

GANDHIAN PERSPECTIVE ON DIFFERENT ISSUES

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Introduction

Gandhi was primarily a social reformer. He called himself a ‘social revolutionist’. He had to enter politics because political handicaps stood in the way of the realization of his ideals of social change. He was the first Indian politician to give a social dimension to the Indians struggle for freedom from British rule. The Congress in its earlier days, had repeatedly turned down the suggestion to devote its attention to the social problems under the fear that this would divide the national political front. Gandhi removed the distinction between social and political activities. In today’s political scene, only the political objectives have become prime concern whereas Gandhi felt that socio-economic issues should be of primary importance as compared to political goals of a party. Gandhian ideas on socialism need to be studied in today’s competitive world of profit-making and lop-sided development. There is need to re-assess the value of Gandhi’s social and economic ideas in the context of contemporary problems of not only India but also world. India will be really independent if it becomes independent in terms of economic self-dependence and basic facilities are provided to all. Similarly, in the reckless world of Capitalism, Free trade, Liberalisation, Globalization and Privatisation, Gandhian philosophy teaches us not to forget the welfare of whole humanity.

Gandhian Perspective on Life

Man may be described as being made in the image of God, but he is far from being God. -M.K.Gandhi, 1946 The Father of Nation believed that a luminous spark of noetic intelligence is present in the action of each atom and also in the eyes of every man, woman and child upon this earth. He was of the view that there exists identity with all life; human

beings can be identified even with crawl on earth. Since all living beings claim descent from the same God, so all life in whatever form it appears must be essentially one.

In his speech on Indian Civilization in Indore on March 30, 1918, Gandhiji has observed that India survives as a witness to its own civilization. He felt disheartened in saying that we no longer understand prayers and the verses composed by our forbears, even though we recite them in morning. A student should go on striving and never lose heart by remembering a poem of Pandit Rambhuj Datt Chaudhari:

“Never accept defeat, though you lose your life”.

He guided that on committing an error, we must not hide it. A sinner is forgiven by God if he has sincere repentance at the end of his sins. Another folly is committed by the person in hiding his error. This act of hiding can be compared with presence of an abscess in the body which must be removed by way of pus; otherwise it may lead to death.

According to Gandhiji, ‘truth’ should be the very breath of our life. All our activities should be centered in truth. “The soul is neither male nor female, neither young nor old. These attributes belong to the body alone, as both scripture and experience testify. The soul is the same in both you and me.” These were his views regarding equality in both sexes. To observe silence without a definite purpose can be of little use and may even do harm. Every activity of a lover of truth has a clear end in view. A patient observes silence as a part of treatment and a speaker does it in order to rest his throat, while someone else takes to silence in order to turn the searchlight inwards. So, silence has to be observed only with some purpose.

The main idea of Bapu was to motivate the Indians to work for universal service, which is the only service worth doing. The life as an aspiration has perfection its mission. This mission should never be sacrificed due to imperfections and weaknesses. The work of social reform has to be done by providing freedom to each to exercise creative consciousness for the well-being of our society.

Social Programmes of Gandhi

The main social goal towards which Gandhi strove all his life was the establishment of a village-based Indian society free from all forms of exploitation. That to him meant *Swaraj* and the spinning wheel with all that it implied was the primary means to achieve it. Besides *Khadi*, the other chief plank of his social platform were; (1) promotion of Hindu-Muslim

unity, (2) removal of untouchability, (3) prohibition of intoxicating drugs and drinks, (4) amelioration of the condition of women, (5) substitution of Indian Vernaculars for English as medium of instruction, (6) popularization of Hindi as the national language of India, (7) improvement of the breed of cow and its progenies, etc. These goals suggest that he wanted to work for the overall social development of the masses. All the social problems of Indians concerned him. A balanced development of all the members of society was his prime motive.

A major ideological dimension of the national movement was the over-all social outlook of Gandhi and the Gandhians. Gandhi did not accept a class analysis of society and the role of class struggle. He was also opposed to the use of violence even in defence of the interests of the poor. But his basic outlook was that of social transformation. He was committed to basic changes in the existing system of economic and political power.⁴

He universalized the scope of Indian politics, emphasizing the world-historical character of the Indian struggle as representing the struggle of the oppressed and the exploited against all oppressors and exploiters. He thought of himself as fighting for a better world-order and not simply for a free India. Indeed, until comparatively late in his political career, he did not emphasize so much the freedom of India, as he did a reformed British Commonwealth in which India could be a self-respecting and valuable partner. In his own view, the Indian movement was not national but universal-human – one global in scope and paralleling the Marxist movement.⁵ Prior to coming of Gandhi in Indian politics, Congress lacked social programme and ideology and hence had no mass appeal. It was given a new lease of life when a definite ideology for the overall development of masses was inserted by Gandhi.

Gandhian Perspective on Violence

The 20th century has certainly been the most violent and destructive in human history. Over 90 million people have died in the two world Wars, in the Spanish and Greek civil wars, Hitler's gas chambers, Arab-Israeli and India-Pakistan wars, and innumerable local conflicts in different parts of the world. Yet, quite possible more people live in constant dread of sudden and violent death today than at any time in the past. The collapse of the blazing World Trade Towers on September 11, 2001 has seared themselves on the human mind universally. The suicide bomber has become the new symbol of terror of our times. Even the most sophisticated surveillance systems of a super power have proved in capable of preventing terrorist attacks in broad daylight.

This somewhat pessimistic reading of history is challenged by one major exception, Mahatma Gandhi's application of politics and techniques of nonviolence in India. Gandhi's success both redeems human nature from the inevitability of its historical experience and also suggests the viability of nonviolence in modern situations.

When Gandhi arrived on the Indian political scene in 1915, the Russian revolution had just taken place. This and the widespread antipathy for British rule had generated strong revolutionary fervor among Indian nationalists. Their father figure was the Bengali novelist Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, whose popular novel, "Anandmath" was the inspiration for secret societies, and its hero Satyanand, the model for "revolutionaries". It contained the rousing hymn "Bande Mataram". Aurobindo Ghosh was the other influential figure. Educated in England, and selected for the coveted Indian civil service he had given it up to join the "revolution". Like many others who had studied abroad, including Jawaharlal Nehru, he was deeply impressed by the achievement of Mazzini and Garibaldi and Japan's defeat by Russia in 1905. Besides, like the rest of India, he was outraged by British division of Bengal on religious lines in 1904. Bartaman Rananiti, 'Modern Art of War' published anonymously in 1907 propagated Bankim's idea that the destruction was another form of creation and that funds for revolutionary activities must be raised by any means including terrorism. During the 1905-1915 periods, there was a spate of assassinations of British officials not only in India, but also in England.

At the 1919 Amritsar congress session when Gandhi spoke about Truth and Nonviolence, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, a senior nationalist leader who had connection with and sympathies for the revolutionaries, contemptuously retorted "My friend, Truth has no place in politics". Two decades later another nationalist leader Subhash Chandra Bose, who assessed the nonviolent approach impractical and ineffectual, secretly left India for Germany and Japan. In collaboration with the latter he set up the "Indian National army" with Indian troops taken as prisoners of war by the Japanese in South East Asia. Gandhi's task in promoting Truth and Nonviolence within the Indian national movement was, therefore, not an easy one. He succeeded only because of his great moral strength, his total identification with the poverty-stricken Indian people, and the impressive results his nonviolent campaigns, based on mass participation, produced vis-a vis the British, 1920 onwards. Besides Tilak died in 1920 and left a more open arena for him.

Gandhi ardently believed that truth was an objective moral reality as real and mighty as God himself. Truth was what constituted the “Right Path”. For him, there was no greater strength than the strength of the Human Spirit when it was imbued with Truth and was unafraid to die, unarmed, upholding it. Since Humans have been created “In the image of God” and have the “Divine Spark” in them they have to be motivated and governed by Reason and Love rather than by fear and violence. When one is steadfastly rooted in Truth, reason will always lead him along the path of Love and Righteousness. One has to live, and be ready to die, for Truth, Love and Righteousness but never to kill. “Given a just cause, capacity for endless suffering, and avoidance of violence, victory is a certainty”, “Peace will come when truth is pursued, and Truth implies Justice” and “the end of nonviolent struggle is always a mutually acceptable agreement, never the defeat, much less the humiliation of the enemy” are the three cardinal principles of Gandhi’s trust and Nonviolence strategy.

Within 30 years of Gandhi launching his nonviolent national struggle for Independence, the British withdrew from India voluntarily and among the first acts of independent India was to become a member of the British Commonwealth renamed as Commonwealth of Nations. Britain and India parted and stayed as friends. The nonviolent struggle for Independence has been amply justified. Gandhi’s strategy of Truth and Nonviolence also has had notable successes outside India. Using this strategy, Martin Luther King managed to bring about more beneficial change for his fellow blacks in the US in the single decade of the 1960s, than a bloody civil war and the subsequent one-hundred years of constitutional and legal struggle had achieved. It also brought about a fundamental transformation among them.

In the 1960s and 70s, over one hundred European colonies in Asia and Africa achieved independence. This came about partly because they used the same efficacious tool of nonviolent struggle, and partly because the national movements led by Gandhi and Martin Luther King effectively changed the global mindset on the acceptability of Imperialism, Colonialism and Racism. In the 80s and 90s , nonviolent movements have successfully brought down oppressive regimes in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Philippines and South Africa. Using the same technique, one lone, frail woman, Aung san Su Ki has bravely stood up against oppressive military might in Burma and effectively swung world public opinion in support of her democratic cause. In accepting his Nobel prize in December 1989, he spoke thus: “I accept the prize with profound gratitude on behalf of the oppressed everywhere, and all those who struggle for freedom and work for world peace. I accept it as

a tribute to the man who founded the modern tradition of nonviolent action for change Mahatma Gandhi whose life taught and inspired me. And of course, I accept it on behalf of the six million Tibetan people, my brave countrymen and women inside Tibet, who have suffered and continue to suffer so much.

Gandhiji's nonviolent resistance strategies aroused much interest in the US, Europe and other parts of the world not only among civil rights and peace activists and people's movements the Hungarians used them after the Soviet Invasion of 1956 but also among military strategists. Paul Wehr in his articles on 'Nonviolence and National Defense' in the book, "Gandhi in the Post-Modern Age" writes: Gandhi's ideas on nonviolent national defense made their way to a western world on the brink of war. Pacifists there were looking desperately for a viable alternative." Kenneth Boulding's essay "Path of Glory: A New way with War" proposed nonviolent resistance as a functional substitute for war. He observed that the technological revolution had made war dysfunctional. This point he made so many years ago continues to provide the basis for contemporary social defence research, as does his concept of transarmament. Boulding appears to have been the first to suggest that a notion, in this case Great Britain, adopt a nonviolent defense policy, though others like Lindberg in Denmark, Vrind in Holland and John Galtung and Arne Naess in Norway were thinking on the same lines Their work was a direct link between Gandhi and modern social defense policy. "By the late 1950s in the looming shadow of the mushroom cloud, social defense seemed more credible as an option for national defence. By 1962, the concept of 'social defense' had taken root in western Europe The 1964 Oxford Conference on civilian defense brought together peace researchers, military strategists and people having direct experience with nonviolent resistance. By 1980, 'Social Defense' or Non-military resistance' had in one form or the other become an integral pair of overall defense policy in Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland.

On the nuclear bomb, Gandhi's views were clearly articulated by him in the tragic, aftermath of the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945: The moral to be legitimately drawn from the supreme tragedy of the bomb is that it will not be destroyed by counter bombs. Unless the world adopts nonviolence, it will spell certain suicide for mankind. Albert Einstein echoed the same sentiments when he stated: "The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything but our thinking; thus we are drifting toward a

catastrophe beyond comparison. We shall require a new manner of thinking if mankind is to survive.

Interestingly, the great theoretician and proponent of nuclear weapons as an instrument of statecraft, Henry Kissinger began his July 31st, 1979 testimony to the US Senate Foreign Relations committee on SALT II with the following words: “In his essay, ‘Perpetual Peace’, the philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote that world peace would come about on one of two ways: after a cycle of wars of every increasing violence, or by an act of moral insight in which the nations of the world renounced the bitter competition bound to lead to self-destruction.”

What was Gandhi’s approach to societal, national global peace? It was based on the simple assumption that if one really wanted peace, one had to strive for peace rather than prepare for war. One had to cleanse one’s mind hatred, arrogance, avarice and fear, and avoid all actions, which create these emotions in others.

Terrorism is dreadful scourge but it can neither be wished away, nor bombed off the face of the earth. Much of it today emanates from various brands of religious fanaticism or religion masked political extremisms, though at deeper levels historical inequities in land distribution, living conditions, political, economic and cultural dominance and military presence are also involved. The 9/11 terrorist attack has traumatically shown how devastating the consequences of just one scenario of war, and ushered in the epoch of “asymmetric warfare” where the enemy is invisible, minuscule in number and strikes not from outside but from within our societies and nations.

Then crucial issue to be faced by all countries plagued by violence and terrorism is whether peace and security are better pursued through justice and negotiated, mutually acceptable agreements based on the aspirations and legitimate demands of both parties in a conflict situation, or through massive preemptive or retaliatory military action, and multibillion dollar national security plans. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat’s heroic visit to Jerusalem in 1977 and the successful outcome of his subsequent peace negotiations with Israeli Prime Minister Izhtak Shamir at Camp David is irrefutable proof that the nonviolent, negotiated path to peace can and does produce outstanding, enduring results for both parties in a conflict situation, even in the most difficult times.

Gandhian Approach to Rural Development

Mahatma Gandhi, was probably the first among our leaders to promote rural development in India. On March 30, 1946 at the Prayer meeting at Urulikanchan before leaving for Delhi for final negotiation with the British, Gandhiji reiterated that we cannot retain power in Delhi without developing rural India. His concept of rural development meant self reliance with least dependence on outsiders. The Swadeshi Movement was launched through spinning and weaving to promote Khadi. This also provided livelihood to the rural people.

The other emphasis was curb on consumption as excessive consumption causes pressure on resources and adds to wastage and pollution. His thought provoking statement, 'there is enough on this earth to meet the need, but not the greed' has now become a universal slogan for ensuring environmental protection and sustainable development. The Gandhian model of development can provide solutions to our rural problems which are linked to the basic needs of the people, such as 'Anna' (livelihood), 'Akshar' (literacy), 'Arogya' (health) and 'Acharan' (moral values). While the development programmes should aim at meeting these needs, it is essential to blend these activities with 'Dharam' - not any particular religion but the essence of all religions alongwith a focus on moral values - 'Acharan'. In the absence of moral values, particularly non-violence, non-addiction to gambling, drugs and alcohol and marital discord, the development may shape our future generations as demons, instead of citizens of a civilised society. If one can insist on adopting moral values, it will be easy to curb one's greed and with sincere efforts, there will be no difficulty in meeting one's needs.

I also believe that our natural resources although degraded and abused beyond sustainability, still have the potential to support our people. However, we need to discipline ourselves for managing our resources and environment carefully. This calls for a radical change in our planning strategy. Earlier, our rural development programmes were planned by the Planning Commission and thereafter at the state headquarters. Later on, we accepted the need for planning at the district level. However, I personally feel that the district is too large an area for implementing a specific development plan. Considering the variation in the quality of our natural resources and opportunities at the village level, I strongly advocate block level or taluka level planning.

Such decentralised, 'micro-level planning' should primarily focus on conservation and optimum utilisation of our water resources. As water is the basic need, supply of safe drinking water for

our rural people should be the priority. We transport water hundreds of kilometers to set up our industries and to meet the demand in urban areas. Then why not for the rural people? If we can ensure safe potable water for them, we can solve the major problem of health, because a majority of the health disorders in rural areas is linked with contaminated water. This can also reduce the drudgery of rural women who often have to walk barefoot a long distance carrying headloads of water throughout the year. Subsequently, our farmers need water to maintain their livestock and the surplus can be used for growing trees and crops.

Our planning should also explore the possibility of making optimum use of the degraded land and unproductive livestock which are posing a threat to our environment. Wastelands spread almost over one half of the total land area in the country cannot absorb rainwater. The water and top fertile soil flow through agricultural fields into the river resulting in floods and droughts. In this situation, the efforts and resources of our development agencies are diverted towards relief measures. Livestock, when left free for grazing, denude our pastures and forests. This further accelerates the process of soil erosion, floods and global warming. Hence our planning should give priority to convert our wastelands and non-descript livestock into productive assets for ensuring employment and livelihood in rural areas, while enriching our environment. It is difficult to motivate villagers to adopt family planning without assuring good health. Child care through nutritional awareness camps and Anganwadis should become an important component of our health care programme. Literacy too cannot be ignored, because in the absence of functional literacy, rural people cannot adopt appropriate technology. Even if they earn surplus money, they may not utilise it in the proper direction. This can be harmful for the community.

As livelihood, education and health are inter-related, we need to tackle them simultaneously. This integrated approach can provide an excellent opportunity for the development agencies and field workers to interact with the rural people, who in turn can be motivated to participate in development programmes. I am sure this new approach will bring about a radical change. This has been the approach of BAIF Development Research Foundation, founded by Dr. Manibhai Desai, a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi.

BAIF also believes that the focus of a programme should be on the rural family rather than on a village. This is because the village has a heterogeneous character with respect to socio-economic status. If this important fact is overlooked, the benefits of development are invariably snatched by a few well-to-do families. As a result, the development agency becomes instrumental in widening the gap between the rich and poor. It is necessary to realise that the programme should be competent to attract the rural poor. Efforts should also be made to involve rural women who contribute to about 75% of the family responsibility through child care and development. BAIF entered the areas of dairy cattle production, run-off water harvest, horticulture, forestry, sericulture, bio-energy, skill-oriented training and community health programmes for development of women and children. Such activities enable the families to settle down within 5-7 years and develop their own infrastructure to continue the activities without external support.

BAIF is presently providing livestock breeding and advisory services to a million rural families spread over 12,000 villages in the states of Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh. An integrated programme to rehabilitate the weaker sections of the society on a hectare of degraded land through tree-based farming systems has been a major breakthrough for ensuring livelihood along with a clean environment. We are very fortunate that many of the State Governments have accepted this model of development as a replicable programme for eradication of poverty in rural areas.

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