Every theory of social action is ultimately a philosophy of history. *1

Gandhi's theory of social and political action was rooted in his basic concept of history for history is the beginning and end of ways of living. Gandhi was not a philosopher of history in the sense Hegel, Michelet, Vico or Marx was. But to dismiss him as a philosopher of history on the ground that he did not systematize his views or did not offer any original interpretation or that the concept of history that he had is not intelligible in the modern sense of the term may give us the idle pleasure of suspending our judgment - judgment demands thorough acquaintance with and a close scrutiny of his views pronounced on different occasions - but that would be, to put it mildly, an intellectual folly. We shall on our part make an attempt to present in a brief outline his philosophy of history in a systematized form.

What was the lesson Gandhi drew from the succession of historical events or what appeared to him to be 'the general laws governing the course of events'? Gandhi subscribed to the view that despite of temporary setbacks, mankind has steadily progressed so far and it will progress still further. That was one of his fundamental beliefs.

In 1926 he wrote:

"Human society is a ceaseless growth, an unfoldment in terms of spirituality." *2

Gandhi's concept of spirituality should be understood not in a sense of escape from life as the term generally lends impression. We have seen earlier in our discussion of his metaphysical outlook that he held that life is an unity. "I do not believe that the spiritual law works on a field of its own. On the contrary, it expresses itself only through the ordinary activities of life. It thus affects the

Gandhi's concept of spirituality may be compared to William James' definition of spiritualism. "Spiritualism" said James, "means the affirmation of an eternal moral order and letting loose of hope." 4

An earnest God-believer that he was, Gandhi subscribed to the belief or philosophy that "all life in its essence is one, and that the humans are working consciously or unconsciously towards the realization of that identity. This belief requires a living faith in a living God who is the ultimate arbiter of our fate. Without Him not a blade of grass moves." 5

This statement of Gandhi comes close to that of the Christian view of history. Collingwood in his celebrated book *The Idea of History* explaining the revolutionary effect of Christian thought on the way in which history was conceived, wrote:

"A new attitude towards history grew up, according to which the historical process is the working out not of man's purposes but of God's; God's purpose being a purpose for man, a purpose to be embodied in human life and through the activity of human wills, God's part in this working out being limited to predetermining the final end and to determining from time to time the objects which human beings desire. Thus each human agent knows what he wants and pursues it, but he does not know why he wants it; the reason why he wants it is that God has caused him to want it in order to advance the process of realizing His purpose." 6

Gandhi's statement may suggest theological determinism which carried to its extreme limits can lead to the philosophy of Occasionalism. 7 We shall discuss presently how for his philosophy of history was determined by his fundamental faith in God being the supreme determinist of things and movements in the world.

To Gandhi, the significance of history lay in terms of the unfolding of the twin principles of Truth and Non-violence. Whenever man acts in answer to the imperatives of these principles there is progress; decline comes about when there is an interruption of these forces. He wrote:
"History is really a record of every interruption of the even working of the force of love or of the soul... History, then, is a record of an interruption of the course of nature. Soul-force, being natural, is not noted in history." 8

And

"I believe that the sum total of the energy of mankind is not to bring us down but to lift us up, and that is the result of the definite, if unconscious, working of the law of love." 9

Gandhi conceived the progress of history to be one-directional. To quote him:

"If we turn our eyes to the time of which history has any record down to our own time, we shall find that man has been steadily progressing towards ahimsa. Our remote ancestors were cannibals. Then came a time when they were fed up with cannibalism and they began to live on chase. Next came a stage when man was ashamed of leading the life of a wandering hunter. He therefore took to agriculture and depended principally on mother earth for his food. Thus from being a nomad he settled down to civilized stable life, founded villages and towns, and from member of a family he became member of a community and a nation. All these are signs of progressive ahimsa and diminishing himsa." 10

He held that "Man as animal is violent, but as Spirit is non-violent." That is why he was optimist enough to declare:

"If we believe that mankind has steadily progressed towards ahimsa, it follows that it has to progress towards it still further." For "Nothing in this world is static, everything is kinetic. If there is no progression, then there is inevitable regression. No one can remain without the eternal cycle, unless it be God Himself." 11

As one interpretator of Indian history has correctly pointed out: "Gandhi's view of history is essentially ethical and spiritual and comes close to the ancient Indian view that human history is the unfolding of man's waywardness constantly
checked by divine will and love."

Gandhi subscribed to the Iskandar teleological belief that "Ultimately it is the Unseen Power that governs the course of events - even in the minds of men who make those events."

This shows that he accepted the theory of divine determinism in history. But this should not lead us to infer that this determinism, as he conceived it, degenerated into fatalism. His interpretation of the Gita and Karmanvada introduced an active element of human endeavour and not a fatalistic surrender to the unknown forces of nature and life. He combined a faith in the supremacy of God with the insistence on constant actions (for his views on Karma, see pg. 123-125).

We have observed earlier that he conceived progress to be one-directional, in the direction of progressive ahimsa. But does this mean that he accepted a unilinear trend of progress? For Gandhi, human history is neither a unilinear trend of progress nor a static picture of eternal recurrence but rather a spiral-like movement that is determined by the power of spirit over matter within the limits of the course plotted out by Karma.

To quote Gandhi:

"Life is not one straight road. There are so many complexities in it. It is not like a train which, once started, keeps on running."

While rejecting the unilinear view of history he did not doubt in the fundamental direction of progress - progress in terms of non-violence that is in terms of human morality. His interpretation of history, briefly outlined above, suggests that he had supreme faith in the divine governance of the cosmic and the human progresses. Because of this spiritual interpretation it was but natural and logical on his part to reject the Marxian view of history.

Marxian View of History

Marxism has traditionally viewed history as essentially a one-directional process. Capitalism inevitably generates the forces which will in due course produce socialism; and socialism, once established, equally inevitably evolves towards
the full classless society of communism. To be sure, this process was never thought of as smooth and continuous. The movement is zig-zag, spiral-like. The transition from capitalism to socialism would have to be a revolutionary jump, and counter-revolutionary setbacks could not be ruled out. But the fundamental direction of change is not doubted.

Belief in Human Progress: Area of Agreement

Belief in human progress is the common point in Marxism and Gandhiism. But there ends the agreement and the agreement is also on surface for the basic approach rests on different grounds. While we do not propose to make a comparative study of Marxian and Gandhian philosophy of history, we shall have at least to delineate Gandhi's reactions to the Marxian philosophy of history.

"I do not believe", said Gandhi, "that it is prakriti (matter) which originates and governs the thought-processes of purusa (spirit)." He believed in the power of the spirit of man to shape its environment to some extent and thus affect the course of history. He explicitly rejected the materialist conception of history.

Gandhi's Critique of Materialist Conception of History

Marxism has generally been understood or rather misunderstood to be a form of economic determinism which it is definitely not. Lack of systematic treatment of this subject by Marx and Engels, deliberate misrepresentation and distortion by some of the bourgeois critics and mechanistic understanding of a large body of adherents of Marxism have helped to spread this wrong impression about materialist view of history. Gandhi understood Marxist philosophy in that general or current sense. He could not be credited with thorough acquaintance and comprehensive understanding of Marxism. As is well known, it was during his last detention at Poonah that he read Marxian literature. On the fly-leaf of A Handbook of Marxism he scribbled: "All for each and each for all." "From each according to his ability to each according to his needs." This, to him, was the quintessence of the teaching of Marx. As Pyarelal reports, Marxism, to Gandhi, however, was not the only way or even the best way of achieving this goal.
Gandhi being asked to give his appraisal of some aspects of the Marxist philosophy said:

"I do not agree that our ideologies, ethical standards and values are altogether a product of our material environment without any absolute basis outside it. On the contrary as we are so our environment becomes." 18

Gandhi continued:

"The Marxist regards thought, as it were, 'a secretion of the brain' and the mind 'a reflex of the material environment'. I cannot accept that. Above and beyond both matter and mind is He. If I have an awareness of that living principle within me, no-one can fetter my mind. The body might be destroyed, the spirit will proclaim its freedom. This to me is not a theory; it is a fact of experience." 19

He further added:

"What has made the teaching of Marx dynamic is that he regarded mankind as a whole and transcending class divisions identified himself with the cause of the poor oppressed toilers of the world. But in that he is not alone. Others besides him have done the same." 20

But paying compliment did not mean for him dittoing what he could not accept as true. He rejected the Marxian interpretation of the causes of wars. The role of individual was central to Gandhi's view of history. *

* But man is nothing when he sets himself up against the divine purpose of the universe. "Napoleon planned much and found himself a prisoner in St. Helena. The mighty Kaiser aimed at the crown of Europe and is reduced to the status of a private gentleman. ... Let us contemplate such examples and be humble." - Young India, October 1924, Quoted in N. Raghavan Iyer, Gandhi's Interpretation of History, Gandhi Marg, vol. 6. No. 4, pp 320-1.
To quote him:

"Supposing Hitler were to die today, it would alter the whole course of human history. Similarly, supposing all capitalists were wiped out as a result of an earthquake or some other natural cataclysm, the history of class-war would then be changed in a way least dreamt of by the exponents of economic interpretation of history. Would not the history of the present war have been different if instead of Chamberlain a more dynamic figure had been the Prime Minister of England? Or, if Chamberlain had not shown lack of political courage at the last moment?"

"The Marxists say, Pyarelal interjected, "that to abolish war we have but to abolish the institution of private property. You have also taught that property is incompatible with the non-violent way of life."

Gandhiji: "This is only partly true. Was not Helen of Troy the cause of the Trojan war? Were the wars of the Rajputs related to the institution of private property? No. To banish war we have to do more. We have to eradicate possessiveness and greed and lust and egotism from our own hearts. We have to carry war within ourselves to banish it from society."

This brief survey shows that Gandhi rejected outright the Marxian philosophy of history. This rejection stood broadly on three grounds: (1) Marxism is a reductionism, reducing everything to the economic factor and (2) Marxism denies or underrates the role of individuals and (3) Marxism is materialist philosophy.

Marxian Position: A Brief Exposition.

Let us take up the last point first. As a metaphysical idealist, Gandhi had every reason to differ from the materialist philosophy interpreted and given a new shape by Marx and Engels. While he could legitimately disagree, from his own point of view, with the materialist approach of Marxism, it seems that he had not properly grasped the fundamental philosophical stand of Marxism. He understood Marxism to be a variant of mechanistic materialism while the founders of this doctrine ceaselessly waged attack in their philosophical writings, the tradition was
carried further by Lenin, against mechanistic view of life and universe. The basic fact of materialism for Marx was not the reduction of mind to matter but the priority of matter to mind in the course of evolution and the dependence of mind on matter. But when mind appears as the highest function of matter it is immensely potent, since consciousness and knowledge make an immense, qualitative difference to human behaviour. Indeed they make man free. 22 The relationship between mind and matter is dialectical. Gandhi did not or could not perceive this dialectical nature of the relationship between mind and matter. And hence he commented that according to Marxism, thought is 'a secretion of the brain' and mind 'a reflex of the material environment.'

This is no place to expound the fundamental philosophical postulates of Marxism and we need not enter into a discussion of Marxism as such. But a few passing references are deemed to be necessary to make out that Gandhi's understanding of Marxism was not correct in all its aspects. To put it briefly. While he was right in estimating the ethical core and underlining the humanistic content or to use an idealist phrase the essence of Marxism, he could not comprehend the fundamental dialectical materialist approach which distinguished itself as a science as against all sorts of vulgar, mechanistic materialism and utopian ideals of regeneration of mankind and reconstruction of society. It is not in a spirit of polemic but as an expression of our understanding of Gandhi's view of history vis-a-vis Marxism that this comment is offered here.

New to turn to the Marxian interpretation of history, commonly referred to as historical materialism. As for the charge that Marxism reduces everything to economic motives or that it is economic determinism, let us see for ourselves the position held by the co-founder of scientific socialism.

Engels in a letter to H. Starkenburg dated London, 25 January, wrote:

"Political, juridical, philosophical, religious, literary, artistic, etc., development is based on economic development. But all these react upon one another and also upon the economic base. It is not that the economic position
is the cause and alone active, while everything else only has a passive effect. There is rather, interaction on the basis of the economic necessity, which ultimately always asserts itself.” 23

In another letter to J. Bloch, dated London 21 September, 1890 Engels was more elaborate and specific.

“According to the materialist conception of history the determining element in history is ultimately the production and reproduction in real life. More than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. If therefore somebody twists this into the statement that the economic element is the only determining one, he transforms it into a meaningless, abstract and absurd phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure - political forms of the class struggle and its consequences, constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle, forms of law, and then even the reflexes of all these in the minds of the combatants: political, legal, philosophical theories, religious ideas and their further development into systems of dogma - also exercise their influence upon the historical struggle and in many cases preponderate their form. There is an interaction of all these elements in which, amid all the endless host of accidents, ... the economic movement finally asserts itself as necessary ... there are innumerable intersecting forces, an infinite series of parallelograms of forces which give rise to one resultant - the historical event ... Marx and I are ourselves partly to blame for the fact that younger writers sometimes lay more stress on the economic side than is due to it. We had to emphasize this main principle in opposition to our adversaries, who denied it, and we had not always the time, the place or the opportunity to allow the other elements involved in the interaction to come into their rights.” 26

* Moment - element in the dialectical process of becoming. (Ed. Eng. ed.)
It is perhaps a sad commentary on Marx's and Engels' powers of communication that nearly a century later this should have to be dwelt on. Again and again they insist that historical materialism is not a dogma, not a formula, but an empirical science and a guide to concrete study and historical investigation. Yet widespread opinion, both lay and critical, both within the Marxian movement and without, persists in treating it as though it were the reverse. "Our conception of history," Engels wrote in a letter to Conrad Schmidt, "is above all a guide to history, not a lever for construction. ... All history must be studied afresh, the conditions of existence of the different forms of society must be individually examined before the attempt is made to deduce from them the political, civil-legal, aesthetic, philosophic, religious, etc., notions corresponding to them." 25 (Emphasis added). The excerpts we have quoted above are quite specific. They repudiate all mechanistic or "reductive" views of history's determination.

It has been generally supposed that Marxism denies any significant role to the individuals. This is a misrepresentation of Marxian philosophy of history. According to historical materialist conception, the activity of men cannot but be of enormous significance in history. Plekhanov in his small but significant tract The Role of Individuals in History demolished the wrong and perverted theses attributed to Marxism.

To quote Plekhanov:

"While some subjectivists, striving to ascribe the widest possible role to the "individual" in history, refused to recognise the historical progress of mankind as a process expressing laws, some of their later opponents, striving to bring out more sharply the coherent character of this progress, were evidently prepared to forget that men make history, and therefore, the activities of individuals cannot help being important in history. They have declared the individual to be a quantitatively negligible. In theory, this extreme is as impermissible as the one reached by the more ardent subjectivists. It is as unsound to sacrifice the thesis to the antithesis as to forget the
antithesis for the sake of the thesis. The correct point of view will be found when we succeed in uniting the points of truth contained in them into a synthesis." 26

He added further:

"... by virtue of particular traits of their character, individuals can influence the fate of society. Sometimes this influence is very considerable; but the possibility of exercising this influence, and its extent, are determined by the form of organization of society, by the relation of forces within it. The character of an individual is a "factor" in social development only where, when, and to the extent that social relations permit it to be such." 27

We have discussed in chap. I the role of great men in history and what constitutes 'greatness' in socio-historical field according to Hegelian-Marxian concept. But since the question of the powerful impact of great men on history has arisen here in connection with Gandhi's critique of Marxian interpretation of history we would like to let Plekhanov state what Marxism stands for.

"A great man is great not because his personal qualities give individual features to great historical events, but because he possesses qualities which make him most capable of serving the great social needs of his time, needs which arose as a result of general and particular causes. Carlyle, in his well-known book on heroes and hero-worship, calls great men beginners. This is a very apt description. A great man is precisely a beginner because he sees further than others, and desires things more strongly than others. ... But he is not a hero in the sense that he can stop, or change, the natural course of things, but in the sense that his activities are the conscious and free expression of this inevitable and unconscious course. Herein lies all his significance; herein lies his whole power. But this significance is colossal, and the power is terrible." 28

This sums up the historical materialist attitude and no further discussion is
Gandhi's Concept of Time: Philosophical Background

Gandhi's view of history, we believe, can be better appreciated in the context of Indian thought and tradition. This becomes apparent if we care to see that history as understood in the modern western sense of the term had no appeal for Gandhi. As Dr. D. N. Datta observes: "Regarding Gandhi's conception of space and time we find that he was influenced by the general Indian ideas about them." A very sympathetic reviewer of Hinduism remarks: "One of the characteristics of ancient Hindu thought is its indifference to history." Prof. D. P. Mukherji in his study on Western Influence on Indian Culture observed: "Many of those who have made India's history have had little or no western 'sense of history' at all. Gandhiji had none. His conception was essentially Indian, i.e. qualitative, vertical, 'heroic' and moral." According to Indian philosophy, Time is without beginning and without end. History is conceived to be a pattern of timeless moments. T. S. Eliot once declared that the study of Indian metaphysics left him in a state of enlightened mystification. When the vision of the eternal dawns, he tells us, effort and exploration are forgotten in the discovery of the already known; beginning and end are one. 'In my beginning is my end.'

"Time present and time past
   Are both perhaps present in time future
   And time future contained in time past
   If all time is eternally present
   All time is unredeemable."

It has been said that the profundity of Indian philosophy is only two-dimensional, as it were, since it ignores systematically the metaphysical and spiritual significance of time and history. According to this view of Indian philosophy, "Indian thought seeking Absolute Truth (whatever its name), is driven to sublimate space into infinite (ananta in the Taittiriya Upanishad) rather than time into eternity. Its goal is, psychologically, the boundless rather than the timeless, since there is no *

* "Time is without limit and the world is wide." - Bhababhuti.
inward feeling for the time dimension at all. And the *Bhadranyaka Upanisad* gives us the final picture of this Absolute, as seen by the Indian mind, when it claims that it is "this imperishable Being" across which "is space woven, warp and woof." 32

The Reverend Bryan de Kretser observes: "Hindu man has no sense of a decisive or significant 'now' in any historical event. When a man believes that his life reaches back into the infinite past and that his future is equally limitless, he can have no awareness of a need for critical action. Unlimited historical life must 'sag' under the burden of all endless vista of recurrent existence. And secondly, a cyclic interpretation of history, destroys the meaningfulness of life, and because of its origins are in *avidya* its 'end' can have no true value. In the final analysis, Hinduism reduces all life to a fatuity. History is mere froth and bubble." 33

One may object to this interpretation of Indian philosophy as an oversimplification of a complex theory of existence and may point out that ancient Greece too seems to have suffered from such a metaphysical load if Collingwood is to be taken for granted. 34

The concept of time or *kale* is either that of a 'blind and insentient power, much like the western conceptions of fate, necessity and destiny or as the

* "Ancient Greek thought as a whole has a very definite prevailing tendency not only uncongenial to the growth of historical thought but actually based, one might say, on a rigorously anti-historical metaphysics. History is a science of human action; what the historian puts before himself is things that men have done in the past, and these belong to a world of change, a world where things come to be and cease to be. Such things, according to the Greek metaphysical view, ought not to be knowable and therefore history ought to be impossible." - R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford University Press, London, 1946), p. 20.
supreme conscious power identical with the absolute reality or even as subordinate power immediately responsive to the supreme will.' In fact, there was no unanimity about the nature of Kala, except on a point or two. In the 'Shantiparva' of the Mahabharata, there are three uses of the word, one interpreted as avyakta, another as jiva, and a third as maya, Shabala, brahma.

The Nyayikas, Vaisesikas and Mimamsakas conceived it as a static principle, substantial, eternal and ubiquitous in character and held it responsible for our notions of priority and posterity—temporal sequence or succession; whereas according to the exponents of the Agama it is the supreme dynamic principle lying at the root of the cosmic process, both of creation and destruction. To the view of the Patanjali School, however, it is only a mental construction based on a sense of succession and has no value in reality.

A discussion into other schools like the Jainas, the Shaiva, the Bhagavat and Shakta may not be necessary. Prof. D. P. N. Kukerji in his study of Philosophy of Indian History observed: "Kala's function as the source of nature's dynamism is one, while the ascent of the soul through various stages to a stage when time is transcended (known as kalatyag) and becomes one with the absolute reality, is another. Apparently, such a transcendental view of Kala is most useful for individual salvation, evolution and conversion; it has a philosophy of change, but the change is of the individual.... Speculative philosophy may steer clear of the collective need, but practical philosophy does not. People always want a Kriya to support the concept of Kala. This, of course, our philosophies sought to do through their concept of bishwakalyana, the external manifestation of Kriyasakti, keeping its own nature as Swatantrabishyanta (self-contained) by virtue of its capacity to represent Swatantra-shakti (supreme freedom) of the Absolute." 35

It is in terms of these basic Indian notions that Gandhi's concept of time that is of history is to be understood.

Gandhi's view of human nature is dependent on his interpretation of history as well as his view of cosmic evolution. We have discussed in a previous chapter...
his views on human perfectibility. To believe in human perfectibility in the context of politics and society is to invert Hobbes' 37 as one commentator has aptly put it and therein lies the true significance of his view. One may or may not agree with his subjective approach towards history— that is a matter of one's understanding and commitment. But the key element of his views is to be read in his hope that the ideals of truth and non-violence would ultimately triumph. "A few thousand years," Gandhi said, "are but a speck in the vast time circle." 38 Faith in this eternal, vast time circle explains his great patience, and optimism in redemption of mankind.
NOTES

2. Young India, 16-9-26, p. 324.
3. Young India, 3-9-25, p. 304.
11. Ibid.
17. Ibid, p. 137.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
27. Ibid, p. 41.
34. B. G. Gokhale, op. cit., p. 9.
35. D. P. Mukerji, op. cit., p. 149.
36. Ibid.
38. Young India, 3-9-25, p. 304.