Economics: Where People Matter

Aruna Roy

1 Introduction

1.1 COVID: The Leveler

COVID-19 stripped the world of some illusions, and the pandemic was a leveler (Dennison, 2021; Deshpande & Ramachandran, 2020). In India, the threat to the life of people of all castes, classes, and other divides exposed the vulnerability of life and its fragility (Bhardwaj et al., 2021; Johri et al., 2021; Kim & Subramanian, 2020). It began dramatically for the workers, with the closure of all workplaces. Small and large industries and factories were ordered by government diktat to close down, with a four-hour notice. As the shutters came down quickly, migrant workers across India were stranded, branded, and unable to move or survive (Iyengar & Jain, 2021; Jesline et al., 2021). As millions walked and struggled to reach their homes, empowered and privileged India was forced to acknowledge the existence of their fellow citizens. It was a brief period when the reality of India's underbelly—of living on the margins, often crowded out by glitz and power debates—grabbed the attention of the privileged and the media (Misra, 2022).

Sensitized by its own predicament of facing the fragility of survival, the shortage of oxygen cylinders, and hospital beds, an indifferent affluent society was forced to look at the condition of the less privileged. The struggle to survive strengthened arguments for the need for robust public health and employment systems (Bussolo et al., 2021; Kuppalli et al., 2021; Walter, 2020). There emerged an obvious counterargument to the myth that public health, employment, and rations, among other things of necessity, were sops and subsidies for the poor. The privileged, threatened

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by the transmission of the disease, isolated themselves. For the poor, living in one room or shack, isolation was an impossibility. The condition propelled the range of civil society actors to plan and organize support (Bhargava, 2021; Tandon & Aravind, 2021). As we wrote for the Seminar journal (Roy & Dey, 2020),

> *Migrant worker* is a phrase that is pejorative. It is a stigma… The mass walks back home following the lockdown is not a migration. It is a forced relocation of individuals to go back to places of comparative comfort and familiarity. It is, in fact, a distress-based internal displacement of millions of Indian citizens.
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> Actually, till the migrants - by sheer presence, numbers, and visible distress as they walked home – compelled an acknowledgment, they were unseen and unheard by design. When no workers were seen on the streets, it was assumed that the crisis was over.
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> Policymakers, either had no clue about the condition of 93% of India's workforce, or studiously suppressed data and information[1] in a bid to paint an ever 'India Shining'. It is shocking that in contemporary times where computerization and big data have become the norm, we are unable to get statistics of workers classified as 'migrant labour' in states or big cities. Even the numbers who stayed back, or live permanently in the *bastis,*[2] are not known.

This quote reminds us that uneven economic growth cannot help this planet prosper in the immediate or long run. It is worth looking at the recent OXFAM Inequality Report (Ahmed et al., 2022), which highlights the deep economic inequality during the COVID years. There must be a limit to the expansion of private capital, and there must be re-distribution. In such a scenario, Gandhi assumes the greatest significance.

The report titled, *Inequality Kills - The unparalleled action needed to combat unprecedented inequality in the wake of COVID-19*, states,

> The wealth of the world's 10 richest men has doubled since the pandemic began. The incomes of 99% of humanity are worse off because of COVID-19. Widening economic, gender, and racial inequalities[3]—as well as the inequality that exists between countries—are tearing our world apart. This is not by chance, but choice: 'economic violence' is perpetrated when structural policy choices are made for the richest and most powerful people. This causes direct harm to us all, and to the poorest people, women and girls, and racialized groups most. Inequality contributes to the death of at least one person every four seconds. But we can radically redesign our economies to be centered on equality. We can claw back extreme wealth through progressive taxation; invest in powerful, proven inequality-busting public measures; and boldly shift power in the economy and society. If we are courageous, and listen to the movements demanding change, we can create an economy in which nobody lives in poverty, nor with unimaginable billionaire wealth — in which inequality no longer kills.

[1] These tendencies of suppressing information or creating disinformation and misinformation has increased with the advent of social media, such as Twitter (Qureshi et al., 2020, 2022a).

[2] *Basti* refers to (in India) a slum inhabited by poor people.

[3] An area of research that is gaining importance in management and organization studies research (Bapuji, 2015; Bhatt et al., 2023; Gorbatai et al., 2021; Maurer & Qureshi, 2021; Qureshi et al., 2018b; Riaz, 2015).

1.2 The Gandhian Context of Public Action

My generation of Indians, born before or around the year of Indian Independence in 1947, consider Gandhi to be a significant figure in both their personal and political experiences. Further, he also served as an inspiration in our pursuit to locate ourselves in political struggles outside the mainstream electoral system. He remained a moral benchmark for those who worked with the marginalized in rural India (Garg, 2019; Ghatak et al., this volume; Iyengar & Bhatt, this volume; Javeri et al., this volume; Kumar et al., this volume; Patwardhan & Tasciotti, 2022; Mahajan & Qureshi, this volume; Qureshi et al., this volume; Vij, 2013). No rural worker, then or now, can function without recognizing and addressing privilege, unipolar theories of development, and the displacement of rural production methods by technology (Rotz et al., 2019). What is now known popularly as "Gandhian Economics" was further developed by Schumacher in his book on sustainable economics, "Small is Beautiful?" Gandhi also left us the legacy of independent political action as a model for accessing justice (Chandhoke, 2008). His definition of categories of community work—as *Seva, Nirman, and Sangharsh*, that is, service, creative work or development, and struggle—has been useful in locating public action (cf. Bhatt & Qureshi, this volume; Bhatt et al., 2023, this volume-a, b).

In the period of the recent pandemic, all public action was Seva. The service for the ill, working out spaces for isolation, and accessing treatment and aftercare was a predominant concern. Civil society groups became grassroots points of contact and delivery (Bhargava, 2021; Tandon & Aravind, 2021). Braving personal consequences of infection, tens of thousands of young civil society workers delivered kits for prevention and food for those out of access to employment. In some cases, even "work" was delivered at home to increase minor cash flow. Many campuses opened up to become "COVID centers," an essential part of COVID care in both villages and cities.

As the immediate threats of infection receded, larger questions of an uneven economy and the continuing threat to employment and subsistence have remained to be addressed.

1.3 Social Entrepreneurship and Gandhi

This book is about Gandhian perspectives on "social entrepreneurship" in a post-COVID world. It would be useful first to consider what indeed the definition connotes and what Gandhi's perspective on entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship might have been. He stood for equality and was not in support of the accumulation of wealth (Rao, 1986). He would certainly have been uncomfortable with the idea of a business entrepreneur whose primary motive is personal profit. However, if one were to be generous to entrepreneurs and see them as innovators—and not the more modern understanding of them as "disrupters" or "social entrepreneurs"—they

could then be seen as "*social innovators*" (Bhatt et al., 2013, 2019, 2021, 2022; Pandey et al., 2021; Parth et al., 2021; Qureshi et al., 2021a, b, c, d; Smith & Woodworth, 2012; Zainuddin et al., 2022). For the purpose of this chapter, "social entrepreneurs" will be taken to mean those developing alternative solutions to social problems (cf. Bhatt, 2017, 2022; Escobedo et al., 2021; Hota et al., 2019, 2021; Parthiban et al., 2020 a, b, 2021; Pillai et al., 2021a, b; Qiu et al., 2021; Qureshi et al., 2016; Sutter et al., 2023), divorced from the idea of profit-making. In this chapter, civil society and social activism will be the chosen words for self-descriptions, and they will operate not within the "market economy," but rather within the Indian constitutional frame of "equality, fraternity, justice" and the Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP) in the Constitution. The DPSP, which shares its values with Gandhian concepts of self-reliance and dignity, is an instruction to governments to work toward greater socioeconomic equality (Hota et al., this volume; Rao, 1949).

2 Civil Society: A Space for Developing Alternatives

The quest for solutions and survival have also been concerns of many who have taken the option away from conventional careers to follow a path of collective, participatory planning and action.[4] This chapter reviews the Gandhian perspective of using and respecting human capital for development, dignity, equity, and in harmony with nature (sustainability); issues of paramount importance to a world threatened by climate change and a rapidly degrading environment (Bansal et al., 2014; Kumar, 2020; Tiwari, 2019).

We briefly look at two examples of Gandhian practice within the categories of *Nirman* and *Sangharsh*. The first looks at the development, bottom-up, acknowledging the dignity of traditional knowledge and education, the creativity and skill of the people working with one's hands. Gandhi defined participation as the basis of lasting solutions. People have the capacity to address their collective problems and evolve workable solutions to their conditions of economic distress. People, often described as "beneficiaries" and "targets," know best how to resolve issues, working within their complex socioeconomic intersectionality, interdependence, and constraints. The *second* is *Sangharsh*: struggle—which deals with the Gandhian concept of *satyagraha*,[5] nonviolence, and civil disobedience for justice. This deals with tools and modes sharpened by the national movement for independence, now used

[4] (Aruna Roy's) journey from a career in the civil services, (1968–1975) quitting it for community work (SWRC Barefoot College. Tilonia) in 1975 and later for political activism in 1987, through her work from a small village in central Rajasthan co-founding the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), which translates roughly to "Organization for the Empowerment of Workers and Peasants," has been in part a Gandhian journey from *Seva*, to *Nirman* to *Sangharsh.*

[5] Satyagraha means clinging to truth, holding fast to truth, insistence on truth, or firm adherence to truth; come what may. Gandhiji described Satyagraha as "firmness in a good cause" in Indian

to claim rights enshrined in the constitution in the form of pro-poor policy, legislation, and legal tools, for greater equality and equity. These demands ended with rights-based legislation enacted between 2005 and 2014, the Right to Information Act 2005, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Programme (MGNREGA), the NFSA (National Food Security Act), and many others. It was in fact the culmination of some of the intent of the DPSP into the enactment of legal entitlements.

2.1 Nirman: A Concept in Practice—The Tilonia Way

An alumna looks back[6]

> Our class 10 Hindi textbook had a chapter authored by the eminent Hindi writer and playwright, Bhisham Sahni. In the essay, he wrote about his journey to Tilonia in the (Ajmer) district, a model village which Bunker Roy[7] helped in developing. Sahni saw water conservation initiatives in the drought-prone village, young girls getting computer education and old(er) women working as engineers to repair solar devices. Surprised by such levels of awareness and development at the centre of India's hinterlands, he called his visit, a 'pilgrimage'. Tilonia is still hailed as the most successful experiment of rural development and self-reliance in India (Rawal, 2017).

Pragmatic economic and technical constraints and possibilities have to be located within structures that marginalized groups may know intellectually but often fail to recognize its fine-tuned manifestations of hierarchy and exclusion (Bhatt, 2022; Bhatt et al., 2022; Qureshi et al., 2017, 2018b, 2021a, 2023, this volume; Riaz & Qureshi, 2017; Sutter et al., 2023). Barefoot College at Tilonia functions with the objective of the popular Gandhian quote of reaching "the last person" (Jain, 1988). The last person is seen not merely as a recipient of goods and services but as involved in decision-making. It is strengthened by the modern democratic constitutional principle of participatory democracy. It is a space that acknowledges the equality of knowledge systems as local knowledge and expertise sits shoulder to shoulder with the "professionally" qualified.

For the purposes of this chapter, we choose to look at two specific Barefoot College, Tilonia's activities, gleaned from a range of its work—with water, health, education, women, technology et al. The *first*, Tilonia Bazaar (Hatheli), looks at crafts and livelihood, and the *second*, Solar Mamas, addresses the use of technology from a people's perspective—the well-known "Women Barefoot Solar Engineers." The work with livelihood and crafts in the Tilonia Bazaar is based on Gandhian precepts. The organization recognizes and salutes the extraordinary intelligence of

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opinion. In Young India, he pointed out that Satyagraha was just a new name for "the law of self-suffering."

[6] Aruna Roy worked with the SWRC Barefoot College Tilonia from 1975 to 1983, to unlearn and relearn-village socio-political realities.

[7] Founder, Director SWRC, Barefoot College Tilonia.

people who fashioned the wheel, designed weaving, tilled the soil, and dealt gently with nature and means of production. These systems that do not "exploit" the environment are steadily undervalued (Martin et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2022). Literacy is a skill, while education is an intelligent state of mind. Bunker Roy often introduced himself with, "I am literate but uneducated." He quotes Alvin Toffler,[8] "the illiterate of the twenty-first century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn."

2.1.1 Crafts as a Livelihood: The Tilonia Bazaar

> I have the conviction within me that, when all these achievements of the machine age will have disappeared, these our handicrafts will remain; when all exploitation will have ceased, service and honest labor will remain. It is because this faith sustains me that I am going on with my work…. Indomitable faith in their work sustained men like Stephenson and Columbus. Faith in my work sustains me.[9]

In the midst of the epidemic, around 80% of the artisans had to face a contraction of their markets. Their orders were either canceled, kept on hold, or both. Unexpected shutdowns halted production in the middle, resulting in wasted dyes and other materials (AIACA, 2020).

Khadi to Handicrafts to Defining Livelihood for Craftsperson

Gandhi's concept of spinning and khadi was a powerful one. It was a brilliant combination of expressing political concerns of self-reliance with economic independence (Carver, 1952; Kumarappa, 1951). It was also a statement of the importance of promoting and sustaining rural economies. Gandhi's ability to make these fusions was simple and made them connect with people immediately.

In 1975, the decline in employment opportunities in rural Rajasthan compelled a large portion of the rural population to migrate to the urban as laborers, primarily in the construction sector. While largely an agrarian region, the hinterland of Barefoot College, Tilonia, in the Ajmer District is home to a number of artisans engaged in a variety of crafts. However, due to a flagging local market, these skills were dwindling rapidly. Thus, in 1975, the College began promoting rural handicrafts in an effort to prevent the craft from dying and for the survival of craftspeople. It was difficult for Craftspersons (*dastakar*), who mainly belong to Dalit and minority communities, to address their social as well as economic problems. Working with them was a priority for Tilonia.

Identifying traditional leather workers, weavers, and handicrafts began a long journey. While leather and weaving involved upgrading and diversifying existing

[8] Alvin Toffler was an American writer and known for his work on digital technologies and its impact on cultures.

[9] Gandhi in the Harijan on November 30, 1935.

skills, handicrafts involved training women's groups in different skills. Traditional craftspersons were freed from bondage (lending by traditional money lenders) and breaking traditions using institutional finance. While weaving lost its caste taboos with the entrance of the handloom, new market relationships involved experimenting with newer technology and design.

Importantly, the work also began with looking at the plight of rural women—construction workers who migrated with their spouses to cities and as a consequence lost their health and capacity to do the work required of them rapidly. Their condition provoked the Tilonia group to address problems of migration and the need for alternative employment. They began work to sustain their livelihood, contesting conventional development/political concepts. Tilonia's design of crafts with women has laid out a system that is now widely used by nonprofits in Rajasthan and elsewhere including the strengthening of self-help groups (SHGs) created by governments to support livelihood.

The initial battle to accept crafts as livelihood and not as a commercial enterprise owes much to the original group in Tilonia. They also worked with leather and handicrafts. Eventually, "*Tilonia Bazaar*," the name it is popularly known as, and "*Hatheli*," its registered entity, have been pioneers in looking at the economic sustainability of Dalit artisans and women in a manner in which they could stay at home and improve social conditions of themselves and their families. The stability of being home dramatically impacted the educational and health standards of the family. It also helped them look for markets in a dwindling space.

Barefoot College Tilonia's motto is to empower the local people through sustainable means. As its founder Bunker Roy notes, "strengthen the rural areas and you will find fewer less people migrating to urban areas. You give them the opportunity, self-respect and self-confidence, they will never go to an urban slum" (From the webpage barefootcollegetilonia.org).

Hatheli's understanding was based on crafts as the relationship between the crafts persons' hands and the ability to produce utilitarian beauty products. Gandhiji's ideas were based on crafts that were part of the daily life of the rural economy, though much of that battle has been lost, and institutions like Hatheli and *Dastakar* have tried and for the most part succeeded in expanding the market. But it is still a battle.[10] Hatheli and Tilonia Bazaar are well recognized over the years and have kept the idea of handicrafts alive and self-sustaining.

The failure of the market mechanisms to support livelihood and the disappearance of patronage of the state has been to some extent filled by nonprofits and NGOs (Beaton & Dowin Kennedy, 2021; Kistruck et al., 2013a, b; Stephen, 2019; Will & Pies, 2017). They are however caught in the design of commercial ventures and business models (Kistruck et al., 2008), which look only at financial success, branding, and sales—all processes that are inaccessible to craftspersons, if non-profits do not support them.

[10] Excerpt from Roy and Khan (2022) where it talks about government's policies for handicraft sector. Also, Nosheen Khan, the co-author currently works as a consultant for the Tilonia Bazaar and has a Master's degree from the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) at Jodhpur.

The young in artisan families now look at blue-collar jobs as the solution to endemic poverty. Also, due to the unfavorable living conditions associated with the trade, the more experienced artisans do not want their children to remain in the profession. As a result, many of the traditional crafts that make up our history are on the verge of collapse.

The issue of rural employment, other than agriculture, has preoccupied economists and planners over the years. Artisans were not only craftspeople. They were also active contributors to development. According to the Union Ministry of Textiles, the handicrafts sector in India employs nearly seven million people, making it the third biggest employment category for the poor. Financial institutions classify crafts as a business; the small entrepreneur equipped with degrees and skills has brought in the concept of "branding." This perspective of crafts as business has brought them under the ambit of the Goods and Services Tax (GST). The rural craft economy has been affected severely by both the unexpected demonetization (Lahiri, 2020) and the GST, which has caused production costs to rise significantly. The business operates on the fundamental principles of profit and competition bringing in many variables of inequality. Whereas Gandhian means of production recognize the intersectionality, interdependence, and equality in the contribution of skills for a better life (Koshal & Koshal, 1973; Rivett, 1959).

Crafts have lost the privilege of no taxation, which they enjoyed since Independence. Millions of Indian craftspeople have slim incomes and are non-income tax payees. With the introduction of GST, this already fragile, fragmented sector is now beset with other problems. They are incapable of filing these complicated tax forms (Mastani, 2017). As an additional step in this new process, they have to also locate and use an E-Mitra (common service center). Middlemen, who often filled in the critical link in the sales conduit from village to town, cheated the producers by undercutting prices. It is also essential to note that both raw materials and finished goods are subject to the new taxation regime. Consequently, artisans pay taxes in two locations. This is a double tax on those who are already struggling with rising inflation and dwindling incomes.

For those keen on greening production, crafts play an important role. The crafts industry is among the most eco-friendly and sustainable sectors of the economy using almost no fossil fuels. Artisans' infrastructure is minimal, and they are self-employed and self-sufficient but manage to support themselves despite their shrinking options. The State's policies are inconsistent with their public commitments.

There is an immediate need for an improved craft participatory policy to allow crafts to survive, and people have to learn to process digitalization (Gulati & Mathur, 2017). Government should offer to support with advertising and selling of crafts. The processes must be simple without complicated terms and conditions through special portals. Those of us who admire the beauty and aesthetics evolved of our collective heritage have to promote and use the handmade, nonstandardized product as an object of beauty and utility. In using the product, we contribute however remotely to sustain the world's vulnerable—the craftsperson and the environment.

2.1.2 The International Solar Mamas

> Machinery has its place; it has come to stay. But it must not be allowed to displace necessary human labor.[11]

The concept of "Barefoot College Tilonia," in its earlier avatar as the Social Work and Research Centre (SWRC), stated its objective in the symbol of a farmer and a specialist joining hands for development. The equality of knowledge and experience of two connected systems defined their work from the beginning. The idea that rural India has to be "taught" and "skilled" to follow a paradigm of development had to be debunked.

"Learning by doing" was a guiding principle derived from Gandhi and supported by hands-on work and the practical experience of the exchange of knowledge (Qureshi et al., 2018b, 2022b). The advantage of "doing" lies in testing ideas as you go along.

The first use of the term "barefoot" began with defining health workers, later midwives, and then with rural hand-pump *mistries* (technicians). Bunker Roy was once asked how a hand pump could be repaired by an illiterate, rural person. He countered that argument with, "when you can open up the bonnet of your expensive car for repairs to a mechanic on the highway, with no schooling and no technical degree, why are you so worried about a hand pump being repaired by a village youth who has basic literacy?" The transfer of the idea from the health worker to the solar mamas was an organic evolution of a concept in practice. When this evolved into the sophisticated use of semiliterate and illiterate local skills and intelligence to understand the complicated fabrication of the solar "printed circuit boards" (PCBs), the response was one of disbelief and astonishment.

Women from all over the world, including Africa, Asia, America, the Middle East, and even Oceania, come to Tilonia, Rajasthan, to attend Barefoot College's Solar Mamas program. Many of these women are middle-aged, and many of whom are grandmothers are considered either illiterate or semiliterate. They come from resource-constrained regions with no electricity to attend this six-month-long residential program. The mamas spoke English, Swahili, Jola, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic, Bengali, and many dialects, and of course, Hindi and Rajasthani were the language of the master trainers. The communication of complicated technology among them was a big challenge, given low literacy rates. Capacity building includes the installation and repair of solar lanterns, solar home lighting systems, charge controllers, and even the establishment of a rural electronic workshop. Candidates from all around the world learn to recognize electronic components using color codes and shapes. Fabrication, guided by examples in the field, and hands-on experience equip them with the technical expertise they need to bring electricity to their communities. Yet there was communication, not only of technology but of matters beyond that—exchanging information about their various cultures and songs, cooking habits, etc. (cf. Qureshi et al., 2018a, 2023).

[11] Gandhi's statement in the Young India, January 5, 1925.

Solar is generally viewed as an alternative to conventional energy and most planning stops with the change from one to the other. There are many lessons to be drawn from the solar mamas. Primary among them is the emphasis once again that intelligence is not to be confined to literacy, though the written word is not discouraged. The bogey of "technology" often seen as requiring special skills is within easy access of an intelligent non-literate woman, strengthening gender equality. A woman who gets qualified as a solar engineer contributes to sustainability in two ways. She is greening the environment but equally important she stays to work in her village and does not get seduced into migration for better jobs and salaries.

The residential training of the solar mamas for six months was a test of endurance, for a woman could leave home for that period, without antagonizing her family, traveling miles away. The fact that not only Indian women but women from around the world traveled these miles—sometimes leaving their villages for the first time in their lives—spoke volumes for the power of the program and its addressing basic needs. While remaining Gandhian, this program has made the best use of technology for, by, and with people. A total of 1708 rural women from 96 countries have been trained (The Barefoot College, this volume).

The Solar Mama is the woman who takes "light" to her people; she is empowered and takes progress, through the technology she has learned, to support the activities of the people in her village. The solar lantern and light at night help economic and social activities. Solar energy is also self-reliant and independent from power grids. The solar mama takes it further. She goes back home, empowered by her dignity, her status, and her ability to cope with change. Returning to her country after completing the training, an Afghani Solar Mama told the people in her village, "I'm not merely a woman, I am an engineer!"

2.2 Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) and Sangharsh: Struggle as Public Action

2.2.1 Employment as a Social Responsibility

> My opposition to machinery is much misunderstood. I am not opposed to machinery as such. I am opposed to machinery which displaces labour[12]

Section 22 of the MGNREGA, 2005[13] states, "as far as practicable, works executed by the program implementation agencies shall be performed by using manual labor and no labor displacing machines shall be used."

[12] Gandhi's statement in the Harijan on September 15, 1946.

[13] This Act mandated to provide 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to a rural household, conditionally.

While the MKSS was campaigning for the MGNREGA, a program for the right to work to be enacted by the government, there was a debate with and among some "Gandhian" groups about whether the emerging MGNREGA would counter the Gandhian principles of self-reliant villages (Pandey, 2008). Did this not make people dependent on state support giving birth to another set of dependencies? The MGNREGA drew upon article 39 of the Indian constitution, the DPSP, of providing full employment. Neither the MKSS nor various campaign groups identified the MGNREGA with any particular strain or ideology. The demand was defined by the people. However, the Gandhian principle of dignity of work and the fact that most of them lived with people in rural India and workers in particular were reflected in the formulation of the law. In addition, the fast-growing dismissive attitude of the urban elite regarding manual work had to be countered. Unfortunately, even MGNREGA terms work as "unskilled," which it is not.

The sheer number of people, the logic of the demand, and the economics of constructive labor won the day when the Lok Sabha (lower house of parliament) unanimously voted the law in. However, the MGNREGA is full of provisions drawn from a Gandhian approach to work, employment, rural development, and the dignity of labor.

Almost all of rural India is skilled, in using their hands and tools, to make houses, grow food, and have contributed to the development. In the official category, the skill is defined as "unskilled." The debate that follows among those from urban India, who take time to work with digging tools and unpack their experience, is perhaps worth summarizing. Every trainee and intern in the MKSS works on an MGNREGA site for 4 hours. They swear that this is skilled labor after they come back exhausted and aching all over. Their work output measured for payment according to piece rate norms is so small that it shocks them. As their well-fed bodies struggle to meet the work requirements, they see fragile women and men do it with ease and grace. They go back saying, "this is a skill." One young woman from the Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta, sat with the village women to say, "I will teach you the computer, it's so much easier than this work!"

Everyone in a village household, no matter what the occupation, is skilled in wielding instruments of earthwork, the *genthi, phawda and the tagari*[14] necessary for agricultural production, building, and construction, for keeping the economy alive. It is a skill that now fights with mechanization and competition for work and wages. The machine, the one who owns it, and the economy they represent are formidable opponents fueled by multinational structures and global financial interests.

> Last weekend, a friend and I visited Devdungri village in Rajasthan. It lies in the Rajsamand District and is the *karmabhoomi* of the political and social activist Aruna Roy, who along with Nikhil Dey and Shankar Singh helped establish …Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS). The organisation was at the forefront of the Right to Information (RTI) campaign and also played a key role in advocating the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).

[14] Pickaxe, shovel and the receptacle to collect and carry the earth

> Both of these legislations have radically redefined the relationship between the state and its citizens by empowering the latter. They have ushered a new era in democratic India. My experiences in this remote village were extremely enlightening and calling my visit a 'pilgrimage', on the lines of Sahni,[15] wouldn't be an exaggeration.
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> There is a small kitchen-cum-dining room where food is cooked on a traditional *chulah*…Everyone eats the food together, without any discrimination on the basis of caste, class or gender. After the meals, one washes their own utensils. All this generates a strong feeling of community and self-dependence…Both the rooms are *kuchha* structures with walls made of mud and cow-dung. But the ideas of dignity, empowerment and accountability discussed within those walls makes them taller than any ivory tower (Rawal, 2017).

The background: From the early 1970s, every visit to a village began and ended with a demand for work. Contrary to myths that circulate about the poor looking for doles, they are most conscious of their dignity. Even during the worst drought, young children would drop into the MKSS's home and office—a mud hut in the village of Devdungri—and respond with, "we have just eaten," when offered food. The local grapevine looks at the lifestyle of the MKSS and thinks "its Gandhian," but when the struggle begins, they say "they are socialists." The MKSS whether Gandhian in its methods or socialist in its demands from the state, works with and for people.

People's imagination works outside the artificial, if sometimes necessary, structures that divide the economic and social from the political paradigms the literate construct and which trigger public policy. The thought—Gandhi's perception of the dignity of people working with one's hands—is a basic economic recognition of labor as capital. The intrinsic connection between labor and their knowledge of the economics of survival led the MKSS to examine what national policy could learn from rural demands and practical knowledge. There is equality of rural and urban systems of knowledge: as the concept of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is amply displayed as policy and in its practice. Derived from the experience with the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Act,[16] it went far beyond in scope and guarantee.

The part of India where the MKSS works is the dry, desert state of Rajasthan, which faced droughts every few years even before climate change (Bokil, 2000). This caused immense economic distress in rural India, and people constantly looked for work as a means to buy food to eat and survive. The Government of Rajasthan would organize drought relief work to alleviate this distress. However, the time and frequency and number of days were not defined, leaving people at the mercy of erratic state decisions and local administrative whims. The MGNREGA drew its inspiration from the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme, which ultimately led to the legal right to employment under MGNREGA. A 100 days job entitlement programme at minimal wages, sometimes even less than the minimum wage is

[15] Eminent Hindi writer and playwright, Bhisham Sahni

[16] An Act passed in 1977 to secure the right to work by guaranteeing employment to all adults who volunteer to perform unskilled manual work in rural areas of the Indian state of Maharashtra.

provided. For example, in the state of Rajasthan it is INR 231 a day as against a minimum wage of INR 259.[17]

> India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) builds on the simple idea that people who have no better means of livelihood should have a right to be employed on local public works at a minimum wage. Other important entitlements under the act include payment within fifteen days, basic worksite facilities, and an unemployment allowance if work is not provided. The Act can serve many useful objectives: enhancing economic security, empowering rural women, activating gram sabhas, protecting the environment, restraining distress migration, creating productive assets, and promoting social equity, among others.
>
> The early years of NREGA were a time of hope and progress. Within a few months of the programme being launched (on 2 February 2006), millions of workers found employment at NREGA worksites. Women who had never earned an income of their own got a chance to work for the minimum wage at their doorstep. Gram sabhas gradually came to life in areas where they had rarely been seen before. Thousands of NGOs started awareness campaigns, social audits, and other NREGA-related activities. Corruption was fought step by step. Slowly but – it seemed – surely, things improved year after year, sustaining the hope.
>
> Five years on, it looked like NREGA could claim some real achievements. The scale of employment was staggering: 219 crore person-days in 2011–12, according to official data, largely reflected in independent survey data for the same year.[1] The majority of NREGA workers were women (who have a very low share of employment in the economy as a whole), and more than half were Dalits or Adivasis. Further, the programme helped rural workers in general, by putting some upward pressure on market wages. Much good also happened, and continues to happen, in terms of the other objectives mentioned earlier (Drèze, 2019).

Public criticism from neo-liberal economists and industrialists stems from fear—the fact that they, the privileged, see any distribution of wealth as a threat to their business and profits. However, political and economic theorists have internationally acclaimed and seen its value:

> The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) is a unique legislation not just in India but also among developing countries for the simple reason that no other developed, nor developing, country has enacted a right to employment. In simple terms, it guarantees 100 days per year of paid work, on demand and as a manual laborer, to every adult resident of rural areas. As a legislative act it provides for compensation in the form of an unemployment allowance for delays in wage payment and as compensation for failure of the government to provide jobs. It lays down guidelines for the process of seeking work and sanction of work as well as defining a wage-material ratio for the work itself. Since the NREGA was passed as an act of parliament, it is justiciable and it is this feature of the program that makes it different from other social protection initiatives of the government. For many, economists in particular, it represents an attempt to enshrine social security in a rights-based discourse: NREGA is seen as an attempt to recognize and legislate a full-fledged right to work. However, any attempt to understand the passage and implementation of NREGA solely as a social security scheme to help the poor is overlooking its political significance in altering and redefining the political economy of growth and redistribution in India (Jenkins & Manor, 2016).

[17] It translates to USD 2.81 and USD 3.15 respectively as on April 4, 2023.

2.2.2 Right to Work and the Fight for MGNREGA

MKSS's struggle has always been informed by ethics. Gandhi and Ambedkar have argued that peaceful political order cannot be achieved by politics alone; it has to be achieved along with other factors. For Gandhi, ethics played a major role, for Ambedkar, its constitutional values (DN, 1991; Singh, 2014). The methods adopted in our fundamental political struggle for this right were conceived in this context. Every forum and form was deliberated and had to adhere to the ethical framework of accountability and transparency, which the RTI struggle hoped to define. Inspired also by Gandhi's practical ethical wisdom in public action, we were constantly aware that the means must match the ends (Roy, 2018).

The speaker of the Lok Sabha, Somnath Chatterjee, placed the NREGA on the floor of the house for its passage in the 14th Lok Sabha in 2005. There was great expectation, and people watching it on the televised broadcast were on edge. When there was unanimous assent in the House, shouts of joy broke out and joined the Minister for rural development to say, NREGA zindabad (Long live NREGA). Hundreds of thousands of workers all over the country saw the birth of real independence from economic need, and the promise of participatory democracy comes of age.

With the MGNREGA's employment guarantee scheme, adults in rural regions who are willing to perform unskilled manual labor are guaranteed 100 days' pay in a fiscal year, thus providing critical livelihood security to the marginalized (Kumar & Chakraborty, 2016; Singh, 2017).

"The single most innovative programme from India, lesson for the whole world, it was that programme (MGNREGA)," said Stiglitz, the Nobel laureate in Economics when asked how India can reduce inequality. Stiglitz was speaking on "Global Inequality—Causes and Consequences at an event organized by Azim Premji University, Bangalore. Elaborating on how to curb inequality, he said it is crucial to ensure full employment for the rural masses., Also a professor in the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University in New York City, he further stated that, "One of the things most important is employment. And when there are high levels of unemployment, there is inequality" (IANS, 2016).

Its importance was first felt during the economic crisis of 2008 when it allowed India to largely tide over what the rest of the world was being affected by the economic meltdown. The rural economies thrived and the markets did not slump. The most emphatic endorsement of MGNREGA was during the COVID pandemic.

2.2.3 MGNREGA and COVID-19

India's millions of migrant workers were locked out by government diktat, over COVID, in 4 hours in 2020. Urban India had never witnessed migratory groups on the given scale and had to acknowledge the magnitude of the calamity. The virus of COVID was matched by the virus of unmitigated unemployment, poverty, and hunger, which awaited them, as they walked home (Adhikari et al., 2020; Iyengar & Jain, 2021; Jesline et al., 2021; Misra, 2022).

The government, the biggest employer, was protected from facing catastrophe and dealing with unimaginable destitution, by the existence of the MGNREGA (Lokhande & Gundimeda, 2021; Vasudevan et al., 2020). No other program functioned to provide employment in millions in villages across the country. However, the beleaguered private sector had a better track record of making payments, than the government provisions for MGNREGA. This was despite the PM's call for compassion for people who lost jobs. People lose hope when basic needs are not addressed.

An effective and alert government should have used this opportunity to build a lasting architecture of basic rights and benefits—food security, health, work, and wages, among other needs—to address possible, future occurrences of natural disasters.

2.2.4 Sustaining MGNREGA

The critics and the reactionaries in government fight the MGNREGA through fiscal cuts and delayed payments of wages. The piling backlog of wage payments is craftily used to downgrade allocations and at the same time destroy the faith of the worker in the guarantee of work.

There is a constant lament about the inefficiency of the system to deliver. The core reason is a malfunctioning bureaucracy. The suggested solution through privatization is not acceptable, because there is no guarantee or accountability in private contractual relationships between the people and private investors. The rights-based legislation sought to remedy the factors of basic needs, delivery, and transparent government, by decentralizing rights through legal tools and granting access (Kumar & Chakraborty, 2016; Roy et al., 2016; Singh, 2017) to "*roti, kapda, makan, swasth aur shiksha*," that is, basic living needs.

3 Conclusion

There are occasional seminars titled, "is Gandhi relevant" or "the world of Gandhi and his topical applicability." Parallel to this is the building up of a whispered and sometimes blatant narrative abusing and misrepresenting any theory that places people and not profit at the center of the socioeconomic political architecture. A large part of the economy is open to private business, which is indifferent to Gandhian, Ambekarite, and Socialist concerns for the last person, to empower the vulnerable.

The question is, Can India afford to ignore, negate, or set aside these paradigms of dealing with inequalities? The basic entitlement to work and the protection of traditional methods of production need to be sustained for a more compassionate economy and growth mode. The relevance of Gandhi in this context cannot be

questioned. To quote Albert Einstein, "in theory, theory, and practice are the same. In practice, they are not."

To find the ideals that drove the formation of the Indian republic, one would have to go to DPSP, Part 4 of the Indian Constitution. The DPSP laid the foundation of the vision of a free Indian Republic and reflected the needs of the people as its core, with equity and social justice as its guiding principles. The methods of getting there may have been different, but these core principles remained unchallenged. Post the early 1990 and market liberalization, the dominant thought is economic growth with no concern for either equity or the preservation of the environment and natural resources. The core idea of Gandhian trusteeship that could have been applied to future generations has given way to marauding resources for profits without any concern for the future. If one were to read the DPSP, the words "growth rate" do not find a single mention yet that is the only indicator used today to measure the health of the economy.

Where is Gandhian economics today? Despite the immense relevance of the idea, especially as we face imminent disaster through global warming and climate change, it is pushed to the margins. Principles of profit overwhelm all debates on "progress," pushing people's well-being to the margins. The neo-liberal economic framework so heavily reliant on the profit motive has destroyed almost every framework of self-reliance, simplicity, equity, redistribution, and even trusteeship. Today, it is not just Gandhian economics that is threatened but also that of the Ambedkarites, the Socialists, the Communists, and any ideology that brought in the principle of equality.

How does one then critique the present model that is neither helping the environment nor the sustainability of the earth? People-centered frameworks continue to bring common sense and the preservation of nonrenewable natural resources to the center of the debate. The critique, of the current exploitation of resources and people, is also there in implicit priorities defined in our constitution. Particularly, the DPSP in Articles 38–43, which should be used to measure economic success with equity and democratic guarantees of access to food, shelter, education, health, and housing. Those guiding principles and constitutional rights combined to partially stall the contemporary assault on peoples' rights, through enabling entitlements like the MGNREA, Forests Rights Act, and the Street Vendors Act. They have managed to create their own space, in a hostile environment. They all propagate, protect, and advocate the elements of Gandhian economics and Gandhian values for our common good.

The current economic model prioritizes profit maximization at the expense of social and environmental justice, resulting in widespread inequalities and exploitation of the planet. As such, there is a need for management and organizational studies scholars to draw lessons from Gandhian economics and remedies to address the negative impact of capitalism on people and the planet. Ignoring these issues would lead to disastrous consequences, including the perpetuation of inequalities and the exploitation of informal sector workers. Additionally, the greed and lust of a few could lead to irreversible damage to the planet, which would ultimately harm billions of people. It is, therefore, imperative that we prioritize people and the planet

in our economic decisions and embrace Gandhian remedies to cure capitalism. Failure to do so will result in our own nemesis, as our so-called success will eventually lead to our downfall. By taking a turn toward Gandhian economics and values, we can create an economic model that is compassionate, sustainable, and just.

Are we willing to use these parameters to measure growth and well-being, whether or not the global market rating agencies consider them of value?

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