

Gandhism

Gandhi was the supreme leader of the nationalist movement. He was also a thinker who challenged most of the assumptions and beliefs of his time. The national movement before him was confined to a few sections of society. He turned it

into a mass movement. His strategy of political action largely determined the form of national protest and struggle against the British. The idea of Swadeshi and boycott had been formulated earlier. But he gave them a unique meaning by integrating them with the idea of a nonviolent satyagraha. His political strategy attempted to bring all sections of Indian society into the nationalist struggle.

His views are known as Gandhism but he himself denied that there was anything as "Gandhism". But there are a set of ideas in him which are original and which have exercised enormous influence on different people in the same way as other ideologies have. His writings are diffuse and repetitive, except in Hind Swaraj which he wrote before he plunged into the national movement. But, despite this, his writings have a coherent: vision of man and society.

Some of his important ideas can be summarized under five heads: (i) critique of western civilization, (ii) Gandhi's views on Democracy (iii) freedom and the state, (iv) freedom and economic organization, (v) methods of conflict resolution.

Critique of Western Civilization

Gandhi like Vivekananda and other leaders of the Indian Renaissance criticized the western civilization. According to him it was based on calculated rational self-interest, which was totally disruptive of human relationships. He admired Indian civilization, which according to him had a more satisfactory view of man's place in the cosmos. It had given due importance to spiritualism and man's search for the soul. He was convinced that the pursuit of self-interest in the form of material interest would increase conflict in society. He believed in the ancient ideas of simple, moral, pious life. This does not mean that he admired everything Indian. He revolted against the exploitation of the scheduled castes and did more than anyone else for the improvement of their status.

Gandhi also did not like the political democracy as it prevailed in the West. He dismissed liberal democracy as 'a fish market' in which people compete for their self-interest. He of course

believed that the government ought to be based on the consent of the people but he, hated to see the state as the rule of the selfish individuals. According to him democracy, as practised in Britain, was bad because it believed in counting heads. Those who used 51 per cent votes ruled. He wanted that in a democracy the weakest should have the same opportunity as the strongest. He complained that democracy had come to mean party rule, or to be more exact, rule in the hands of the Prime Minister who often lacks honesty of purpose. In it, he held that each party thrives on bargains regardless of their consequences for all.

His reaction against the industrial civilization, which he detested as immoral, had also a pragmatic reason. Ours is a predominantly rural, society. Most people depend on agriculture. He thought that the introduction of labour -saving devices in such a society would play havoc with life of the people. However, with advancing age his opposition to technology decreased. He began to welcome any technology which did not increase unemployment and destroy village craft and the simplicity of village life.

Views on Democracy

In Hind Swaraj (1909), Gandhi had taken an extremely negative view of the value or role of the institutions of modern civilization. Namely, the parliament, law-courts, the police, the military, machinery, hospitals, railways, etc. These institutions of modern civilization, he said, were divorced from morality, whereas by contrast, "the tendency of Indian civilization is to elevate the moral being". Accordingly, in place of the institutions of modern, western civilization, he put forward an alternative ideal of "real home rule...viz, self-rule and self-control" by the individuals in accordance with the spiritual values of truth and non- violence.

However, within a year of his active involvement in mobilizing the Indian masses into the freedom struggle. Gandhi made a partial revision of his earlier views on the institutions of modern civilization. That revision was due not only to his active involvement in the freedom struggle but also to the criticisms which many political thinkers and

political leaders had made of Gandhi's booklet. At any rate, within about a year of his final return to India from South Africa in 1915. Gandhi came to adopt a rather positive attitude toward the institutions of modern life, including the parliament, law-courts, machinery, railways and hospitals; Rather than dismissing them outright as he had done in his Hind Swaraj, he now reluctantly included them in what he called his "pardonable programme for the attainment of parliamentary swaraj".

As to the organizational features of "parliamentary swaraj", Gandhi preferred it to be a village-based, decentralized set-up, in which all but the lowest level of government was to be indirectly elected by the Immediately lower level. This decentralized, village-based model of parliamentary / democratic swaraj was not the model that was favoured by the Congress and adopted by the Indian Constitution. The Constitution, however, does incorporate some so-called Gandhian institutions such as the village panchayats. Moreover, the personal and civil liberties as well as the democratic rights components of the liberal- democratic political philosophy of the Constitution are basic to Gandhi's own moral-political philosophy.

Freedom and the State

Gandhi looked upon an increase in the power of the state with the greatest fear. All increase in the power of the state, according to him, was detrimental to individuality. For him the state represented "violence in a concentrated form". He said: "The individual has a soul, but the state is a soulless machine, it can never be weaned from violence to which it owes its existence". He too believed in Swaraj as a condition in which the individual would be complete master of himself. He often contrasted spiritual dominance of Indian society with political dominance of the West. For him, while the west prized "brute force", the ancient Indian society glorified kings who considered their own swords as "inferior to the sword of ethic".

He postulated a non-violent state based on the willing consent of the people and representing the

near unanimity in society. He was convinced that if India was to evolve along non-violent lines, it would have to decentralize power because "centralization as a system is inconsistent with a non-violent structure of society". He was not only against centralization of political power but was also against the centralization of economic power. He was against industries based on large-scale production and later large-scale control. In a centralized state, Gandhi thought, there was bound to be a conflict between the rich and the poor. Decentralization, on the other hand, would make people responsible and non-violent. It would foster feelings of co-operation.

Gandhi's ideal state would be completely self-regulated. In such a state, he thought, everyone would be his own ruler. He will rule himself in such a manner that he will never be a hindrance to his neighbour. It is for this reason that he admired Ramrajya which personified the idea of self-help, sacrifice, and discipline. He even regarded Abu Baker and Hazrat Uman like Rana. But he was quite aware that it was not possible to create such a state in the immediate future. One of the obstacles were inequalities "in which few roll in riches and the masses do not get even enough, to eat". Therefore, he conceded that in the present circumstances coercion could be used in extreme cases. But he was convinced that a state is good in which people are governed the least.

He thought the village Republics working in terms of panchayats would develop if spontaneous energies of the people while training them in co-operative action. He therefore, pleaded that panchayats should be given full powers. Every village had to be self-sustained and capable of managing its own affairs. Gandhi praised this system because in it everyone knows his wants and

also realizes that "no one should want anything that others cannot have with equal labour". He summed up his society thus: "In this structure composed of innumerable villages, there will be ever widening, never ascending circles. Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom... But it will be an oceanic circle whose

centre will be the individual always ready to perish for the circle of villages, till at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals". He further said that the outermost circumference will, not wield power to crush the inner circle but will give strength to all within and derive its own strength from it.

Freedom and Economic Organization

Like Marx he put emphasis on labour. He believed it to be the real wealth which gives rise to money. He thought, "The real owner of wealth is one who puts in certain amount of labour with a conscious productive aim". He believed that one should not eat even a single meal without doing some labour. He thought that such an attitude would foster economic independence, which in turn will make us fearless and increase the national character.

He totally, repudiated property. He always thought that property was an obstacle in the realization of God. After a theft he quoted a verse of Premchand to Gangabehari: "It is a blessing that chains have broken, it will be easier for me to find Shri Gopal". Gandhi was, however, conscious that such a position was impractical. He therefore, declared that if property is "lawfully acquired", it is entitled to protection.

It is in this context that he called upon the Capitalists and Zamindars to become trustees. He argued that they should regard tenants and workers as co-proprietors. The zamindar should hold his Zamindari or industry in trust for them. He admitted that absolute trusteeship was unattainable. But he was convinced that if we strive for it we would go a long way in realizing a better state of equality on earth than by any other method. For him change of heart was the answer.

How about state ownership? Isn't it better than private ownership? Gandhi admitted that it was better but he rejected it on the grounds of violence. He was convinced that "if the state suppressed capitalism by violence, it will be caught in the coils of violence itself, and will fail to develop non-violence at any time. But if the Zamindar or Capitalist refused to become trustees, and the state

ownership became unavoidable, he I would support a minimum of state I ownership".

Methods of Conflict Resolution

Gandhi emphasized the need to harness the forces of love as against hatred. He insisted on non-violence and Satyagraha over the concepts of boycott and passive resistance. He wrote that means to be means must always be clean. For him ahimsa is our supreme duty. If we take care of the means, we shall definitely reach the end sooner or later. He had derived his ideas from Thoreau, Emerson, Tolstoy and the Jain tradition. He was also influenced by the Sermon on the Mount. He was convinced that what was required was to educate a man in truth and non-violence, and by truth, man will transform material conditions for the good of all. Material conditions and individual character are two sides of the same coin in which, according to Gandhi, the individual character had a greater precedence because it alone has the capacity to transform material conditions on a permanent basis. A change of material conditions without corresponding change of heart will not yield results. Both trusteeship and satyagraha were such methods.

Satyagraha consists of two words, i.e. Satya, which means 'truth' and Agraaha, which means 'force', 'request' or 'strength'. All practitioners of Satyagraha should oppose violence by non-violence as well as by the strength of his moral convictions. According to Gandhi, it was not merely a way of resisting authority but also a way of using love and moral strength to vindicate truth in society. Gandhi was convinced that violence inflicts injury on others. On the other hand, use of Satyagraha may involve suffering of the Satyagrahi himself. The Satyagrahi does not merely by to win but seeks the larger good or truth which Gandhi thought was God himself. However, if there was a choice between violence and cowardice. Gandhi always favoured the former.

Satagraha is the name of Gandhian non-violent way of political action to resist and transform untruthful and violent systems of social or political power. According to Gandhi, the distinctive

features of Satagraha, in comparison with "passive resistance", are as follows:

- (i) While the passive resisters harbour hatred toward their adversaries, the satyagrahis view their opponents with love.
- (ii) The passive resisters, unlike the satyagrahis, may harass and injure their opponents,
- (iii) Satyagraha, unlike passive resistance, can be offered even to one's nearest and dearest ones,
- (iv) Passive resistance is a resistance by the weak and helpless, and it does not exclude the use of violence, whereas satyagraha is a moral-political action by the strong, and it excludes the use of violence.

The various methods of satyagraha are: (1) purificatory actions by the Satyagrahis, such as pledges, prayers and fasts; (2) acts of non-cooperation, such as boycott, strikes, hartal, fasting and hijrat (i.e. voluntary emigration); (3) acts of civil disobedience, such as picketing, non-payment of taxes and defiance of specific laws; and (4) a constructive programme of social reform and social service, such as the promotion of inter-communal unity, the removal of untouchability, adult education, and the removal of economic and social inequalities.

Gandhi provided a severe indictment of the state, property and industrialization. He also provided an alternative set of values and institutions. The whole basis of society with its inequalities, coercive state and competitive capitalist is vicious. He declared, "If plain life is worth living, then the attempt is worth making". His numerous ideas are vague, his realism as a political strategist is amply contrasted with idealism in his thoughts. But there is no doubt that Gandhi raised almost all the important questions which confront modern civilization, namely, the question of increase in state power, bureaucratic oppression, increasing use of violence, the unfortunate consequences of big technology, etc. His critique of the modern civilization is full of great insights. His ideas on the relationship between means and ends are particularly thoughtful. No one

has a better case on these points than Gandhi. His greatest contribution was his emphasis on decentralization of economic and political power. Our Directive Principles of State Policy insist on the introduction of this idea- Moreover, social scientists world over are keen to articulate and explain the Gandhian alternatives to the current ills of development. These efforts amply justify the relevance of Gandhi to the contemporary world.

Gandhi, however, did not adequately develop an alternative institutional strategy, which could link up his ideas with practice in modern times. For example, in advancing the idea of trusteeship, he did not realize the appalling selfishness of the capitalists. That is one reason why when India became free people found it difficult to translate his ideas into concrete structures. While he convinced the people about the merits of the political struggle he waged, he did not sufficiently develop his idea to make it clear to them the linkages his ideas could have with the creation of a new political and economic order. It is for this reason that while some of his followers turned to European socialism for inspiration, the others to the Sarvodaya philosophy of communitarian life based on nonviolence. However, it was his great achievement that he highlighted the problems of the twentieth century by insisting that politics, industry and technology should be subordinated to the ideals of life. It is for this reason that while some of us can disagree with Gandhi, none can ignore him.