

The think tank and the ashram

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[With think tanks technocratising knowledge, it is time to rethink the ashram as a centre for ethical invention](#)



Anniversaries often become moments of rhetoric and hypocrisy rather than a space for recollection, a crossroads about future strategies and debates. One needs to rethink them. The more literally charismatic the person, the greater the attempt to embalm him in mothballs. The Gandhian idea suffers most from it as the regime plays officially Gandhian, even moving into the Khadi and Village Industries Commission calendar. Last month, Prime Minister Narendra Modi attended the centenary year celebrations of the Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad. Between the official rhetoric of Gandhi and the disturbing silence of the civil **society** lies a huge void that one needs to talk about, discuss openly, if Gandhi needs to come alive as he did in Desmond Tutu's Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa.

The ashram and Gandhi The relevance of Gandhi is not in doubt. What is in question is the way we articulate that relevance. The ashram as an idea, as a way of life, becomes central to this exercise. The ashram was not just the home of prayer, it was the crystal seed of ethical inventions from weaving to a dream to liberate scavenging. Gandhi's experiments on the body had implications for the body politic which ranged from work, walking, consumption to compassion, where the ethical and the political wove together to create a theory of resistance as invention and of democracy as caring. At a recent meeting, the physicist and eco-centric technologist Ashok Khosla put it matter-of-factly. He said Gandhi was no Luddite, but a framework for the future. It is the regime, babbling about climate change and corporate social responsibility, that needs to catch up, linking lifestyle and livelihood. Gandhi was a huge catalogue of inventions where prayer, walking, weaving, writing, bhajans all had to be reworked so that the neighbourhood and the cosmos, swadeshi and swaraj, were in consonance. Central to it all was the ashram as a mode of thought and as a way of life. The futuristic implications of the ashram have not been grasped. Ask yourself, what is the ashram as an act of trusteeship? The ashram was not a place to pickle Gandhi into potted jars of consumability. It was a centre for ethical invention, where spirituality met everyday life to enhance democratic creativity. Think of a few possibilities where civil society rewrites

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to answer the challenge of climate change. A Gandhian trustee would understand that responsibility needs polysemy, that sustainability is a provincial idea till it combines with plurality, justice and peace. For this, one has to go beyond odd ideas of Make in India and the vision of a national security state. [The new-age think tank](#) At a policy level, what is challenging the ashram, vying for cognitive space, is the think tank. There is something brutal about the idea, of knowledge in a Darwinian world, where fang and claw marginalise violence. A think tank technocratises knowledge into a domain of strategy and expertise. An ashram opens up a question to issues of ethics and cosmology. There is a Promethean hubris about the think tank, a conviction that knowledge is subject to problem-solving. An ashram understands the modesty and the limits of knowledge. A think tank invites you to a machismo of power, speaking strategy to power. With a decline of the universities and the debates on knowledge, the think tank has acquired a touch of machismo, hypothecating ethics to the margins. To policy, ashram offers prayer, an understanding of the limits and complexity of knowledge. When one watches think tanks from Observer Research Foundation, Carnegie, Vivekananda, one senses an obsession with security has dispensed with [satyagraha](#). Non-violence is for the laymen and the illiterate. Bad ethics hide behind patriotism and expertise. Each promotes a myth — the first of the nation state, the second of the value neutrality of knowledge. One cannot think of a single think tank which has a clear-cut idea for peace. By specialising in information and expertise, the think tank has lost out on the ethics of epistemology of knowledge. Even war is seen as an act of plumbing, of balancing interests. When one looks at a think tank and compares it to the great social movements of our time, one sees the difference between the new imaginaries of peace, democracy and the conventional ideas of policy. I remember the social scientist Rajni Kothari laughing at the idea of think tanks. He said that ours is the hospitality of democratic theory; a think tank sugar-coats knowledge in secrecy. A think tank commoditises knowledge. He told me if the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies was a think tank, it would not have challenged the Emergency. Only the combined wisdom of the chowkidar, the gardener, the senior fellows, the visitors allowed for the courage of that solidarity. For Kothari, a think tank is too seduced by power to be truly ethically autonomous. Sadly, as political scientists like him disappeared, the lack of a democratic imagination got solidified into the current fetishism about think tanks. The Gandhian ashram has to challenge the alleged efficacy of think tanks.

Revitalising the ashram

The Gandhian ashram, without playing partisan politics, can be the centre of the dissenting imagination. It can emphasise that dissent as an act of caring and conscience is always plural. The marginal, the minority, the displaced, the defeated, the informal, the alternative imagination, the subaltern in every sense represent a festival of knowledges rarely represented in constitutional law or a democratic forum. The ashram becomes trustee of the silences, the margins realising that the margin in India is huge, a continent of suffering and survival in its own right. It realises that trusteeship — unlike a bound membership — is not a comfortable chair to speculate on retirement. It is a perpetual summons to conscience and whistle-blowing.

Third, it links ideas to lifestyle and livelihood so that one lives for ideas, not off them. Fourth, trusteeship cannot put that memory in mothballs but realise that memory, like language, is a perpetual source of invention. To soak Gandhi in the formaldehyde of nostalgia will not do. A Gandhi lives so long as he is reinvented by every citizen. If trustees even become a think tank, then the Gandhian idea becomes a form of secondariness ready to be museumised. Trusteeship in that sense is the ethics of memory, prayer, invention and goes beyond any official committee. Every citizen becomes a trustee and the ashram a commons for the new experiments in ethics from Irom Sharmila, the woman of Kashmir to the battle of the Narmada dam to the new controversus in agriculture, where experts look on agriculture as a 'twilight industry'. In fact, for me and many others of my generation, one of the greatest ashrams was a science laboratory, the photosynthesis research centre (Shri A.M.M. Murugappa Chettiar Research Centre) in Chennai under the late C.V. Seshadri dreaming dreams of alternative energy, of a poor man's science which was not poverty-stricken in terms of ideas. The slum around the laboratory became a compost heap for ideas of fishing, wind tunnels, ventilation, waste, algae. It was probably the only science lab where the worker, the cleaner and scientist shared a patent, where work, not only science, had a dignity. Seshadri dreamt of an India where Gandhian truths collaborated with scientific truths, where knowledge and lifestyle followed collaborative strategies. Seshadri and Kothari were intellectuals who saw the public more as a commons for ideas, not a space to be hypothecated to experts. He created an ascetic science, not dismal in its morality, but playful in its possibilities. One wishes ashrams today would reinvent that confidence. Rethinking the ashram as a part of the future is one of the great Gandhian challenges, as civil society fights to link [swadeshi](#) and [swaraj](#) which the current regime — playing to a second-rate nationalism — has disrupted. Reinventing an ethics for the 21st century is a task for the ashram, where spirituality does not lose its sense of the sacred, or ethics its quest for a new sense of science. It is a search for new paradigms and exemplars and Sabarmati Ashram is a true heritage site because it both made history and is futuristic. On its 100th anniversary it is time to retune it, so the great rituals of freedom, faith and inventiveness can begin again.

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