality to deliver the inaugural address, and another eminent personality to preside over the conference.

The last Sarvodaya Conference was held at Pune on 6,7,8 November, 2008. It was inaugurated by well-known social worker and Gandhian thinker Shri LC Jain. An interview taken by the journalist, Shri Ashok Gopal before this conference was held, was carried in the monthly organ of the Gandhi Memorial Trust, namely *Sansthakul*. We are happy to reproduce it here for the benefit of our readers. Shri Jain has his own special style of writing and speaking, which is considered as unique and impressive. In course of the interview, Shri LC Jain narrates some important experiences of his life and he also shares his thinking about the overall socio-political situation in our country.

The readers may recall that Shri Jain is one of the winners from India of the prestigious Magsaysay Award. He has also served the country with distinction in different capacities, the chief among them were his tenure as a Member of the Planning Commission, and also as India’s High Commissioner in South Africa. Last but not the least is that Shri Jain is a strong champion of volunteerism and voluntary service. The entire fraternity of voluntary social workers look at him with affection and respect.

N.Th.



Shri L.C. Jain

LC Jain looks back on half-a century of policymaking and analysis and traces India's problems to one key factor: an over-reliance on the bureaucracy to helm India's development, and our failure to remember what Gandhi knew well - nothing should and can be done without the involvement of the people.

Closely associated with various development efforts in India for nearly 50 years, as a policymaker, analyst and later, teacher, observer and mentor, Lakshmi Chand (LC) Jain firmly believes the Gandhian way of thinking and doing things is as relevant today as it was in Gandhi's time.

This conviction does not stem from hero worship. LC Jain, unlike some Gandhians, had never worked closely with Gandhi.

He *has* read a lot of Gandhi though, and continues to do so. But the huge library in his Bangalore home also displays the collected works of Nehru and Ambedkar. Agile and active at 82, LC Jain spends hours before sunrise reading selections from these works.

None of this reading has diminished the impact of an early 'Gandhian' experience LC Jain had when he was a college student.

The year was 1946. Thousands of refugees were pouring in from Pakistan. Jain, who had participated in the Quit India movement, was put in charge of a refugee camp in New Delhi.

At the camp, the young Jain had to deal with some "chronic mischief-makers" who were angry that he had replaced one of them as camp in-charge. One night his barrack was pelted with stones. Jain's colleagues suggested he call the police.

The son of a journalist who was in the freedom movement, LC Jain was not then a 'Gandhian.' But Gandhi was "in the air."

“Gandhi haunted me,” he recalls. “Gandhiji came to my mind and I thought to myself: What would he think if he heard that I had set the police on refugees?”

Jain refused to call the police. He decided to do what Gandhi would have done to resolve the problem: Go to the people directly, sit and talk with them and work out a solution.

“The next day I held a meeting at each barrack and explained to the refugee inmates exactly what had happened. I also told them that if they were very unhappy with me, I would leave.”

By the evening a voluntary committee had been set up to assist in camp management. The committee decided to expel all the mischief-makers.

Again, Gandhi came to Jain’s mind. “I said to the leaders that though misguided, these (people) too were our children and we should not expel them.”

When the trouble-makers heard this, they were chastised. They came to Jain and expressed their gratitude that he had not thrown them out but had given them a chance to reform. They promised there would be no more trouble. It was then that Jain realised, “Gandhi works.”

Fifty years on, and suffering from the “tyranny of age,” LC Jain remains unshaken in this belief that Gandhi works, at all times.

Ironically, in the years after Independence, LC Jain has seen every good Gandhian idea with which he was associated brought to ruin.

Jain was a volunteer organiser with the Indian Cooperative Union (ICU) in an extraordinary rehabilitation project undertaken in Faridabad, 20 km from Delhi, for 50,000 Pathan refugees from the North West Frontier Province.

As he recalled in *The City of Hope* (Concept, New Delhi), the Faridabad Project, supervised closely by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru for some time, was a model of participatory development.

For the first time in India adult franchise elections were held - using kerosene tins as ballot boxes - to form a representative planning and management board. For the first time, an entire township was built through labour cooperatives. Social health and basic education systems based on non-colonial principles were set up. Workers held ownership of industrial enterprises.

But it all soon came to naught as bureaucrats took over and the spirit of cooperation that was at the core of the project was destroyed.

One man could have perhaps stopped this deterioration, but didn't: Prime Minister Nehru.

LC Jain has a theory about this. The carnage of Partition deeply shook Nehru, he says. It led to a "mind collapse." Chosen by Gandhi as the one man who could hold India together, Nehru inevitably drifted towards over-reliance on a colonial bureaucracy to fulfil this enormous mission, Jain feels.

The bureaucracy triumphed even before the Constitution of India was formally adopted. From the perspective of his community's experience, Ambedkar considered the village a "den of ignorance." Gandhi's idea of village autonomy found few serious takers among the Constitution-makers. The idea of panchayati raj was quashed before India became a republic.

Subsequently, Nehru and Indira Gandhi systematically de-linked elective representatives from the political party. The political worker lost the role in social transformation he/she had played before Independence. The responsibility of building a new social and economic order was given to a lowly sarkari official with no accountability to the people: the Block Development Officer, or BDO. Politics itself became a game of four Ps: "power, patronage, price and partisanship."

Even as all this was happening, LC Jain readily lent his experience to several governments. As part of the ICU, he helped set up the Central Cottage Industries Emporium and Super Bazaar cooperative store. He was chairman of the All-India Handicrafts Board, chairman of the North East Handicraft and Handloom Development Board and, later, he was member of the Planning Commission and some state planning boards.

He was also India's commissioner to South Africa, member of a special committee set up by the Government of India to review the Sardar Sarovar Project, and vice-chairman of the World Commission on Dams. He received the Magsaysay award for public service in 1989.

LC Jain saw no contradiction in working with governments that did not practise principles he had learnt from Gandhi's life and work.

Recall, he says, how Sardar Patel had running differences with Nehru yet worked with him. Recall also, he says, how Dr Ambedkar was inducted into the Union Cabinet by the Congress though his claim to represent a sizeable part of India's population was demolished in elections.

What accommodated such contradictions, he says, was the spirit of idealism, the belief that “we would be able to shape our own destiny.”

Jain believes it is the absence of this value that is the biggest loss suffered by India since Independence. “Idealism has become a term of abuse.” Among political parties there is “no agenda of work or principles” other than gaining and holding on to power. “The political class does not even feel it has to follow its manifesto, and there is no public aversion to that.”

The cost of such indifference is enormous. “If our political class cannot give any inspiration or courage to anybody, how will our civilization survive,” Jain asks. “We will break something of enduring value; we will injure the best interests of humanity.”

But what can a common citizen do under such circumstances? What would be the Gandhian way?

LC Jain does not want to offer a prescription. But, he urges, as a first step we can all “at least entertain the thought” that loss of idealism is “unacceptable.” We must insist: “There can be no politics without principles.”

However, we cannot wait for politics and politicians to change. “If there is a fire, do you hold a seminar or do you take a bucket of water and throw it on the fire?”

Each one of us has a responsibility to do something. That responsibility starts with living according to one’s beliefs. “Before you ask people to change, you have to change yourself.”

One’s beliefs may not match those of another. The “civilised way” of resolving such a conflict is not by beating up or shouting the other person down. It is by holding a dialogue with the opponent, keeping a clear distinction between a person’s ideas and the person as a whole. “Gandhi opposed British rule, but he did not hate the British.”

This ‘Gandhian’ approach of looking at the larger human being behind a particular point of view “did not start with Gandhi,” Jain stresses. It is at the core of our civilization which is built upon the principle that you “cannot trample upon others.”

In resolving differences, we must be careful about the use of history - for instance, in invoking the well-known differences between Gandhi and Ambedkar on the issue of untouchability. “The question we have to ask is: Does that debate help solve challenges today?”

These challenges require careful analysis, which has to be built from the bottom, from information and insights gained through experience of the ground realities.

In his speeches and writings, LC Jain has frequently recalled *An Economic Survey of Matar Taluka*, a 1929 survey done by JC Kumarappa at Gandhi's advice, which Jain got reprinted when he was a member of the Planning Commission.

Based on meticulous observation of conditions and practices of agriculture and other livelihood sources in Matar taluka of Kheda district in Gujarat, the Kumarappa survey listed as rural development priorities things that are as relevant today as they in the 1920s:

- Detailed and scientific soil surveys.
- Bringing wastelands under cultivation.
- Improving the water distribution systems.
- Improving grazing lands and fodder production.

These priorities are widely recognized and several government programmes have been drawn up to address them.

But, as LC Jain showed with rich field observations in *Grass without Roots* (Sage, 1985), a book he co-authored with BV Krishnamurthy of the Delhi School of Economics and PM Tripathi, a one-time BDO with hands-on experience in the voluntary sector, all such government programmes fail miserably because they ignore a commonsensical notion that Gandhi understood well: Nothing should and can be done without the involvement of the people.

It is a principle practised by several voluntary agencies in the country which LC Jain has closely observed over the last two decades. In a regular column he writes for the *Asian Age*, he wrote about his interaction with Gram Vikas in Orissa:

“After five decades, government with its vast rural development extension agencies loaded with thousands of crores of rupees is still clueless as to how to reach the poor. But in one fell swoop, the Orissa Gram Vikas has found the answer which I gathered during my four-day visit to Ganjam - Orissa's most poverty-stricken area. I was even more amazed at the simplicity of their approach. Why do you have to 'reach the poor,' agitatedly asks Gram Vikas director Joe Madiath? 'Start with them,' he says, 'it is as simple as that.'”

Starting with the poor, Jain insists, means revisiting Gandhi's idea of village autonomy, which, he feels, is a much misunderstood term. What Gandhi advocated was the creation of local production systems that would meet local needs as much as possible.

In a vast country with a huge number of poor, such an approach has advantages that any Centre-driven programme of growth cannot match. It builds self-reliance and true independence. It is also, he argues, economically viable - it involves low distribution costs.

Economists enamoured of the idea of competitive advantage will dismiss the idea of local production for local consumption. But they have not understood their favourite concept fully, Jain argues. "Competitive advantage talks only of competitive advantage of production. Competitive advantage in production does not necessarily mean competitive advantage in distribution."

Any government programme that is not built on the principles of decentralization and local self-government is "a mere palliative." Even a programme like the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) is "necessary, but far from sufficient." "It is not a substitute for self-sustained employment which can be generated from the production system alone."

Even as palliatives, government programmes fail because people are not involved in their design or operation. The people have no sense of ownership; they are reduced to numbers. The avowed objective of the programme is soon forgotten and the implementing officials become distant and disinterested. That is inevitable because "only if you find out what's perturbing me will you have a stake in devising a way of working with me."

These basics can be understood and followed without invoking the name of Gandhi, says LC Jain. Gandhi is easily misunderstood and has become an object of ridicule. Even those who claim to understand him and invoke his name do so only for their own glorification. "Gandhi is best left dead," Jain advises.

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