

Non-Violence and Gandhian Socio-Political Thoughts

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Abstract— In the study of history of human civilization it is found that there was a continuous trend of torturing the weak by more powerful individuals or groups, exploitation of the poor by the rich and landed people, neglect of the illiterate by the educated people, socially overpowering women by men and as such injustices. Such social injustices are a constant source of discontent giving rise to conflicts. Instead of solving those conflicts they were always suppressed. In the progress of civilization and development of humanistic attitude, people are now gradually getting more and more concerned with Human Rights that demand social justice to all sections of the society. Extreme poverty and illiteracy among a major section of the population is the greatest tragedy for India. Also, in the global context a reasonable economic order through equitable distribution of wealth among different nations and more particularly among the people of the same country is very much needed to avoid conflicts and clashes. Keeping aside these basic facts, only a slogan for “peace” can’t change the society. In this context, Gandhian socio-political thought based on non-violence can go a long way towards solving these problems.

Index Terms— Ahimsha, Enlightened Anarchy, Village swaraj, Trusteeships, Sarvodaya

1 INTRODUCTION

Gandhi's political ideas are unique because he tries to introduce morality in politics as well as his ideas made up in accordance with his religious and metaphysical beliefs. For him, all men are essentially one and there is an element of essential goodness present in every man. Therefore, distrust, hatred, violence, immorality etc should be removed from politics. Gandhi is of the view that even in politics, hate and violence could be conquered by love and suffering.

Gandhi visualized decentralization system in politics and economics for the greatest good of society. It naturally helps the individual in simple living with social co-operation. It also emphasizes intimate neighborly love and virtues. As Gandhi says “I suggest that, if India is to evolve along non-violent lines, it will have to decentralize many things. Centralization cannot be sustained and defended without adequate force. Simple homes from where nothing to take away requires no policing.”¹

For Gandhi centralization of capital as well as power would lead to exploitation. Besides centralization system of capital and power cannot be maintained and defended without resorting to force or violence. “Centralization as a system is inconsistent with non-violent structure of society.”²

He firmly believes that exploitation is the essence of violence. It harms the personality of the individual. This exploitation becomes a reality when power would be concentrated in the single body like state. To Gandhi, “the state represents violence in a concentrated and organized form. The individual has a soul, but as the state is a soulless machine, it can never be weaned from violence to which it owes its very existence.”³

2 DOCTRINE OF AHIMSHA

Gandhi was the foremost devotee of Ahimsha. He on the other hand, holds the view that state represents violence in an undiluted and organized form. For peaceful society non-violence must be necessary and for that violence must be avoided. This violence can be eliminated through the decentralization. As Gandhi remarked “ I look upon an increase in the power of the state with the greatest fear, because although while apparently doing good by minimizing exploitation, it does the greatest harm to mankind by destroying individuality which lies at the root of all progress.”⁴ So Gandhi emphasizes decentralization in politics as well as economics to avoid violence. For him decentralization is an end of a progressive and welfare oriented society.

Gandhi believes that power of state is not an end in itself but “one of means of enabling people to be better their condition in every department of life.”⁵ He also does not consider the state even the groups or the community of communities. To him, the state is only one of the means to secure the greatest good of all.

Gandhi sincerely believes that the state represents an organization based on force. The compulsive nature of state authority damages the moral value of the individual's action. The action which is not voluntary cannot be called moral, but an action is moral only when it is voluntary Gandhi disapproved of “an organization based on force, which a state as voluntary organization there must be.”⁶

3 STATE OF ENLIGHTENED ANARCHY

According to Gandhi, political power of state is just a means not end itself. It is the means to regulated national life by the national representatives. For him life of nation

would become perfect when power would be self regulated, wherein no representatives are necessary. There is then a state of "enlightened anarchy". In such a state sovereignty vests in every one who is his own ruler. Speaking of this ideal state Gandhi says "There is then a state of enlightened anarchy. In such a state everyone is his own ruler. He rules himself in such a manner that he is never a hindrance to his neighbor. In the ideal state, therefore, there is no political power because there is no state."⁷

Gandhi visualized the goal of enlightened anarchy in three phases. In the first stage the goal is one of immediate swaraj based on nationalization and in the second stage the objective is to bring about a non-violent state through the evolution of village republics. In the final stage the purpose is to achieve Ram Raj.

4 CONCEPT OF VILLAGE SWARAJ

Gandhi's concept of village swaraj is a significant milestone of decentralization. The word "swaraj" means self-rule. It is originally derived from the ancient Hindu Philosophy. His concept of village swaraj is a significant milestone of decentralization. He says "the root meaning of swaraj is self rule. Swaraj may, therefore, be rendered as disciplined rule from within.....the word swraj is a sacred word, Vedic word, meaning self rule and self-restraint and not freedom from all restraint which independence often means."⁸ Gandhi says that real swaraj will come not by acquisition of authority by a few but by the acquisition of the capacity by all to resist authority when abused. In other words, swaraj is to be obtained by educating the masses to a sense of their capacity to regulate and control authority.

Gandhi visualized village to be self-sustained and autonomous. For, Gandhi every village is absolutely essential for the all round progress and prosperity of the country. As he says "my idea of village swaraj, is a complete republic, independent of its neighbors for its vital wants, and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is a necessity."⁹

Referring to the democratic structure of rural community or village republic Gandhi writes that every village will be a republic or panchayat having full powers. It follows, therefore, that every village has to be self-sustained and capable of managing its affairs even to the extent of defending itself against the world. It will be trained and prepared to perish in the attempt to defend itself against any onslaught from without. Thus, ultimately, it is the individual which is the unit. This does not exclude dependence on and willing help from neighbors' or from the world. Such a society is necessarily highly cultured in which every man and a woman knows what he or she wants and what is more, knows that no one should want anything that others cannot have with equal labour."¹⁰

Every individual of this village republic will have complete freedom. His thought and action will be pervaded by spirit of non-violence. Such will be perfect democracy based upon individual freedom. Gandhi argues "the individual is the architect of his own government. The law of non-violence rules

him and his government. He and his villages are able to defy the might of the world. For the law governing every villager is that he will suffer death in the defense of his and his villages' honor."¹¹

In modern world, communism or democracy forms the pyramidal structure of administrative system. But Gandhi alters this pyramid system by the concept of village republic. In his scheme of village swaraj the pivotal element is the individual who comes into his own. Gandhi says, "In this structure composed of innumerable villages.....life will not be a pyramid with complex sustained by the bottom. But it will be an oceanic circle whose centre will be the individual always ready to perish for the villages, the latter ready to perish for the circle of villages, till at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals..... The outer most circumferences will not wield power to crush the inner circle but will give strengths to within and derive its own strengths from it."¹² This village republic panchayat is a key unit for decentralization of legislative, executive and judicial powers. All the activities of village swaraj maintain itself without external interference. Gandhi holds the view that "the government of the village will be conducted by the panchayat of five members annually elected by the adult villagers male and female, possessing minimum prescribed qualification.....since there will be no system of punishment in the accepted sense, this panchayat will be the legislature, judiciary and executive combined to operate for its year of office. Any village can become such a republic today without much interference ever from the present government."¹³

This kind of idle society is one in which there will be no police and military, no law courts, doctors, heavy transport and centralized production. It would be a decentralized society, where equality pervades every sphere of life. This idle society is based on non-violence and the control of the federation over the units will be purely moral way. Every member of this idle society lays stress on non-possession, bread labor and swadeshi. The first two imply voluntary poverty, village industries and the common people owing the means of production and having the capacity to resist injustice. Swadeshi which demands attention to duties immediate in point of space and time as against remote one relates the area of man's direct service to his capacity for knowing, loving and serving.

The equality of this stateless ideal society would be expressed through the law of Varna with the combination of the idea of non-possession and bread labor. Gandhi believes that a healthy social life must be based on sincere feeling of cooperation and division of work. There should be inner arrangement inside a society for enabling every member to do his share of work for the betterment of the society. Gandhi believes that the ancient classification of Hindu society into four Varna had been made in the spirit. To Gandhi, law of Varna "established certain spheres of action for certain with certain tendencies. This avoided all unworthy competition. While recognizing limitations the law of Varna admitted of no distinctions of high and low....my conviction is that an ideal social order will only be evolved when the implications of this law are fully understood and given effect to."¹⁴ This makes it quite clear that Gandhi does not approve of present day Hindu

caste system. Varna does not mean that somebody is born high and some low, it does not give superiority to anybody simply by birth. The original Varna distinctions were based on the principle of "division of work". Gandhi believes that individuals belonging to every Varna must do bread labour.

For Gandhi every individual should work in ideal society according to his capacity. Gandhi wants every man to be treated as equal; consequently, he comes to think of certain way for preventing and eradicating social inequality. The idea of bread labor is one of them; it means that in order to live man must work. This idea automatically leads to non-possession and economic equality which non-violence also implies. "Love and exclusive possession can never go together. Theoretically when there is perfect love there must be perfect non-possession." 15 Thus the law of varna and idea of bread labour and non-possession will bring about complete economic and social equality. In this stateless society there is no room for exploitation of zamindari system or system of capitalism. Every individual would be his own master and none a hired labour of another. Gandhi is not against the machinery, but he is dead against the centralization of mass production and profit motive. For Gandhi, centralization of product leads to concentration of power. So it leads to exploitation. So Gandhi says "A non-violent civilization therefore cannot grow up in the factory system, but it can be built on self-contained villages." 16 Gandhi also advocates the cottage and small scale industries for all round development of rural areas. This brings about equal economic progress without any interfered of external affairs. So, Gandhi emphasizes the production of agricultural products and handicrafts. He advocates the use of simple tools and instruments and such machinery as saves individual labor and lightens the burden of millions of cottagers.

In this self-contained village republic non-violence will reconcile individual freedom with social restraint. Non-violence implies that mechanism of control which maintains social cohesion will consists of internal and non-coercive external sanctions. The individual will use his opportunity to advance "the greatest good of act" while society will give to the individual maximum opportunity. Gandhi's view is that in the self-contained village republic every individual should have equal economic privilege. He believes that society has to be based on love and mutual trust and not on struggle. According to him everything of society must be solved on the basis of moral consideration instead of violence or struggle. For him class-struggle would happen due to economic in equilibrium.

5 DOCTRINE OF TRUSTEESHIPS

For this reason in order to make economic equality Gandhi introduces the doctrine of trusteeship of the rich. According to theory of trusteeship every person should consider him the trustee of the surplus wealth. The wealth must be used for the good of the society and not for personal consumption. Gandhi believes that even rich people are after all human beings and as such they also have in them an element of essential goodness that every man necessarily possesses. If that element is aroused and if the capitalists are also won over by love, they would be persuaded to believe that the wealth in their possession should be utilized for the good of the poor. The rich people should be made to realize that the capital in their

hands is the fruit of the labor of the poor man. This realization would make them see that the good of the society lies in using capital and riches for the good of others and not for one's personal comforts. Then the capitalists would function only as trustees for the poor. They would then keep all surplus wealth in trust and this would guarantee both economic solidarity and economic equality. "Capitalist would then exist only as trustees. When that happy day dawned, there would no differences between capital and labor. Then labor will have ample food, good sanitary dwellings, all the necessary education for their children, ample leisure for self-education and proper medical assistance." 17 The aim of his theory of trusteeship is to establish cordial relations among all the sections of the society through the use of accumulated wealth of few people for common good of all. According to Gandhi economic deprivation, mass poverty, unemployment and inflation etc are due to economic growth not being accompanied by educating cannons of social justice. The perennial problems of poverty, hunger and diseases are not because of abundance of production but due to faulty or lopsided organization.

He gave a socio-economic content to the moralization idea of trusteeship. He had the view that property is the concept that arose only within the confines of human society and as such it belongs to the society at large as much as to particular individuals. Hence it should be used for the welfare of one and all. Under such consideration the mental and physical talent and wealth of individuals have to be looked upon as a trust for the benefit of the society. Gandhi does not recognize hereditary inheritance of property. He visualizes a transformation from individual ownership of property to community or trust ownership. Trusteeship recommends remuneration for the work done through common consent of workers and the state. There must be parity between the remuneration of the trustees, the talent and expertise of labour is neither to be exploited nor used to sub serves vested interests of the few. Society as a whole must derive the benefits. Trusteeship is not a theory against capitalists, but it seeks common good through a proper utilization of their experience and talent. For Gandhi, trusteeship involves the building of consensus of a society for implementing it for social good. Gandhi wanted that the rich should become the trustees of the society by sharing their surplus wealth with the poor and underprivileged. This argument is advanced by Gandhi in the belief that society in general is an extension of the particularistic family.

According to Gandhi by nature all human beings are equal. Though they are physically different from each other, basically they are one. So, there should not be any economic discrimination or disparity among different individuals in respect of income, consumption and other bare necessities of life. Gandhi as an idealist had experience that people naturally desired to accumulate the wealth of society. Every individual seeks to live material comfort. So they possess disproportionate need which is the cause of misery of majority of people in the society. So, he tries to have equal distribution of the accumulated wealth for social happiness. This happiness results through the emphasis of metaphysical and religious aspect of life. According to Gandhi man should live peacefully with their basic need. There are many sources in earth to meet their basic

needs. The wealth of society is concentrated in the hands of a small privileged group. But a vast majority of society is deprived of the basic need. Gandhi wanted to establish an equitable economic distribution of the accumulated wealth to all members of the society. He tries to remove the selfishness of individual by appealing to the moral consciousness of individual. Gandhi says, "I must know that all the wealth does not belong to me, what belong to me is the right to an honorable livelihood, no better than that enjoyed by millions of others. The rest of my wealth belongs and must be used for the welfare of the community. I want them to outgrow their greed and sense of possession and to come down in spite of their wealth to the level of those who earn their bread by labour."¹⁸ His theory of trusteeship provides an opportunity to capitalists and land lords to voluntarily transfer their wealth to the society. Capitalists and land lords should act as trustees along with other representatives of society. So capitalist avoid the confiscation of wealth without any hesitation for the common good of society. Trusteeship is indeed a non-violent alternative to class warfare and mass violence, since it emphasizes the ethico-religious dimension in human beings.

For Gandhi there should not be any economic classification between workers and mill owners, land lords and peasants in stateless society. They would work together in harmony like a great family. Thus the capitalist regards himself as trustee "for those on whom they depends for the making, the retention and increase in his capital."¹⁹

His concept of trusteeship economy could bring about a socio-economic order, somewhat superior to the acquisitiveness of private enterprise and all powerful democratic socialism in which the individual is sacrificed at the altar of the state. Gandhi thinks that everything of the universe depends on God. So, all things should be used for the welfare of all. In his opinion "everything belonged to God and was from God. There, it was for his people as a whole, not for a particular individual. When an individual had more than his proportionate portion, be a trustee of that portion for Gods' people."²⁰ To him human beings metaphysically equal, they are only physically different from each other. So he held the view that there is no justification for "the glaring difference between the classes and the masses, the prince and the pauper, by saying that the former need more. That will be idle sophistry and travesty of my argument."²¹ He utilizes theory of trusteeship as a potential weapon to remove ills of capitalist society by transforming it into an equalitarian society based on justice and fair play. He also believes at the same time in ultimate goodness of human being. He says that the private property is a evil for society. So, one should voluntarily surrender excess wealth or property for social good. Gandhi seeks to abolish ownership of property, because individual property is not used for sectional interests of the society. Thus, Gandhi emphasizes his economic order for social necessity and social good instead of individual selfishness.

6 DOCTRINE OF SARVODAYA

In this form of socio-political set up Gandhi moves to consideration of doctrine of "Sarvodaya". The Sarvodaya etymologically means betterment of all. The original source of the doctrine of Sarvodaya is the book of Ruskin "Unto This Last". Basically Sarvodaya is concerned with the unity of all existence. Though every individual life feels itself to be a separate, self-contained and independent ego, it is not many, nor a few, but only one common Atman. Referring to oneness of god Gandhi says "I believed, in the absolute oneness of God and therefore of humanity. What though we have many bodies? We have but one soul. The rays of the sun are many through refraction. But they have the same source. I cannot, therefore, detach myself from the wickedest soul, nor may I be denied identity with the most virtuous."²² Therefore, Gandhi argues that men are brothers, because they partake of the same reality and share the same Atman. The social, political and economic aspects of life of the one man affect the life of his fellow man. As Gandhi says, "I am endeavoring to see God through the service of humanity, I know that god is neither in heaven nor down below, but in every one."²³

Sarvodaya implies the unity of all. According to Gandhi unity of all life is such that "if one man gains spiritually, the whole world gains with him and if one man falls, the whole world falls to that extent."²⁴ This belief of the interrelationship of life leads to service for the welfare of all. As Gandhi says "whether an individual is good or bad is not merely his own concern, it is the concern of whole community, world."²⁵

By the concept of sarvodaya Gandhi really means universal uplift or the welfare of all men. But it is not just the greatest happiness of greatest number as utilitarianism holds, when we compare Gandhi's concept of sarvodaya with utilitarianism the latter shows a lack of humanity. Utilitarianism is hedonistic. Its standard somehow is pleasure. Moreover, utilitarianism ultimately depends on selfish consideration. On the other Gandhi's concept of sarvodaya is based on love and benevolence. It enlightens man to self-sacrifice for good of others. The end of all activities, whether they may be social or political have to be nothing but the upliftment of everybody. This can be possible only under the panchayat system. The small village units will be able to pay attention to every individual of the village.

Utilitarianism is a hedonistic consequentism. It holds that the moral value of justification of any action is to be found its consequences. According to utilitarianism the right action is that action which produces the greatest degree of happiness. So, the utilitarianism is essentially limited in its scope. It is not universally applicable, because the standard of "the greatest degree of happiness" may be applicable to a particular society, but it may not be applicable to another society. On the other hand sarvodaya is based on metaphysical belief that there is an essential unity behind everything. Gandhi held the view that there is no distinction between "I" and "Thou" is all rooted in selfish considerations, whereas the realization of oneness is the supreme condition for the effective following of ethical principles.

The system of village republic is based on such a consideration. In village republic values of freedom, equality and brotherhood will be appreciated. Mutual relation between man and man will be viewed from different angles than how these are viewed today. There will be no required to reduce his wants. He will be asked to live a simple life. Every effort will be made to reform the society from the bottom and from within. There will neither be any craze for mass production nor for large scale industrialization. In the other words it will be a society based on cottage industries and the production will be according to the needs and requirements of the people.

7 CONCLUSIONS

There is no doubt that a perfect realization of oneness is not possible in this life. But true spiritual life consists not in attaining the ideal, but in constantly striving and aspiring for it. The life in the village republic will be an example of such a spiritual living because every men of a panchayat will have a bond of affection for every other and consequently will not develop a sense of having a possession. Even land will be considered a belonging to everybody. Gandhi says, "Real socialism has been handed down to us by our ancestors who taught, all lands belongs to Gopal, where then is the boundary line? Man is the maker of that line and he can therefore unmake it. Gopal literally means shepherd; it also means God. In the modern language the state that means the people".²⁶

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