



GANDHIAN PERSPECTIVE OF DEMOCRACY AND ITS RELEVANCE IN CONTEMPORARY WORLD

Dr. Ashutosh Pandey

Associate Professor, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Dr Shakuntala Misra National Rehabilitation University, Lucknow (UP), India.

“My notion of Democracy is that under it the weakest should have the same opportunity as the strongest. That can never happen except through non-violence. No country in the world today shows any but the patronizing regard for the weak.”

-Harijan: May 18, 1940

This study is very significant and interesting, as Gandhi does not make any distinction between morality and politics and ethics and economics. He does not want only to raise the standard of democracy but the quality of democracy and the quality of living in such a system. In the light of these issues, Gandhian alternatives have been studied, discussed, examined and analyzed keeping in view the contemporary problems in Indian democracy.

Introduction

In the political sphere, democracy is the idea of participation by the whole community in the political process. It bases political authority on the will of individuals who by a process of cooperation make decisions that are binding on all. Democracy is not only a form of political system; it is also a way of life. 1 Democracy is in essence the art and science of mobilizing the entire physical, economic and spiritual resources of all the various sections of the people in the services of the common good of all. 2 The highest form of freedom carries with it the greatest measure of discipline and humility. Freedom that comes from discipline and humility cannot be denied; unbridled licence is a sign of vulgarity injurious alike to self and one's neighbours. 3 A born democrat is a born disciplinarian. Democracy comes naturally to him who is habituated normally to yield willing obedience to all the laws – human or divine. Let those who are ambitious to serve democracy qualify themselves by satisfying first this acid test of democracy. Moreover, a democrat must be utterly selfless. He must think and dream not in terms of self or party but only of democracy. 4 In true democracy every man and woman is taught to think for him or herself. 5 In democracy, the individual will is governed and limited by the social will which is the state, which is governed by and for people. If every individual takes the law into his own hands, there is no state; it becomes anarchy, i.e. absence of social law or order. It is destruction of liberty. 6 The truest test of democracy is in the ability of anyone to act, as he likes, so long as he does not injure the life or property of anyone else. It is impossible to control public morals by hooliganism. Public opinion can keep a society pure and healthy. 7

Gandhian Perspective of Democracy

Gandhiji opines: “whether we are one or many, we must refuse to purchase freedom at the cost of our self-respect or our cherished convictions. I have known even little children becoming unbending when an attempt has been made to cross their declared purpose, be it ever too flimsy in the estimation of their parents”. 8 To safeguard democracy the people must have a keen sense of independence, self-respect and their oneness, and should insist on choosing as their representatives only such persons as are good and true. 9 The voice of the people may be said to be God's voice, the voice of the Panchayat. 10 People are the roots, the state is the fruit. If the roots are sweet, the fruit are bound to be sweet. 11 Gandhi elucidates: An evolution of democracy is not possible if we are prepared to hear the other side. We shut the doors of reasons when we refuse to listen to our opponents, or having listened, make fun of them. If intolerance becomes a habit we run the risk of missing the truth. Whilst, with the limits that nature has put upon our understanding, we must act fearlessly according to the light vouchsafed to us, we must always keep an open mind and be ever ready to find that what we believed to be truth was, after all, untruth. This openness of mind strengthens the truth in us and removes the dross from it, if there is any. 12.

In matters of conscience the law of majority has no place. 13 Gandhiji clarifies that “the right of free opinion and free action as we do, we must extend the same to others. The rule of majority, when it becomes coercive, is as intolerable as that of a bureaucratic minority. We must patiently try to bring round the minority to our view by gentle persuasion and argument.” 14 All society is held together by non-violence, even as the earth is held in her position by gravitation. But when the law of gravitation was discovered the discovery yielded results of which our accentors had no knowledge. Even so when society is deliberately constructed in accordance with the law of non-violence, its structure will be different in material particulars from it is today. 15 True democracy or the Swaraj of the masses can never come through untruthful and violent means, for the simple reason that the natural corollary to their use would be to remove all opposition through the suppression or extermination of the antagonists. That does not make for individual freedom. Individual freedom can have the fullest play only under a regime of unadulterated Ahimsa. 16 A Government cannot succeed in becoming entirely non-violent, because it represents all the people. 17.



The true source of rights is duty. Gandhiji feels that if we all discharge our duties, rights will not be far to seek. If we leave our duties unperformed we run after rights and they escape us like a will-o-the-wisp. The more we pursue them, the farther they fly. The same teaching has been embodied by Krishna in the immortal words: 'action alone is thin. Leave thou the fruit severely alone.' Action is duty; fruit is the right.¹⁸ Every man has an equal right to the necessities of life even as birds and beasts have. And since every right carries with it a corresponding duty and the corresponding remedy for resisting any attack upon it, it is merely a matter of finding out the corresponding duties and remedies to vindicate the elementary fundamental equality.

I hold the opinion firmly that civil disobedience is the purest type of constitutional agitation. Of course, it becomes degrading and despicable, if its civil, i.e. non-violent character, is a mere camouflage.¹⁹ Disobedience to be civil must be sincere, respectful, restrained, never defiant, must be based upon some well-understood principle, must not be capricious and above all, must have no ill-will or hatred behind it.²⁰ This fearlessly and firmly, that every worthy object can be achieved by the use of Satyagraha. It is the highest and infallible means, the greatest force. Socialism will not be reached by any other means. Satyagraha can rid society of all evils, political, economic and moral.²¹ Gandhiji persuades everybody that civil disobedience is the inherent right of a citizen.²² Since Satyagraha is one of the most powerful methods of direct action, a Satyagraha exhausts all other means before he resorts to Satyagraha. He will therefore constantly and continually approach the constituted authority, he will appeal to public opinion, educate public opinion, state his case calmly and coolly before everybody, who wishes to listen to him, and only after he has exhausted all these avenues will he resort to Satyagraha. But when he has found the impelling call of the inner voice within him and launches out on Satyagraha he has burnt his boats and there is no receding.²³ The strikes are an inherent right of the working-men for the purpose of securing justice, but they must be considered a crime immediately the capitalists accept the principle of arbitration.²⁴

Independence must be beginning at the bottom. Thus, 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 whole 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 who is the unit. This does not exclude dependence on and willing help from neighbors' or from the world. It will be free and voluntary play of mutual forces. Such a society is necessarily highly cultured in which every man and 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. 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 village, the latter ready to perish for the circle of villages, till at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals, never aggressive in their arrogance but ever humble, sharing the majesty of the oceanic circle of which they are integral units.²⁵ Society based on non-violence can only consist of groups settled in villages in which voluntary co-operation is the condition of dignified and peaceful existence.²⁶

Gandhi's views undoubtedly have largely influenced the political system of India and its Constitution, i.e. Preamble, the Fundamental Rights, and Directive Principles of the State Policy, Organization of Village Panchayats, etc. The contemporary India scenario is marked by an ever widening gulf between politics and morality. Free India could not live up to the ideals of Gandhiji. Politics without principles has completely disfigured the life in this country today. This is not only true of India but also applies with equal force to many of the developing nations of today. The atmosphere in these states has been excessively polluted by political pressures. In the name of democratic process, the mass base of power, the policy making, decision making and planning have all succumbed to the inescapable influence of political power. There is violence in our hearts and the lust of power and selfishness have corrupted our social and political life completely.²⁷ Gandhiji's fundamental moral values, such as Truth, Justice, Brotherhood and non-violence have been recognized as valid in man's relation in the political field and more especially in the mutual dealings of organized groups and nations.²⁸ India's future is safe, if it is wedded to the principles of rationality, morality and good of mankind for which Gandhiji fought tooth and nail. In reality, his views on democratic state were ultimately related to the creation of a welfare society in which political power is used for the common good and where national life recognizes the force of moral power from Village to State and from Panchayat to Parliament.²⁹

Conclusion

Gandhi's approach to various problems was very scientific, rational and practical; it was not dogmatic and utopian as is often misconstrued by the so-called intellectuals in India and abroad. Gandhiji did adhere to certain eternal truths firmly and without compromise. For example, he was of the definite view that noble objectives could be achieved only through pure and truthful means. He was 'a practical idealist' and endeavored to find realistic solutions of different problems facing the country in the light of his rich and varied experience. I have, therefore; no doubt that Gandhian thought is basically sound and



relevant to our times.³⁰ Gandhiji belongs to the future, and not the past. He is not dead; his message is eternal and shall live as long as the sun shines in the vast open skies.³¹ Gandhiji to me appears to be more relevant, in the midst of the large scale corruption and maddening race for more and more wealth that has enveloped his land. There is still a ray of hope if the spirit of Gandhian thought is followed in all sincerity. Democracy in India Gandhi believed that a democracy, which served the welfare of all, would be marked by Minimum State intervention in social life. He criticized parliamentary democracy. However this system was certainly an advance over monarchy and oligarchy. He remarked, "I do not believe in any government but parliamentary government is better than capricious rule."³² So, he accepted parliamentary Swaraj as an immediate goal and a point in the struggle for Swaraj. In 1924, he said, "Parliament is indeed barren. I do not imagine that its nature can change India I live, however, in the hope that our Parliament will only remain barren and not give birth to wicked son. I cannot abandon practical considerations. The ideal is one only, namely Ramrajya... I am suggesting many ways to ensure that the voice of parliament is really the voice of the people, and not the hired voters. With the end in view I am searching for a device which will enable us to listen to the voice of the entire people. All systems are bound to be defective. We are looking for a system, which will yield maximum benefit of India."³³ Although in the Hind- Swaraj, Gandhi was bitterly hostile to the patterns of functioning of the British Parliament, he prescribed for India a parliamentary government based on Universal Suffrage. His conception of Swaraj inculcated a government based on the consent of the people. This consent of the people was to be ascertained by the largest number of adult population. He wrote: "By Swaraj, I mean the government of India by the consent of the people as ascertained by the vote of the largest number of the adult population, male or female, native born or domiciled who have contributed by manual labour to the service of the state and who have taken the trouble of having their names registered as voters."³⁴ He felt that for the success of a democratic government it was essential that the representatives should be given only general instructions and should not be subjected to detailed dependence on the electorate. It would not be possible for the legislature to operate if the representatives were compelled to consult the constituencies on all issues. It can be said that he upheld the 'mandate' and not the 'delegate' theory for the representative. Gandhi wanted India to evolve "True Democracy" and laid down six conditions for its realization in India: 1. Satyagraha expressed through Charkha; 2. Growth of Village Industries; 3. Primary education through Handicrafts; 4. Removal of Untouchability; 5. Communal Harmony; and 6. Non- violent Organization of Labour.

The nation is certainly at the threshold of the emerging as a global power but if Gandhian spirit is shift in mind, the nation will be prosperous and we will be able to, as Gandhiji's phrase, 'wipe out tears from every face' of the teeming millions. Thus Gandhi's concept of democracy in theory and practice today is as relevant as these were when he enunciated these principles and practiced them.

Gandhiji contribution to democratic theory is not that he offers specific institutional alternatives to representative democracy and pluralism, although he does that. Rather, his importance comes from offering alternative ways of thinking about politics in general and democracy in particular.

Gandhi attempted to reintroduce political culture and political psychology as vital elements in the theory and practice of democracy. A restructured society, where no one saw responsibilities and everyone attempted to pursue his own interest, would be no great improvement for Gandhi. Those who had been at the bottom would have additional resources to enter the political conflicts of the day. The formula of politics would not change, but new winners and losers would appear. Accordingly, Gandhi emphasized structuring a community of common purpose and individual responsibility to the community.

As western democracies move towards the prospect of slower growth and increasing scarcities, the model of interest group politics may lead to phenomenal cleavages. To meet these new challenges, the need for restraint, responsibility, and community becomes more important than in easier, carefree times, and Gandhiji theory of democracy may help to understand and meet these challenges.

Gandhi himself believed that Satyagraha was not only an effective and heroic mode of emancipation of the people of a weak country, but also.....a beacon light.....for Europe with all its discipline, science and organization. If Europe but realizes that, heroic as it undoubtedly is for a handful of people to offer armed resistance in the face of superior numbers, it is for more heroic to stand up against overwhelming numbers without any arms at all, it would save itself and blaze a trail for the world.³⁵

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