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The Agrarian Question in the Views and Activities of Mahatma Gandhi

Kwestia agrarna w poglądach i działalności Mahatmy Gandhiego

Summary: The British Empire's expansive colonial policies consistently pursued in the Indian subcontinent in the late 19th and early 20th centuries led to the shaking of traditional socioeconomic relations. The crisis – caused by sudden demographic growth and extremely difficult climatic conditions – was marked by a disastrous situation in agriculture. Stopping further degradation of the economy required decisive action – especially in the provinces. The creator of the reform program aimed at maximizing the potential of natural and human resources was Mahatma Gandhi – the Father of the Indian Nation, leader of the Indian National Congress, visionary and mystic. Gandhi saw the future of his homeland in the social, moral and economic revival of the countryside. He advocated for a state whose democratic principles would reach out primarily to local communities. Living by example, he aroused hopes among peasants for concrete changes in their lives, lifting themselves out of poverty and overcoming the hopelessness of their social and political predicament.

Keywords: India, Indian National Congress, Mahatma Gandhi, colonialism, independence movement, Ashram

Streszczenie: Ekspansywna polityka kolonialna Imperium Brytyjskiego prowadzona konsekwentnie na Subkontynencie Indyjskim na przełomie XIX i XX w. doprowadziła do zachwiania tradycyjnych stosunków społeczno-ekonomicznych. Kryzys – spowodowany nagłym wzrostem demograficznym i skrajnie trudnymi warunkami klimatycznymi – zaznaczył się katastrofalną sytuacją w rolnictwie. Powstrzymanie dalszej

degradacji gospodarki wymagało zdecydowanych działań – szczególnie na prowincji. Twórcą programu reform, którego celem było wykorzystanie potencjału zasobów naturalnych i ludzkich był Mahatma Gandhi – Ojciec Narodu Indyjskiego, przywódca Indyjskiego Kongresu Narodowego, wizjoner i mistyk. Gandhi przyszłość swojej ojczyzny widział w odrodzeniu społecznym, moralnym i gospodarczym wsi. Opowiadał się za państwem, którego demokratyczne zasady sięgać będą przede wszystkim do społeczności lokalnych. Przykładem swojego życia rozbudził wśród chłopów nadzieje na konkretne zmiany w ich życiu, wydobycie się z nędzy i przełamanie beznadziei społecznego i politycznego położenia.

Słowa klucze: Indie, Indyjski Kongres Narodowy, Mahatma Gandhi, kolonializm, ruch niepodległościowy, Ashram

Introduction

The research purpose of this article is to present the activities of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948)[1] carried out for the transformation of the socio-economic life of the rural population in India. The paper also addresses the influence of Gandhi's political thought on the activities of the groups shaping modern rural development policy in India.

The main research methods used in the work included analysis and criticism of the literature. It made it possible to verify the theses argued in the studies, analyze the source documentation – in this case, the intellectual output of Gandhi – and then initiate research on issues of Indian agrarianism that are under-explored in Polish historiography. The publication fills another gap in the Polish historical literature and is a prelude to a broader undertaking, namely research into the history of the political thought of the popular movement in India.

Mahatma Gandhi, called by his countrymen the Father of the Indian Nation, Mahatma – the Great Spirit – is a unique figure in recent world history. He subordinated his entire private and professional life to the service of others. His activities were based on an ethical system and teachings whose moral message found expression in three postulates, the so-called "supreme values": truth (*satya*), renunciation

1 The literature on Mohandas Gandhi's activities and life is extensive. The key publications include: C. Clement, *Gandhi – mocarz wolności*, trans. L. Częśnik, Wrocław 1994; *Gandhi After Gandhi. The Relevance of the Mahatma's Legacy in Today's World*, ed. M. Casolari, London 2021; R. Jahanbegloo, *Gandhi and the Idea of Swaraj*, London 2023; I. Lazari-Pawłowska, *Gandhi*, Warszawa 1967; eadem, *Etyka Gandhiego*, Warszawa 1965; B. Mrozek, *Gandhi*, Warszawa 1977; J. Nehru, *Gandhi*, Bombay 1966; J. Rao, *Economist Gandhi. The Roots and the Relevance of the Political Economy of the Mahatma*, New York 2022; R. Shankar, *The Story of Gandhi*, New Delhi 1969; J. Warda, *M. Gandhi przywódca Indii*, Warszawa 1968; S. Wolpert, *Gandhi's Passion: the Life and Legacy of Mahatma Gandhi*, Oxford–New York 2001.

of violence (*ahimsa*) and temperance (*brahmacharya*). However, he attributed primary importance to "truth," claiming that it is the supreme principle encompassing other values.[2] Unlike other reformers, he did not consider himself the founder of a new doctrine. As he believed: "I have simply tried in my own way to apply the eternal truths to our daily life and problems."[3] He wished to make the principles he preached as universal as possible. According to Gandhi, the highest manifestation of individual moral freedom was *satyagraha*, literally translated as "surgery of the soul" – a way of activating inner potential, allowing one to break through barriers, prejudices and egoism. Following its principles, he ordered the individual to adopt a servile attitude towards others and to restrain one's own desires. Only such an attitude, according to Gandhi, made it possible to maintain social order.[4]

The socio-economic situation in rural India at the turn of the 20th century

The disruption of traditional socioeconomic relations by British colonial rule led to the specter of disaster felt at every level of life. Agriculture was the foundation of the economy in the Indian Subcontinent. Seventy-five per cent of the population worked in the countryside, which produced 54% of the national income. Although in the 1880s, one could speak of a theoretical balance between consumption and agricultural production, the situation became more difficult with each passing decade. India maintained its position as a food exporter in the last decades of the 19th century. After 1921, the situation reversed to its disadvantage as imports steadily increased. Despite the intensification of irrigation work and an increase in agrarian areas, the amount of cultivated land per capita began to decline significantly. The progressive fragmentation of agricultural ownership was a key barrier to farm modernization. Since World War I, the productivity of all crops had been declining and in the first half of the 20th century, it was already among the lowest in the world. The integration of India – through the development of transportation routes – into the world economy, however, did not bring farmers the expected benefits. At the end of the 19th century, a major problem draining India's agricultural economy became the fact that agri-food production dominated in favor of industrial crops, e.g.: in the Deccan, cotton was specialized; in Bengal, jute and indigo; in Bihar, opium; in Assam, tea; and in Punjab, cotton acreage grew in addition to wheat. From the 1890s to the end of World War II, India saw an 85% increase in the production of industrial crops

2 I. Lazari-Pawłowska, *Etyka Gandhiego...*, pp. 216–219.

3 Cited in ibidem, p. 11.

4 M.K. Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, translated by. V.G. Desai, Ahmedabad 1968, p. 12.

while agri-food production declined by 7%. The disastrous situation in agriculture was greatly influenced by internal factors: demographic growth, the archaic caste system, economic underdevelopment, and difficult climatic conditions; and external factors – the British Empire's expansive colonial policy.[5]

A particular difficulty in India's economic development was caused by excessive population growth. In the pre-British period and the first half of the 19th century, the rate of population growth differed significantly from the world average. Data on India's population in the pre-British period is incomplete, but it is believed that between the 16th century and the 19th century, growth occurred at a rate of 0.2% per year, which seems characteristic of balanced systems. In the 19th century, there was a slight increase, reaching about 0.4% per year.[6] Disturbing symptoms appeared after 1921. Initiated social programs: health care, improved sanitation and hygiene, and the fight against hunger paradoxically contributed to a birth rate of 1.3% – 2.1% per year between 1921 and 1951. The phenomenon of demographic explosion caused overcrowding of the countryside, triggering an exodus of the population to suburbs, where poverty districts, so-called slums, were created.[7]

Another problem for Indian agriculture was the crop failures that plagued the area. A growing percentage of the country's population suffered from famine and developing epidemics. The reasons for the intensification of this phenomenon in the colonial era can be traced to the overexploitation of natural resources and its impact on the natural environment.[8] Depletion of water resources, flash floods, disruption of the monsoon circulation and the barrenness of soils led to food shortages. Demographic development in the second half of the 19th century definitely accelerated environmental degradation. Expansive farming led to increased exploitation of low-grade land, less resistant to climate change and requiring greater investment. Forest land and wasteland were increasingly allocated for cultivation, which contributed to the disruption of the water balance. Crop failures affected areas previously abundant in food.[9]

The drought that hit the country in 1866–1867 caused up to 2 million Indians to die from malnutrition in an area stretching from Calcutta to Madras. In the following

5 J. Kieniewicz, *Historia Indii*, Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków 2003, pp. 499–501.

6 K. Iwanek, A. Burkowski, *Indie. Od kolonii do mocarstwa 1857–2013*, Warszawa 2013, pp. 87–88.

7 J. Kieniewicz, op. cit., p. 546.

8 In India's pre-colonial history, waves of famine and epidemics were not caused by the plundering of natural resources and did not differ in intensity – in terms of frequency and scale – from similar phenomena on the European continent. B.M. Bhatia, *Famines in India. A Study in Some Aspect of Economic History of India (1860–1945)*, London 1963, p. 76.

9 Ibidem, p. 89.

years, around one million people living in the Northwest Province (NWP), Punjab and Bundelkhand perished due to food shortages and infectious disease epidemics. In 1873, as a result of the drought in northern Bihar, some 17 million people suffered from hunger due to lack of basic foodstuffs (mainly rice).[10] The food crisis was only partially resolved in the early 20th century.[11]

The policy of the British colonial authorities towards the economic and demographic crisis in India

The British authorities, faced with food supply problems afflicting the local population, displayed a passive attitude. Failing to provide central coordination, routine preventive measures were taken in individual areas of the country: supplies were stockpiled, speculation was punished, loans were granted or payments of benefits were suspended. Although an extensive railroad infrastructure could have ensured the transportation of food to the affected areas, the lack of financial facilities and stored surplus foodstuffs made it practically impossible to implement the relief plan. It was not until the second half of the 19th century that a commission headed by Richard Strachey was established and recommendations were made to prepare an action plan in case of another crop failure.[12] In 1883, official legislation was introduced, which made the program to combat famine one of the key tasks of the colonial administration. However, the said measures were limited to attempts to level the effects of individual waves of famine and did not address the causes of the phenomenon.[13] These lay in the plundering economic policies of the colonial lands, carried out meticulously by the Metropolis. The plan to build irrigation canals implemented to ensure the water balance was slow moving and its effects would not be seen until the end of the century.[14] The financing of these investments was charged

10 Residents of other provinces also faced crop failures during this time: Mysuru, Hyderabad, Deccan and Oudh. The apogee occurred in the 1890s. The drought, which caused crop failure in the areas of West Bengal, Madras, Bombay and Punjab with a population of over 60 million people led to the death of 700,000 of them. T. Roy, *The Economic History of India 1857–1947*, Oxford 2010, p. 80.

11 During the famine wave in the United Provinces in 1907–1908, efforts were made to keep mortality below average. The following year, thanks to the monsoons, India managed to meet its economic needs despite the ongoing hostilities. B.R. Tomlison, *The Economy of Modern India (1860–1970)*, Cambridge 2003, p. 52.

12 R. Gopal, *British Policy in India. 1858–1905*, Cambridge 1965, p. 69.

13 Ibidem, p. 72.

14 In initiating the construction of an irrigation system in India, the colonial authorities thought that it would contribute to the development of agricultural production and at the same time absorb the surplus labor force. The first works involved a restoration of the old

to the Indian taxpayer. Charitable aid from the British government reached the province sporadically, so only the power of the collector, usurer or landowners mattered on a daily basis. Meanwhile, the famine did not stop the demographic development, which proceeded at a significant pace and India's population at that time increased to about 50 million.[15]

The loss of momentum in India's economic development, especially in agriculture, continued until the first half of the 20th century. The fiscal policies of the colonial authorities and the new administrative division of the country led to the breakdown of traditional socioeconomic structures. In addition to the unfavorable agrarian structure and the gigantic indebtedness of farmers, mention should be made of traditionalism and an aversion to any innovative endeavor. A lack of initiative and reluctance to introduce change were traits already attributed to Indian farmers. This problem did not resolve itself with the advent of independence and was among the key issues requiring reform in the second half of the 20th century. Peasants vehemently rejected opportunities to change the way they farmed, shying away from introducing new farming techniques and using expert guidance. A traditional village was also marked by its commitment to a set of norms and values upheld for generations. The rules that have guided the lives of individuals and groups for centuries, the caste system, the belief in the inseparability of man and nature, and all the tenets of folk Hinduism had sustained the hierarchical image of the province, blocking the way for change. Initially, the British authorities did not encourage farmers to implement a program to modernize and upgrade their means of production. It was not until the interwar years that the first attempts at land consolidation and irrigation were made, and the offer of preferential loans for agriculture was introduced. However, these initiatives were late and faced a number of obstacles.[16]

India's economic and technological underdevelopment was exacerbated by its dependence on external political and economic factors. Thus, the process of devastating

existing canals, which had been obstructed since the 18th century. In 1807, work was undertaken on the canal system of the eastern Yamuna, and from 1815, similar work was extended to the western bank. This was a reconstruction of the irrigation network from the 14th–18th centuries. As a result, the investments did not bring the expected benefits. Between 1836 and 1842, irrigation projects were prepared for the Upper Ganges Canal, which would irrigate hundreds of thousands of acres of land in particularly poverty-stricken areas. The canal was completed in 1854. In the Madras Presidency, maintaining a network of canals and reservoirs was the backbone of agricultural operations. The British began several major irrigation projects in 1836 on the Kaweri River and in 1846, on the Godawari. Further projects on the Kistna and Periyar rivers only came to fruition in the late 19th century. Work on modernizing irrigation systems on a larger scale was not undertaken until the second half of the century. J. Kieniewicz, op. cit., pp. 500–501.

15 Ch.A. Bayly, *Indian Society and Making of British Empire*, Cambridge 2008, p. 98.

16 Ibidem, p. 103.

the country took place gradually, both economically and environmentally. The British, subjugating individual regions, established a new administration. By demolishing the existing social structures, they aroused the growing Hindu-Muslim antagonism. This was most evident in Bengal, where the disintegration of traditional social structures caused the collapse of the education, health care and communication systems.[17]

With increasing dependence on the Metropolis, the wealth of Indian society was stratified. The emergence of new merchant fortunes was accompanied by the formation of a middle class and, at the same time, the percentage of society without private ownership increased. Property stratification increased primarily as a result of the disintegration of rural communities and the intensification of the struggle to survive. Tax burdens and land hunger deepened tensions in the provinces. The number of landless people hiring themselves out to do field work grew, often even at the expense of personal freedom. Colonial policies also affected the regression of local crafts that produced goods for rural farms. As a result of measures detrimental to free competition, the British authorities led to the decline of workshops producing luxury goods intended for the wealthy consumer. Speculation in cotton prices during the US Civil War led to the bankruptcy of many Indian enterprises.[18]

First experiences with the introduction of the new socio-economic order

In Gandhi's vision of social development, a special role was to be played by the Indian countryside, not yet tainted by the economic influences of the market and the consumerist attitudes associated with it. Gandhi advocated for a state whose democratic principles reached out primarily to local communities. For him, the basic community unit was the village, governed by a five-member *panchayat*, or council derived from universal suffrage and composed of both men and women. "My idea of village *Swaraj*[19] is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbors for its own vital wants," Gandhi wrote, "and yet interdependent for many others which dependence is a necessity."[20]

An attempt to put Gandhi's vision into practice was the establishment of a settlement called Phoenix in the South African city of Durban. It existed from 1904 to 1914, and the community was guided by the following goals, articulated by its initiator:

17 S. Wolpert, *A New History of India*, Oxford–New York 2004, p. 134.

18 H. Kulke, D. Rothermund, *A History of India*, London–New York 2010, p. 157.

19 *Swaraj* (from Hindi: self-governance) – in Gandhi's conception, the word meant self-determination.

20 H. Kulke, D. Rothermund, op. cit., p. 13.

- if possible, all agricultural work should be done without the use of mechanization;
- through dialogue between Europeans and Indians who have settled in South Africa, one should strive to create a relationship based on respect and mutual understanding;
- promote spiritual purity in the life of the individual;
- enhance the sense of service to other people.[21]

The principles, whose following was the duty of every resident, included physical labor. Gandhi believed that more important than the acquisition of theoretical knowledge gleaned from books was the practical formation of individuals' character through work. Work that could be done on one's own should be done individually: "From fetching water from the well to cleaning the latrine." Although settlers were not given land ownership in Phoenix, it was envisioned that farm labor became the means to achieve a simple, self-sufficient and spiritualized life.[22]

During his stay in South Africa which lasted two decades, Gandhi's social activities were directed by the principles of *satyagraha*. He was convinced that this was the way to combat social injustice, right all wrongs, and resolve conflicts. He argued that "world rests upon the bedrock of *satya* or truth. *Asatya* meaning untruth also means non-existent, and *satya* or truth means that which is. If untruth does not so much as exist, its victory is out of the question. And truth being that which is can never be destroyed. This is the doctrine of *Satyagraha* concisely."[23]

Gandhi's rural reform activities in Indian National Congress

Before Gandhi took the lead in the Indian National Congress (INC),[24] the ideas voiced by its leaders and supporters reached only educated residents of large cities. In the provinces, Congress activists appeared sporadically. Words addressed to simple folk, in which they promoted political slogans, the development of self-government and

21 M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography – The Story of My Experiments With Truth*, Ahmedabad 2013, pp. 539–541. For more on Gandhi's activities in South Africa, see L. Lasocka, *Gandhi w Afryce*, Warszawa 1933.

22 M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography...*, p. 237.

23 Idem, *Satyagraha in South Africa...*, p. 262.

24 The Indian National Congress (INC) was a political force dominant among the indigenous population of the Empire of India (British India), whose vector was directed towards the struggle for independence and democratization of the country. More extensively on this organization: P.Ch. Ghosh, *The Development of Indian National Congress 1892–1909*, Calcutta 1960; B. Mrozek, *Indyjski Kongres Narodowy. Zarys historii, polityki i programu*, Warszawa 1971; P. Sittaramayya, *History of Indian National Congress*, Bombay 1947.

indigenous industry (*swadeshi*)[25] did not receive much attention. Social problems were to be addressed only after India regained its sovereignty. Gandhi, upon his return to his homeland, had serious doubts whether it would be appropriate to represent the Congress Party, which did not recognize the principle of *satyagraha*. However, he believed that in order to enter the lower strata of society, especially those coming from a rural background, he should act on behalf of the organization's leadership. He began his activism for changes in the socio-economic life of the rural population among the residents of two villages, Champaran[26] in Bihar and Kheda[27] in Gujarat. In both cases, Gandhi, rejecting political discourse, prepared the peasants to carry out actions of passive resistance. Without presenting any social reform

25 *Swadeshi* – means local self-sufficiency. Rejecting imported goods and relying on one's own production. Ibidem, p. 34.

26 In Champaran, peasants renting land from the owners of large estates demanded the abolition of the *tinkathia* system, i.e. the compulsion to sow a third of the farmland with indigo, the harvest of which went entirely to the planters as an annuity in kind. In addition, in areas where this compulsion had already been abolished at the time, they demanded a reduction in the annuity, raising the existing obligations from 50% to 70%. Gandhi urged peasants to persevere in their resistance to European and Indian planters, which entailed refusing to pay annuities until the conflict was resolved. In addition, he urged them to passively resist the police. At the same time, he took on the role of mediator between the peasantry and the planters. As a result of these actions, an agreement was reached. *Tinkathia* was abolished, and the cash pension was reduced by 20%. Gandhi's autobiography shows that he considered the agreement he reached (and approved by the authorities) a huge success. The compulsion to grow indigo was indeed felt by the peasants to be a huge burden and a cause of poverty, however, the action planned by Gandhi did not so much lead to the abolition of this onerous duty as slightly accelerate its replacement by a cash annuity. M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography...*, pp. 451–453. See more extensively: R. Prasad, *Satyagraha in Champaran*, np. 1928, published online: https://vvgnli.gov.in/en/gandhiandlabour/satyagraha-champaran [accessed: July 2, 2024].

27 The situation in the Kheda District was dire at the time, caused by flood and crop failures and epidemics. Gandhi's goal was to bring about a periodic cancellation of the tax that the peasants owed despite the natural disasters. The peasants stopped paying taxes and their resistance lasted until the government, on the one hand, began to apply repression and, on the other, announced that it would consider the case of each farm individually. Before the authorities' decisions had even been made, the rich peasants decided to pay the tax, which meant that the poor peasants were left at the mercy of the authorities assessing the ability of individual farms to pay the tax. This turn of events displeased Gandhi, as some of the rich peasants broke down and began to pay the tax. Nevertheless, the action did not end without some positive results. The peasants managed to persevere in passive resistance to the government for several months. A report assessing the entire action, prepared for the government by the local administration, stressed that the consequence of passive resistance was a decline in the prestige of the government in the Kheda area. *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Ahmedabad 1959–1984, vol. 16, p. 376. See more extensively D. Hardiman, *Peasant Nationalists of Gujarat. Kheda District, 1917–1934*, New Dehli 1981.

program, he won the trust of the rural population as a man speaking out against social injustice. His activities in Champaran and Kheda seriously changed his position in the INC, of which he had been a member for many years, but until then had not attended the annual sessions. Despite his close contacts with its leaders, he had so far represented only the interests of the Indian population living in South Africa, without speaking out on issues concerning the situation in India.

Having gained a position as a people's tribune in Gujarat, he was elected a delegate from that province. He appeared at the deliberations as an activist representing a specific interest group. He was supported by villagers, a section of society hitherto overlooked in promoting the INC's ideas yet comprising the majority of the country's population. Although he did not win this support under political banners, what the leaders of this group cared about was to win the peasants over to the resistance movement. The INC went from being an elite to a mass organization bringing millions of people into its ranks.[28] Gandhi needed the party because it had the influence to spread the principles of *satyagraha* to other provinces. To INC activists, on the other hand, Gandhi's program, based on the ethical principles of *satyagraha*, seemed utopian. However, they embraced it, unwilling to give up the influence this "man of God" had on the people. An additional factor that strengthened Gandhi's position in the INC was his participation in the movement to establish a caliphate among Muslims.[29] This gave Gandhi the opportunity to gain support for the INC among the most traditionalist circles of the Muslim population, hitherto covered by virtually no political action. The Muslim League – the second largest political organization in the country in terms of membership – limited its activities to the educated strata of Islam leaving out the numerous rural communities.[30]

In 1920, Gandhi gained a position as a leading activist in the INC. Throughout his political activity, he strove to improve the lot of the poorest Indians and argued for the need for social reform and moral renewal.[31] He did not intend to wait until independence with the introduction of reforms, although he considered the freedom of

28 B. Mrozek, *Indyjski…*, p. 45.

29 The British government was pressured to come out in favor of maintaining the caliphate in Turkey at the peace conference after the end of World War I. Gandhi interacted with Muslim leaders, who for the first time had the opportunity to use political and religious slogans simultaneously. This led to the mobilization of the followers of Islam in India around the cause. For a more extensive discussion, see G. Minualt, *The Khilafat Movement. Religious Symbolism and Political Mobilization in India*, New York 1982; while on M. Gandhi's activities in the movement for the caliphate: "Speech at Khilafat Conference, 24th of November 1919, Delhi," [in:] *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi...*, vol. 19, pp. 137–141.

30 R. Gopal, *Indian Muslims. A Political History (1858–1974)*, Bombay 1964, p. 56.

31 M.K. Gandhi, *From Yeravda Mandir (Ashram Observances)*, trans. V.G. Desai, Ahmedabad 1932, p. 15.

the homeland a prerequisite for full social and political transformation. In response to a question about the causes of India's decline, he replied: "The English have not taken India; we have given it to them. They are not in India because of their strength, but because we keep them."[32] Criticized by his opponents for putting the struggle to improve the living conditions of his compatriots above the cause of independence, he stressed:

> If we are to realize equality at all, its foundation must be laid today. Those who think that the time for greater reforms will come later are deceiving themselves, ignoring the elementary principles of working for true freedom. It will not fall from the sky one fine morning – it must be built step by step by collective effort.[33]

The practical dimension of Gandhi's activities – the organization of Ashram communities

After returning to India in 1915, Gandhi tried to graft the *satyagraha* experience onto his native soil. He saw the future of his country in the social, moral and economic revival of the countryside. In his view, the Hindu tradition was the basis of the solution to all the problems faced by Indian society. He found the greatest support for the views he preached in the province of Gujarat, where the majority of the population adhered to a faction of Hinduism – Jainism. In 1915, near the city of Ahmedabad on the Sabarmati River, he initiated the first community to house his followers. *Satyagraha Ashram* played the role of a program and decision-making center, inspiring a number of socio-political initiatives. After relocating the political center near Wardha, in 1933, he handed over the care of the community to the *Society for the Fight Against Caste*.[34]

In 1925, he spurred the foundation of the *All-India Spinners' Association*, and a few years later, the *All-India Association of Agricultural Industries*. Gandhi was inspired by his experiences in social activities acquired in Durban:

> I wanted to acquaint my compatriots with the methods I had implemented in Africa to see to what extent they could be applied on Indian soil. It was not without reason that we chose the name *Ashram Satyagraha* for our community, which best suited both the goals and the methods by which we wished to serve the country.[35]

32 Ibidem, p. 16.

33 Ibidem, p. 21.

34 C. Clement, op. cit., p. 134.

35 "The Ashram: an Estimate of Expenditure, 11th of May 1915," Vaishakh Vad, [in:] *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi...*, vol. 14, pp. 444–448.

The communities created by Gandhi fostered a patriotic attitude among their members. The formal provisions of the bylaws attest to this: "The purpose of this community is to foster a love for the motherland and to serve India."[36] The activities of the communities helped crystallize Gandhi's views on the importance and impact of agricultural labor on the spiritual renewal of society and the economic development of the country. They enabled the creation of a program to integrate the forms of professional and social activities: economics, agriculture, politics and ethics, both locally and nationwide.[37]

Considerations on the place and role of the countryside in the structure of the modern state were captured by the Mahatma in a doctrine described by the slogan: "Return to the countryside." Its message was contained in the following words: "We should strip the countryside of superstition and make it unlearn its limited perception of reality. We can do this in no other way than to settle among farmers, sharing their worries and joys, developing education and providing reliable information about current events."[38] Spinning a vision of an ideal rural community, he assumed that:

> It will be based on republican models, self-sufficient in meeting vital needs. Each village will take care of food and clothing by growing appropriate crops. It will take care of pastures for cattle and resting places for its inhabitants […]. It will ensure the operation of a theater, school and community center, and will maintain water and sanitation infrastructure [...]. Education should be compulsory at the primary level and casteism will be abolished.[39]

The rural settlements (*ashrams*) established under the Mahatma's inspiration served – in addition to realizing his ideological goals – to carry out social and, indirectly, political activities. As he mentioned in his autobiography:

> I had a predilection for Ahmedabad. Being *Gujarati* I thought I should be able to render the greatest service to the country through the Gujarati language. And then, as Ahmedabad was an ancient centre of handloom weaving, it was likely to be the most favorable field for the revival of the cottage industry of hand-spinning. There was also

36 Ibidem.

37 Ibidem.

38 Quoted in J. Warda, op. cit., p. 215.

39 "Draft Constitution for the Ashram, 20th of May 1915," [in:] *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi...*, vol. 14, pp. 453–460.

> the hope that, the city being the capital of Gujarat, monetary help from its wealthy citizens would be more available here than elsewhere."[40]

The *Satyagraha Ashram* became the prototype for similar centers emerging in India. In Gandhi's writings, we can find descriptions of the overall functioning, daily life, rules and regulations of this community. The settlement was originally inhabited by about twenty-five people. Collectively, 11 general rules were established, which reflected Gandhi's ethical principles and philosophy of life, derived from Jainism.[41] These included truth, love, celibacy, fasting, prohibition of theft, poverty, physical labor, autarchy, courage, rejection of casteism, and tolerance.[42]

Community members were required to abide by the above rules both while in and out of the community. The rules and regulations adopted by the settlement board read:

- Responsible employees and residents of the *ashram*, whether temporarily or permanently attached to it, should observe the *brahmacharya*.
- Persons who apply for admission to the *ashram* should follow the rules in their own home for a period of one year. The chairman has the right to make an exception to this rule under special circumstances.
- Since it is undesirable for anyone in the *ashram* to run an additional kitchen, newcomers – single and married – should feed in the common kitchen.[43]

The rules of the community strictly referred to the principles the Mahatma followed in his private life. Hence, the principle of *brahmacharya*, or celibacy, was strictly observed:

> Adherence to the above principles is not possible without adherence to celibacy. It is not only a matter of refraining from revealing physical lust; animal lusts must be tamed so that they find no place for themselves in the mind. One who lives in the married state should not reveal any desire, but should treat his partner as a friend with whom he has bound himself for life, and arrange relations with them on the basis of complete chastity.[44]

The dietary rules were of vital importance to the existence of the *ashram's* residents. According to Gandhi: "Food is needed only to keep the body fit and to take care of the body as if it were an instrument for doing work […]. Therefore, food should be

40 M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography...*, p. 442.

41 Idem, *From Yeravda Mandir...*, p. 13.

42 Ibidem, p. 16.

43 Ibidem, pp. 11–15.

44 M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography...*, pp. 347–348.

taken like medicine, while applying the required restrictions."[45] As a result of the top-down guidelines, community residents were advised to "avoid products such as pungent spices and roots. Meat, alcoholic beverages, tobacco and similar products are not allowed. All feasting and all meals aimed at pleasure should be renounced."[46] The ashram was intended to be a place where residents lived in harmony with nature, as: "The law of love requires equal respect for every life – from the tiniest insect to the most outstanding human being."[47]

Another important aspect of conviviality was the renunciation of material goods. At the same time, it should be emphasized that it was not only about seizing other people's property without the owner's permission. According to Gandhi's teaching: "We also become guilty of intellectual theft, including when we hold on to borrowed things in violation with the contract. It is also theft to take items that we do not actually need."[48]

A symptomatic, additional element of the regulations was the rejection of casteism – *varnadarhmie*.[49] "It is understandable," Gandhi wrote, "that among the matters I discussed with my friends was the issue of the so-called 'untouchables.' I stated to them that I would take the first opportunity to accept into the *ashram* a candidate from among the 'untouchables' if they deserved it."[50] Another document, dated May 20, 1915, dealing with this issue reads: "The administrators of the *ashram* consider untouchability to be a stain on the honor of the Hindu religion therefore I have decided that the *dhed* [untouchable – JM] family should join the community, living on the same basis as the others."[51]

Despite the need for strict adherence to all eleven rules of conviviality, it was the latter postulates regarding "untouchability" and the customs of the caste system that caused the greatest controversy among the people. In a letter addressed to V.S.S. Sastri[52] dated September 23, 1915, Gandhi wrote: "I decided to admit a *dhed* family to the *ashram* and she [Gandhi's wife Kasturba – JM] rebelled [...]. Some confusion

45 Idem, *Key To Health*, trans. S. Nayar, Ahmedabad 1948, p. 32.

46 Ibidem, p. 19.

47 M.K. Gandhi, *From Yeravda Mandir...*, p. 13.

48 Ibidem, p. 14.

49 *Varnadarma* – the organization of society introducing the division into four castes. D. Gupta, *Interrogating Caste, Understanding Hierarchy and Difference in Indian Society*, Delhi 2000.

50 "Draft Constitution for the Ashram, 20th of May 1915," [in:] *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi...*, vol. 14, p. 456.

51 "Letter to Srinivasa Sastri, September 1915, Ahmedabad," [in:] *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi...*, vol. 15, p. 46.

52 V.S. Srinivasa Sastri, Gandhi's friend and an activist of the "Servants of India Society."

arose in the community but also in Ahmedabad. I told her that she could leave […]. The whole issue is momentous because it is a test for our movement in the struggle for social justice."[53]

The case of accepting a jovial family of three "untouchables" into the community led – in addition to the Mahatma's personal family repercussions – to the emergence of the community's financial problems. As he recalled years later:

> All flow of monetary aid stopped. With the suspension of aid, rumors spread that a social boycott was going to be applied to us. The whole endeavor came into question when Maganlal – who handled the finances – estimated that the money would not be enough to last another month. In the end, we managed to save the *ashram* from bankruptcy, thanks to financial assistance [...] provided by a certain merchant.[54]

The example of the attitude of the community's dwellers toward the family of "untouchables" is an exemplification of the attachment to traditional rules and social divisions not only of Ahmedabad residents, but also of the *ashram* adepts. Moreover, it illustrates the difficulty of accomplishing the task pursued by Ghandi's movement, seeking to change the petrified caste system. Countering all exclusion, a source of underdevelopment in Indian society, he set as his main goal the need for people of that caste to be included in the community. "Untouchability," Gandhi wrote,

> which has taken such deep roots in Hinduism, is a complete negation of religion, so the duty to combat it was included as a separate principle. In the ashram, the so-called untouchables have a place alongside people of other castes. The residents of the ashram do not recognize casteism, which they believe has led to the perversion of Hinduism.[55]

The *ashram*, in the theoretical assumptions of its originator, was to become a self-sufficient rural community providing its residents with all the products necessary for existence. Each resident was obliged to work for the community according to their ability. The main occupation was farm work. Cotton and crops for cattle fodder were grown. Vegetables and fruits were planted for the residents' nutritional needs, "to make the *ashram* as self-sufficient as possible."[56] Cattle were also raised in the

53 "Letter to Srinivasa Sastri…," p. 46.

54 M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography...*, pp. 539–540.

55 Idem, *To the Students*, Ahmedabad 1965, p. 24.

56 The main activity in the *ashram* was manual labor and, in the case of the youngest members, learning. The only form of individualism was leisure time, known as *relaxation*.

area assigned to the community. The main purpose of the livestock was to provide the residents with access to milk.[57]

In addition to activities strictly related to agricultural work, members of the *ashram* engaged in handicrafts. Each resident was obliged to make textiles by hand.[58] Textile production – in addition to supporting autarchy – was part of Gandhi's broader spectrum of activities, namely the restoration of a centuries-old Indian tradition that was disappearing with the industrial domination of textile production coming from the British Empire: "Handmade textile production has been recognized as a key component of the *ashram's* economic activity. Residents are obliged to do this work as a sacrifice for the good of the nation."[59]

Gandhi attached great importance to maintaining proper sanitation in the settlement. The so-called sanitation service – in addition to routine activities – also had an educational and awareness-raising dimension for the Indian community. It was an important part of the fight against casteism and exclusion. In traditional Indian society, the act of removing waste was assigned exclusively to the caste of "untouchables." "This so important, sacred duty," Gandhi wrote,

> is treated with contempt by our society, as a result of which it is most often not performed at all. The situation calls for numerous improvements in this area. The *ashram* places special emphasis on ensuring that no outsider is hired for this work. Members of the *ashram* take on all functions related to caring for the sanitary condition of the settlement themselves, one by one. New entrants are usually first directed to this particular work.[60]

He valued personal hygiene and neatness in clothing and recognized that in modern India, the issue of its observance left much to be desired. He traced the causes of the plagues of epidemics and diseases afflicting and decimating the Indian people to these glaring omissions. As he recalled: "The matter of hygiene was not at all simple. The peasants betrayed no desire to sweep the streets or change their clothes, and were not prepared to keep the farmyard tidy of their own accord."[61]

For the adult residents of the community, the main value shaping personality and character was physical labor, while for the youth and children, it was education,

57 M.K. Gandhi, *To the Students...*, p. 26.

58 Ibidem, p. 27.

59 Ibidem, p. 28.

60 M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography...*, p. 336.

61 Ibidem, p. 340.

referred to as "national education." They sought to implement such a system of education that would ensure the future civilizational development of the Indian nation. The Mahatma stressed that only through internal transformation could India achieve full freedom and independence,

> since the development of our country is related not to the modernization of the cities, but to the reconstruction of the countryside, so the bulk of the funds will go to the spread of education that contributes to the prosperity of the provinces. [...] The main goal is to prepare a host of future activists, people of sterling character, educated and conscientious.[62]

The curriculum, largely devised by Gandhi himself, sought "the parallel training of spirit, mind and body, limiting content of little practical use, aiming to develop character in even the smallest details." Emphasis was placed on making sure that the education system included the children of the "untouchables" and women: "Special attention was given to women because of the need to raise their social standing, granting them the same opportunities for personal development as men."[63]

In the *ashram*, during the hours that were set aside for adult physical labor, the youngest members of the community participated in educational activities. At the top of the curriculum was the study of the Hindi-Hindustani language. Taking into account the needs of the villagers in the first place, teaching manual labor was given equal importance to intellectual education. Gandhi claimed that: "Only such occupations that are useful to the life of the nation should be taught. For the sake of the nation's physical development, physical exercise should be made compulsory in all schools. Teachers and educators should regard handicrafts as an essential support to the liberation movement."[64]

Religious tolerance was another element that characterized the innovative education system. The consciousness of students was shaped in the spirit of respect for other faiths and also tolerance towards peers of the "untouchable" caste. In the *ashram* in India, the dominant religion in most communities was Hinduism, while members of the African communities belonged to a variety of faith groups, such as Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity:

> The people of the *ashram* believe that although all the basic religions are founded on revealed Truth, due to the fact that they are taught by imperfect people, imperfection

62 M.K. Gandhi, *Basic Education*, Ahmedabad 1951, p. 12.

63 Ibidem, p. 15.

64 M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography...*, p. 428.

and untruths have crept into them. Therefore, we should have the same respect for other people's religious beliefs as we have for our own.[65]

Teachers played an important role in the education and upbringing of young people: "Since the *ashram* is associated with the liberation movement and treats the renunciation of violence as a means to independence, teachers should not use any educational methods that are not in harmony with the truth, and should aim to renounce the use of violence."[66]

The contemporary influences of Gandhi's thought on the social and political level

In 1934–1935, Gandhi began a new phase in his life. He took a break from active participation in politics, devoting himself to social activities. He concentrated his efforts on fostering tolerance towards the *Harijans*[67] and planning the changes that were to take place in India's provinces. His program included demands that did not differ from the ideas he had been promoting, including handmade textiles, abstinence from stimulants and the promotion of marriages between people from different castes. In the period leading up to the outbreak of World War II, his activity took the form of agitating for positivist slogans of grassroots work, which the former INC leader sought to promote through his numerous trips around the subcontinent. It was with awe and disbelief that his activities were observed when traveling around the country on a third-class train, he reached the most remote provinces to teach the peasants there the basic principles of hygiene and modern methods of cultivating the land.[68]

An example of contemporary inspiration from the Mahatma's thought is the Self-Employed Woman's Association (SEWA), founded in 1972 in what is known as India's Manchester – Ahmedabad. It was in this city that the *Satyagraha Ashram* was founded in 1918, followed two years later by the Textile Workers Association. SEWA's goal is to support the vocational activation of women and provide them with suitable working conditions and pay. In 1989, the association had about 30,000 female members, including nearly 5,000 employed in agriculture. A bank and 18 dairy cooperatives were established at the institution.[69]

65 Ibidem, p. 429.

66 Ibidem.

67 S. Wolpert, *Gandhi's Passion…*, p. 240.

68 Ibidem.

69 C. Clement, op. cit., p. 128.

Gandhi's attitude became a role model for subsequent generations of politicians striving to carry out a type of revolution of anachronistic socio-economic relations, the negative effects of which were felt especially in the Indian provinces. Gandhi's political and social activities were appreciated by India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. As he wrote in a monograph dedicated to him:

> Gandhi ordered outreach to the peasants and soon the provinces were overflowing with apostles of action. The peasants began to wake up from their lethargy. The impact that the countryside had on us was of a different kind – for we experienced practically for the first time the fate of the peasant in his daily place of existence, threatened by the specter of starvation. This grassroots work among the simple folk taught us more about the Indian economy than knowledge gleaned from books and lectures.[70]

Nehru's political activity thus followed the work of reform initiated by Gandhi. Under his rule, the privileges of the oligarchs, who dominated the ownership of agricultural areas, were curtailed in favor of improving the economic situation of religious minorities and the lower caste Hindu population. The fight against poverty and caste division became the main ideological and programmatic line of the INC, which ruled continuously from the time of India's independence in 1947 until the 1970s.[71] Gandhi's legacy in the area of socio-economic reform in the provinces was continued by Nehru's daughter Indira Gandhi. The country's first and so far only female prime minister took up the battle against poverty by orienting the economy along socialist lines, hoping to improve the living standards of the poorest Indians. A key pillar of the economic reforms of I. Gandhi was the program of the so-called Green Revolution.[72] Following extensive state interventionism, India transformed itself from a country heavily dependent on grain imports and prone to famine into an autarchic economy, providing food security for its residents.[73]

70 J. Nehru, op. cit., p. 38.

71 In 1977, the *Janata Party* (People's Party) achieved electoral success. From 1980 to 1996, INC leaders served successively as prime minister. In 1996, the elections were won by the BJP and Atal Bihari Vajpayee was elected prime minister, staying in power from 1999 to 2004. In 2004, the INC once again won the general elections, and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh headed the government until 2014.

72 The so-called "green revolution" program involved increasing food production in India. Subsequent government programs aimed at improving the food situation supported farmers in accessing modern technology. The cultivation of new varieties of high-yielding crops such as wheat and rice was introduced. Cf. D. Rothermund, *India: The Rise of an Asian Giant*, London 2009, p. 124.

73 G. Kalmar, *Indira Gandhi*, Warszawa 1989, p. 123.

Gandhi's agrarian thought is reflected in contemporary political groups in India. In 2014, the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) was successful in the parliamentary elections. Its charismatic leader Narendra Modi secured the seat as the head of the government. Modi's party had another political success in 2019. In domestic politics, Prime Minister Modi deftly uses various strands of Indian political philosophy, often referring to ideas that are useful in a given conjuncture. For example, Modi has identified the lack of universal access to sanitation and running water as one of the country's most critical problems. In doing so, he is eager to invoke the need for improved sanitation, an issue often raised in Mahatma Gandhi's speeches. Significantly, Modi does so despite clear ideological and worldview differences separating him from the heirs of Mahatma's thought.[74]

Conclusion

The Father of the Nation, with the example of his life, aroused hopes among the peasants for seeing concrete changes in their lives, lifting themselves out of poverty and overcoming the hopelessness of their social and political position. He stood for the pariah, strove to spread education, raise health and sanitary conditions, give equal rights to women, improve the situation of widows, and abolish underage marriage. Everything he did was dictated by moral motives. He moved the stagnant masses of the poorest, broke their passivity and transformed millions indifferent to public affairs into politically active individuals. Characteristic of Gandhi's social activity was his sense of connection with people suffering misery.[75]

Gandhi saw the path of growth for his homeland in harnessing the potential of natural and human resources. Thus, he advocated for India's choice of autonomous development paths, the basis of which would be autarchic villages. He stressed that producing all the necessities of life on one's own contributes to the expansion of the rural population's self-reliance and sense of worth. The goal of production should not be limited to satisfying consumption needs. Labor also contributed to the inner development of the person and thus to the improvement of material living conditions. Gandhi therefore sought methods of achieving economic growth that would not threaten the cultural integrity of the village. The village, in Gandhi's vision, was a kind of enclave, meeting the needs of its inhabitants to the maximum extent possible.

74 Gandhi strongly opposed nationalist movements. In 1948, he died at the hands of Nathuram Godse, a member of the National Volunteers Association, with which Narendra Modi was associated in his youth. K. Iwanek, A. Burakowski, op. cit., p. 184; cf. T. Okraska, *Słoń w pogoni za smokiem. Stosunki indyjsko-chińskie w zmieniającym się świecie*, Toruń 2019, pp. 157–158, 242, 322.

75 I. Lazari-Pawłowska, *Etyka Gandhiego…*, pp. 13–14.

These ranged from self-maintained communication networks, access to their own water and sanitation infrastructure, to universally accessible education, guest rooms for travelers, houses of worship, venues for play and sports, meeting halls for residents, as well as health and community centers. Gandhi saw the imperative of a transformed village as the main unit of the country's economic and social life in the context of his own assessment of civilization: "Civilization in the real sense consists not in the multiplication, but in the deliberate and voluntary reduction of needs, and the reduction of needs leads to happiness – it gives one a healthy body and a peaceful mind."[76]

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76 M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography...*, p. 234.

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