

MORALS IN POLITICS - THE GANDHIAN TOUCH

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In this paper I suggest that it is tangible Inequality, a growing monster in the world that is breaking all spaces into conflict ridden spaces. I suggest that the speed and starkness with which it is exhibiting itself is the outcome of the particular form of economic globalization –where political economies are driven with purely hedonistic bases of economic progress, namely the growth of the monetized domestic product. That such a momentum or model of progress is on a self destructive roll. I then suggest that in this context Gandhi offers a doable political economy where the ethical underpinnings of progress, drives the economy on a non violent road to wellbeing.

Keywords: Gandhi, globalization, inequality, social change

The Economic Other

As death and destruction,- due to unexpected conflicts, due to violence, and improved technologies of violence - increase there is a quest all over the world for security and at a deeper level, for peaceful conduct of the business of living in the world. Simultaneously, there is also a seeking for solace, for building reconciliation, by reinvoing spirituality, showing the common basis of all religions, drawing on common consciousness. I was also party to such attempts as can be seen in the book *Speaking of Faith* [Jain and Eck 1986] where we argued that a feminist perspective and ethic affirmed that all religions had a common purpose and thus unity could be forged. The recent research on the human genome showing that we all come from a few cells, is another reference point for claiming one-ness.

There is a trend then to argue that we are one, that we need to build unity within diversity, to tolerate, - these are the words of advice, of hope-giving that we hear today.

In this paper, I would argue however, that this is not enough, nor wise. I think it would feed into the enemy's armoury, if I may use military language – of tracing religion, various ethical and spiritual streams flowing out of it, and ethnicity, - as the basis of Conflict. Invoking the spiritual, the moral often linked, - erroneously - with religion and tradition is also the ammunition which is bringing out the affirmation of old identities to handle the new consumer based disparities [Patel 2002], and the contradiction between ostensible opportunity provided by the hype on globalisation, and the reality on the ground, where the cookies are only available to the few. Today the other is being postulated as the Muslim or Hindu or Christian,

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but the hostility and violence we see, the intolerance, I suggest comes from the economic “other”.

As the demarcation of society and politics shifts from social and economic categories, to religious and cultural categories, there is an anxiety amongst people like myself and Amartya Sen, at this re-invoking of old categories. Amartya Sen, [Sen, 2001 SAHR] referring to the issue of identities and our freedom to choose our affiliations, and associations says, ‘This issue has become particularly important in the context of the present political crisis and confrontation, with its ramifications becoming clearer since September 11, though the roots of the problem go back much further. By categorising the population of the world into those belonging to ‘the Islamic world’, ‘the Christian world’, ‘the Hindu world’, ‘the Buddhist world’, etc., the divisive power of classificatory priority is implicitly used to place people firmly inside a unique set of rigid boxes. Other divisions (say, between the rich and the poor, between members of different classes and occupations, between people of different politics, between distinct nationalities and residential locations, between language groups, etc.) are all submerged by this allegedly pre-eminent way of seeing the differences between people.’

Such boxing takes the world back to the days of the Crusaders of Medieval times. To the dark ages when bigotry was the limit to which the human imagination could go. Since then, not only the Enlightenment in the West, but the intellectual expression of societies in the ‘South’ and the ‘East’ had grown beyond, or extended the boundary of imagination to other categories of stratification and division, such as class, ethnicity, caste, gender, occupation. Nations identified themselves, not as Christian and Pagan but newly liberated and colonial. Religion as conqueror was eroded in the 20th Century and there was a sharp fall in attendance in churches, temples, mosques, worldwide.

Philosophies were born which made any form of narrow definition of the ‘moral’, the ‘good’, like the Ten Commandments or a Text, look absurd. Linguistic philosophy a la Wittgenstein, the Existentialism of Jean Paul Sartre – and not the least Marxism; and then the ‘universal consciousness’ philosophies of the various forms of religion from Asia, the literary and artistic expressions from so many sources which celebrated human existence, and ‘civilizations’ as built around the culture of human beings and not theologies, were holding the space in the Twentieth Century. Religion actually was transforming itself as e.g. the liberation theology emerging from Christianity, and many other Reformist shoots of orthodoxy were sprouting.

But recent events seem to have put the clock back and today the term ‘civilization’ ‘world’ is being defined or notified in terms of religious identity. The Islamic world, Islamic civilization juxtaposed to Christian, Hindu etc.

This leads to dangerous grouping of people, “within this new unitary system by turning to the most immediate, familiar collectively shared instrument at hand

to mobilize: inherited culture. In many countries there has been a convulsive ingathering, a return to past traditions and a resurgent assertion of peoples and their leaders.” [Arizpe, 1996].

I propose that it is concentration of political power coupled with economic disparities that need to be dismantled or redressed for healing to take place. It is the exclusion from power to redress injustices and the perpetuation of disparities in access to the necessities of life that is firing the conflict, the hate, the militancy, the violence. Thus one can argue that persistent poverty, especially lack of opportunities for what is called work with dignity; inequality and the visible lifestyle high end consumerism, all perpetuated and enlarged by the effect of visual media has created the economic other. It is this intensification of anger at the inequality; injustice and invasive persecution; accompanied by the carelessness about losing lives in a space where “losing-life” is not such a unique happening, i.e. amongst the very poor, that can explain the increasing occurrence of human bombs. [Jain, 2001].

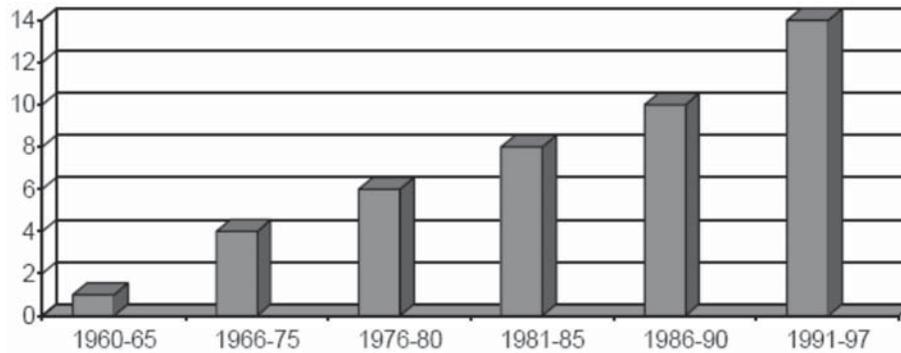
Inequality Intensifies: Creating the Economic Other

To support my argument that the economic divide is the real perpetrator of violence I present some data on disparities.

First in a brilliant paper that was presented by Dr Ismail Serageldin Director Alexandria Bibliotheca, Egypt. [Serageldin, 2002] The figures are very stark. 400 highest income earners in the United States make as much money in a year as the entire population of 20 African nations—more than 300 million people. The richest 10 percent of the world’s population’s income is roughly 117 times higher than the poorest 10 percent, which is a huge jump from the ratio in 1980, when it was about 79 times higher than the poorest 10 percent. [Weissman, 2003] There are others gaps too other than those measured by income. The supposed “knowledge revolution” has also served to accentuate old differences and create new inequalities. In 2004, less than 3 out of every 100 Africans use the Internet, compared with an average of 1 out of every 2 inhabitants of the G8 countries (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the UK and the US). More Internet users reside in the G8 countries than the whole rest of the world combined: [<http://www.itu.int/wsis/tunis/newsroom/stats/>].

This kind of picture is further supported by two other papers on the rising inequality in wealth and in incomes world wide. [Edwards, 2006] It is also clear that rather than traditional causes it is ‘new causes’ that are linked to the excessively liberal economic policy regimes and the way in which economic reform policies have been carried out that are responsible for this increase in inequality. [Cornia and Julius, 2001].

Country after country has experienced an upsurge in income inequality; Chart 1 below for the number of countries in each period where the trend (of decreasing inequality) was reversed.



Source: Giovanni Andrea Cornia with Sampsa Kiiski (2001) 'Trends in Income Distribution in the Post-World War II Period: Evidence and Interpretation', WIDER Discussion Paper No. 89, UNU/WIDER: Helsinki

A recent World Bank study reveals that between 1820 and 1992 the income share of the bottom 60 per cent of the world's population halved to around 10 per cent while the share of the top 10 per cent rose to more than 50 per cent. [Shah, 2008].

The Human Development Report 2006 draws attention to the growing inequality in the world's water and sanitation services. The Report entitled beyond scarcity: "Power, poverty and the global water crisis", looks at water and sanitation as an essential human right, a vast economic cost, and a cause of many social problems.

In India too the disparities are growing in geometrical progression especially since 1995 when economic reforms, euphemism for the introduction of neoliberal economics, trade and financial liberalisation, were introduced.

Within India the sharp and appalling rise in inequality is evident in the fact that while until 1993-1994, the all-India Gini coefficient of per capita consumption expenditure was fairly stable, it has shown a marked increase since then. The magnitude and rate of change of inequalities is quite substantial as very sharp

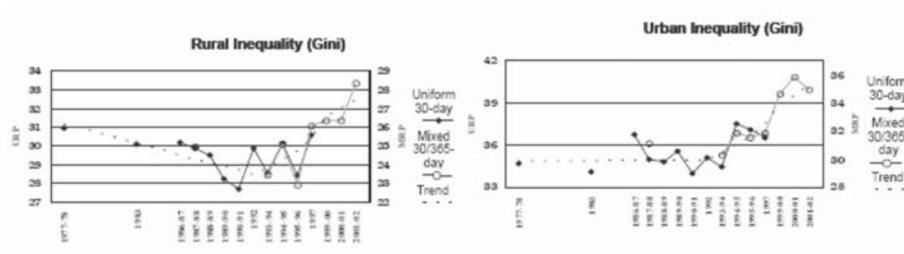


Figure from Abhijit Sen, Himanshu Poverty and Inequality in India-II Widening Disparities during the 1990s Economic and Political Weekly September 25, 2004 pg4366

contrasts are evident between the rural sectors of the slow growing states and the urban sectors of the fast growing states, as well as other geographical zones.

About 75,000 to 150,000 women die every year in India after giving birth, according to WHO. And if we delve deeper again the story of inequality becomes evident- for example in one study showed that over 67% of maternal deaths occurred among the oppressed castes and in indigenous population; in another district it was noted that 48% of the women who had died had no formal schooling. [<http://www.financialexpress.com/news/Maternal-mortality-This-India-story-is-a-shame/370599>].

India now ranks 8th in the world in the number of billionaires. Our 27 billionaires, Forbes assures us, are the second richest in the planet. [Sainath, 2006].

There are other more ‘traditional’ inequalities too around the world and in India. For example a look at a map of India that portrays the sex-ratio in India, shows up what I call “the blood stained hands of Mother India”(See Maps). The red patches are where the child sex-ratio, that is of children between 0-6 year, has fallen by more than 50 points in 10 years 1991-2001. Earlier the reds were mainly in Haryana/Punjab: and in Salem in Tamil Nadu. Now the stains are appearing in other states like Andhra and Gujarat and Maharashtra were some districts have also shown decrease of fifty and above points in Child Sex Ratio – revealing another Indic tradition, the killing fields for the females of the species. Detailed analysis of this phenomenon by the registrar general as well as by the National Family Health Survey (www.nfhsindia.org) show that the higher proportions of such killings are amongst the better off, e.g. the Jain community as well as the farmers of Punjab and Haryana. So it is not only the push of poverty, but the desire to safeguard wealth, another symptom of the driving passion for Money. [Scott Baldauf, 2006].

Morals and Politics of Economy

The healing touch then is to find a mode for dissolving political and economic inequalities. But putting equality on the ground or reducing inequality is not an easy task nor devoid of morals and politics. The existence of poverty is related to political choices of economic paths and to the tolerance of inequality and injustice by the society. The economic logic is that competition and profit seeking makes for efficient use of resources, and ultimately will lift all boats, - redistributive justice, or the trickle down theory of growth.

But poverty eradication requires a substantive change in the choice of economic activity, in the quantum of investment in various sectors, in the economic theory that validates those decisions. It requires a shift in the reasoning of what drives the economy and what are the indicators of progress.

As the late Prof Mahboob Ul Haq, lamented “For too long, it was assumed that development was a process that lifts all boats, that its benefits trickled down to all income classes and that it was gender-neutral in its impact. Experience teaches

otherwise. Wide income disparities and gender gaps stare us in the face in all societies. “He added that growth sometimes actually immiserises and further fuels civil strife by distancing the “haves” from the “have nots; that economic growth was not dealing with poverty and inequality, but actually increasing it. [HDR, 1995].

A person who bundled all this together, a social scientist, who respected science and technology, and religion, but most of all challenged us human beings, was Mahatma Gandhi.

Gandhi’s ethic was actually to efface difference through absorption of the other. This idea of human existence is one of the basic tenets of Jainism, to absorb the other into oneself, and eliminate difference and distance. This is Ahimsa, a concept that was birthed by Jainism, which in turn Gandhi says he learnt from his mother, who was a practicing Jain.

There was a wisdom both in Karl Marx and Mahatma Gandhi in addressing inequality as the crux of the matter; in addressing the rich, the “haves” - even though there is a crucial difference in their analysis as well as their advice. Marx and his analysis is well-known. But Gandhi’s can be restated. While Marx dealt with inequality through restructuring the economic system and making the State all powerful, Gandhi sought political solutions based on social negotiations and a “low profile” State. [Jain 1995].

Gandhi like Marx and Hobbes before him saw the human being as a limited creature - capable of cruelty, narrow-mindedness, greed and violence and required strong medicine to be socially manageable. Indeed, when we *see* starving people especially women and children marching in thousands across national boundaries trying to escape from violence; when we *hear* that when child refugees are crossing the border security personnel pick up girl children, to be sold into the flesh trade; when we turn away from the expropriation of earth, water and mountains for ‘growth’—then their perceptions seem correct.

While orthodox socialism addresses itself to inequality based on ownership of means of production, Gandhi focussed on inequality in consumption. His argument or his advocacy for austerity, simplicity in life style was based on developing in Indians, a consciousness of the problems of the poor. To consume much food or own many clothes or display many clothes when the neighbourhood was filled with those who could neither eat or clothe themselves, was a form of violence. There is a beautiful story of how a child living near the Sabarmati Ashram asked Gandhi why he only wore a dhoti and no shirt. The child offered to bring Gandhi a shirt. Gandhi is supposed to have said that he will wear a shirt when all the millions of shirtless Indians could also afford a shirt. Thus the practice of simplicity was in some sense an attempt to emulate or imitate the life of those who did not have enough and thereby release resources to be able to provide for those who did not have enough.

Gandhi brought in consumption not only as a key issue in fostering inequality or in reverse building equality, but his practice and preaching on restrained consumption was also for conservation of nature and for resource sharing. While orthodox socialism address itself to inequality based on ownership of means of production, Gandhi focused on *inequality in consumption*. He argued that visible disparity in consumption, was a form of himsa, violence, and ahimsa would suggest that we transpose our selves into the life style of the least, and thereby lies the ahimsa.

To consume much food or own many clothes or display many clothes when the neighbourhood was filled with those who could neither eat or clothe themselves, was a form of violence Gandhi took this technique of identification with the “deprived” into many other domains - a form of melting down hierarchies.

In the Ashrams, or collectives that Gandhi built, in those days, **roles** were constantly transposed to dismantle hierarchies. For example, everyone men, women, children had to do manual work as well as “meditational” work : so that the intellectual or the educated would not look down on the manual. Brahmins had to lift night soil so that night soil lifting could not hold stigma and untouchability. Persons belonging to all the diverse religions in India had to recite the prayers of **all** the religions as a Hindu would read the Qoran, or the Christian, the Hindu Prayer. Effacing distance through **muting** the kind of difference that **connotes** hierarchy.

The ethic of simplicity bordering on austerity has a special power in visibly poor, unequal societies like India. It not only provides a demonstrative identification with the poor, but also allows a more even spread of scarce resources. As Gandhi saw it, it was also ahimsa – as there was less open aggression through less aggrandizement by the few of the scarce resources. The importance of this package is that the masses of Indian women – the poor and the traditional – could assimilate it. It springs from values they understood [Jain, 1985].

Muting Gender Hierarchies

A vivid illustration of his particular capacity to draw the poor and the excluded into political and economic action, is offered by the way he mobilised women from the traditional societies into public action. One such incident is revealing as it brought out women and also changed women’s views on themselves, and the outside’s view on women.

There was this time in 1930 - when along with salt satyagraha, picketing against foreign textiles and liquor was started. Gandhiji found that the movement was not gathering enough momentum. He decided then to address himself to the women. His call was answered in Delhi under the leadership of Srimathi Satyawati Vidyalkar - Delhi’s first woman Satyagrahi - a group of women walked down Chandini Chowk distributing bangles to the men; and asking them to wear these

bangles and stay at home - as now, the women were taking over the movement. This incident came to be known as "Churi Andolan". It caught fire - women and girls left their sheltered lives and began to court arrest by picketing liquor shops [Jain, Seth *et al.*, 1997].

Whenever a leader in their community was arrested they would organise a day of mourning. They donned saffron robes - the colour of sacrifice - to show visibly that they were prepared to suffer for his cause. In twos, threes, they sat down on chairs placed before shops selling drugs, liquor or tobacco; they pleaded with men who came to buy at these shops, to give their money instead to Gandhi. When pleading did not avail, they flung themselves across the thresholds, daring the men to walk over their bodies.

It was something never known before in India. But money was being gathered by this army of women, fighting with its own version of Satyagraha. They went to prison cheerfully. There were modern women, like Jawaharlal Nehru's wife Kamala Nehru and his own younger sister Krishna. But there were others - wives and daughters who had lived in purdah all their lives. These were the women who provided the *masses*, the strength of numbers and solidarity of action, without which no boycott movements could have any effect. They were women who had emerged from behind the traditional doors in answer to Gandhi's call. Like millions of other conventionally brought up girls, especially from the orthodox Vaisya community, intensified in its orthodoxy by Jainism, my mother in law Chamelidevi was married into another equally well known commercial family of Delhi jewelers, where as expected, her life moved around ritual and kitchen and, of course, the inevitable *ghoonghat*. She was the first Jain woman to court arrest and was sent to a jail in Lahore. What did it require for an orthodox daughter-in-law to become a freedom fighter? A khadi saree, a blouse and a pair of chappals. And a call from a saintly person [Jain 1981].

Once women were drawn out of their homes - into the area of the struggle, once men got used to women working with them in important and risky tasks the women were emancipated from the greatest source of enslavement i.e. attitudes. It is the attitude of men about what women can do and ought to do; the attitude of women towards themselves, their own roles and its adequacy; the attitude of samaj, the society to what is right and what is wrong in certain types of behaviour that can cripple - as much as it can liberate a society. This technique illustrates how much of these gender related hierarchies are in the mind. It suggests that a critical factor in changing the relations of power is to transform difference, through moral, methodological and intellectual ways. The illustration from gender is to reveal how Gandhi achieved that mutation.

Interpreting Gandhi into a Growth Theorist

As a matter of doctrinal importance, Gandhian system of economic thought runs at tangent to conventional economic canons. While the engines of the normal theories

of growth are through processes of production and investment which is stimulated by finance and driven by profit seeking, Gandhi's engine is the buying power, the economic votes as he called it, of the poor. He promoted a talisman:

'Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test: Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man/woman whom you may have seen and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him.....'. Mahbub Ul Haq the founder of the Human Development movement has also given the talisman pride of place in his South Asia Human Development report.

According to this line of reasoning, the criterion by which any political choice for economic changes is made, is whether it improves the condition of **poorest** person. If we deal with removal of poverty first, then the rest of the economic policies follow.

Gandhi, it could be interpreted, would argue that poverty eradication is a dynamic and purposeful engine of growth. His view could be called the "Bubbling Up Theory of Growth", which counters the old 'Trickling Down Theory of Growth'. The Bubbling up theory argues that the process of removal of poverty can itself be an engine of growth, that the incomes and capabilities of those who are currently poor has the potential to generate demand which in turn will engine production, but of goods that are immediately needed by the poor which are currently peripheral in production. The oiling, then, of this engine will bubble up and fire the economy, in a much more broad based manner. Unlike export led growth, it will not skew production and trade into the elite trap, which is accentuating disparities and creating discontent.

Gandhi even designed an economic constitution for the world in 1928.

"According to me, the economic constitution of India and for that matter, the world, should be such that no one under it, should suffer from want of food and clothing. In other words, everybody should be able to get sufficient work to enable him to make the two ends meet. And this ideal can be universally realized only if the means of production of the elementary necessities of life remain in the control of the masses"

Gandhi's method of linking revolutionary action which is a one time public action struggle, with constructive work, a mundane down to earth sustained social and development work, - providing livelihoods for example through Khadi gave a continuity. Further his approach that working with organizations, institutions outside of the State, what in today's language is called self help groups, or Civil society organisations, CSOs - is more important than being in Government, - enabled men and women to move smoothly from struggle work to development work but outside and often against the State.

Gandhi was averse to all notions of class warfare and concepts of class-based revolution, which he saw as causes of social violence and disharmony. Gandhi's concept of egalitarianism was centered on the preservation of human dignity rather than material development. For Gandhi, that the distinctiveness of others which

evokes our affection is significant only in so far as it is a starting point that aides us in reaching the highest form of moral concern—a kind of agape (unselfish love for all). This is also elaborated by Fatema Mernissi who proposes ULFA, a sufi concept “Ulfa requires that you invest time and brain to figure out how you can ‘harmonize’ with the other so that he becomes ‘anis’, literally sociable and friendly, which is the very root of the Arabic word for human being ‘inasan’. “Al Anasu”, the human, is by definition the creature who does not live in solitude like a savage animal: (wahsha)” [Mernissi 2008].

Gandhi carried these ideas in extraordinary ways. For example his design and support of Khadi, hand spun and hand woven cloth .He said “Political economists assert that social affections are to be looked upon as accidental and disturbing elements in human nature; but avarice and the desire for progress are constant elements... it is this human element on which the entire economics of khadi rests.’ The human element is not accidental, on the contrary it is intrinsic – khadi is a superior cloth because “it has a soul in it”.

“There are many aspects of khadi; amongst them the spiritual one is the one I hold uppermost and the economic one next’ .The spiritual aspect was repentance for having willingly surrendered freedom. ‘The English have not taken India; we have given it to them... ..It is we, the English-knowing men that have enslaved India... .. Foreign cloth constitutes our slavery... We are purifying ourselves by discarding foreign cloth which is the badge of our slavery’ Khadi was not just about employment, which was only a means for alienating the mind, body and spirit from each other, but about engagement of the mind, body and spirit in the means of livelihood and in thus creating conditions for social life. This was its human element.” [Ramagundam 2008]

Lessons for the Global Community

How then can we draw on Ahimsa, on such moral and methodological ideas in handling to day’s turbulent world?

The central issue in the world today is the management of the global political economy. There is deep anxiety that in the new millennium, while it has brought the exciting levelling of information technology, the affirmative spirit of the rights movements also brings with it planet deterioration and conflict arising out of the persistence of poverty and the extenuation of disparities (Mandela 1997). There is a noticeable vacuum in exemplary leadership, whether at the local national at international levels. It is here that Gandhi’s ideas in political economy not only seem relevant but are being legitimised even if without naming by the course of experience.

Gandhi is quoted as saying there is enough in the world for everybody’s need but not for everybody’s greed , and in a *New York Times* article it says , after the financial crisis, “greed, to put it mildly, is no longer good” [Peter, 2008] a new interest in “frugal life styles” and “frugal behavior” [Hoffman 2008] has emerged

.In a survey done of Indians, after the crisis, and what they were deprived of due to the lower incomes, they said only those things that were in some sense, not necessities...what they could do without!!

Today's vanguard in development speaks of discrimination, of disparities being threats to economic growth and political stability; of the importance of restrained consumption, even if for environmental reasons. For instance the UNDP's Human Development Report 1998 is on Consumption, following their support on Poverty.

It argued that the ever-expanding consumption puts strains on the environment - emissions and wastes that pollute the earth and destroy ecosystems, and growing depletion and degradation of renewable resources that undermines livelihoods. The world's dominant consumers are overwhelmingly concentrated among the well-off - but the environmental damage from the world's consumption falls most severely on the poor.

In *A Climate of Injustice*, J. Timmons Roberts and Bradley Parks analyze the role that inequality between rich and poor nations plays in the negotiation of global climate agreements. Roberts and Parks argue that global inequality dampens cooperative efforts by reinforcing the "structuralist" worldviews and causal beliefs of many poor nations, eroding conditions of generalized trust, and promoting particularistic notions of "fair" solutions. They develop new measures of climate-related inequality, analyzing fatality and homelessness rates from hydro-meteorological disasters, patterns of "emissions inequality," and participation in international environmental regimes. Until we recognize that reaching a North-South global climate pact requires addressing larger issues of inequality and striking a global bargain on environment and development, Roberts and Parks argue, the current policy gridlock will remain unresolved. [Roberts and Parks 2007].

None of the theories – whether of the modernization, dependency, neo-liberal or Marxist variety – seem to be working in the sense that they have all run into trouble, even if initial successes were secured. During the 1980's and 1990's these theories have been supplanted by a hegemonic neo-liberal view of development based on "globalization", "free markets" that effectively dismiss questions of ethnicity, of culture, and does not try to understand nationalism, fundamentalism and terrorism. It can be maintained that the whole Western model of development, the "paradigm of modernity", of a secular, industrial nation-state, is now in question and that a coherent and persuasive alternative model is yet to be found." [Emmerij, 2002].

Interpreting inequality as violence, finding the ethical basis for economic growth paths, these are ideas that Gandhi spelt out and even arranged for practice in the earlier India. The package of consumption restraint, non violence in personal relationships, leveling through beginning with the least, these are ideas, this is morals in political economy.

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