



BEYOND LIBERAL DEMOCRACY: RE-EXAMINED GANDHIAN MODEL OF DEMOCRACY AND ITS CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

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Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi's view of democracy was founded on his own definition of democracy, which differed significantly from the western classical definition. He believed in democracy as he knew it, as seen by his intrinsic love of equality, steadfast support for personal liberty, and unyielding call for the establishment of a just order via the brotherhood of mankind that recognized no limits of gender, language, religion, or culture. It is true that Gandhi was not a system architect in the same manner that Plato and Aristotle were. Although they don't seem to have been developed systematically in the sense that he took ideas to a logical conclusion, Gandhi's views on democracy may be found in his speeches and writings. Gandhi's perspectives on democracy were developed as a result of inquiries from friends and well-wishers, also based on his own research, observations of life events, and experiments. Gandhi proposed a non-liberal democratic model based on nonviolence, swaraj, and spiritually empowered participatory democracy. Gandhi remains one of the most influential and current voices on democracy even seven decades after his death. In this paper Gandhian idea of democracy is examined as an alternative to the Western concept of democracy. The article also discussed its contemporary significance, particularly for Indian democracy.

Keywords: *Gandhi; Democracy; Swaraj; Non-violence; Decentralization.*

Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi's vision of democracy is totally encompassed by non-violence. In the framework of Indian democracy, his vision is a stateless democracy in which a federation of satyagrahi village communities functions on the basis of voluntary collaboration and dignified and peaceful coexistence. There is a considerable level of centralization and inequality in today's democracy. Swaraj, according to Gandhi's vision of self-rule, is true democracy, in which people's power is concentrated in individuals, and each individual recognizes that he or she is the true master of one's own destiny. These challenges are still pertinent to the concept of a free India. Gandhi felt that a democracy that served the common good would have minimal government intrusion in social life. He was critical of the parliamentary system of government. This system, however, was unquestionably superior to monarchy and oligarchy. 'I don't believe any government is better than capricious rule,' he said. As a result, he accepted parliamentary Swaraj as an immediate goal and focal point in the Swaraj struggle. He argued that in a democracy, self-determination must start from the bottom. It means that people at the grass-roots level must be able to make their own policies and implement them without the need for stringent and strict oversight from above. As a result, he believes that every village may become a republic with the establishment of a panchayat with appropriate authority and powers.

Both western civilization and western democracies were frowned upon by Mahatma Gandhi. He questioned the usefulness of modern Western civilization. Modern western civilization's fashionable, assertive, and dissolute elements repulsed him. Modern civilization, he claimed, was synonymous with gloom and disease. He harshly criticized Western democratic politics for being riddled with three types of contradictions. They believed in the unrestricted expansion of capitalism, which resulted in the exploitation of societies oppressed. Some of them even resorted to authoritarian or fascist methods. He



stated unequivocally that Great Britain did not conquer India by democratic means. He also denounced the racialism practiced in South Africa and the southern United States. Gandhi was firm in his belief that nonviolence might lead to perfect democracy. It was impossible to combine democracy and violence.

Gandhian Model of Democracy: Basic Assumptions

Gandhi developed his model of democracy on two levels, starting at the grass roots. On one level, he imagined an ideal polity in which there would be no state or government to regulate individual rights. He called this type of government Village Swaraj or Ram Rajya. The other level of polity was conceived at the sub-ideal level, which would have a government that would allow individuals to enjoy the greatest amount of freedom possible. There were two types of polity that evolved from one to the other, involving a shift from a lower to a higher level of democracy.

When one examines Gandhi's philosophy, it becomes clear that he emphasizes the essence and spirit of democracy. Gandhi was very dissatisfied with the contemporary state, believing that "democracy must in essence entail the art and science of mobilizing the full physical, economic, and spiritual resources of all the varied sections of the people in the service of the common benefit of all (Kumar, 2014, p. 58)". It was cut off from society, centralized, bureaucratic, preoccupied with uniformity, and infused with a violent attitude. He believed that because all existing forms of government assumed the modern state and represented different ways of organizing it, they were fundamentally incapable of addressing its structural flaws (Kumar, 2014, p.58-59).

Non-violence

In his image, democracy is one in which there is no provision for punishment and in which even an entity such as the 'State' is outmoded. Because, according to Mahatma Gandhi, "the state is symbolical of centralized and organized aggression." Because nonviolence is linked to the human soul, man can be nonviolent, whereas the state, in contrast, is a soulless machine. It is difficult to eliminate violence under this agreement. Its whole survival is predicated on violence. Nonviolence should be accepted as an invariable aspect of our lives, according to Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy, and modern polities must work on the basis of this dictum.

Gandhi's goal is a stateless democracy in which a federation of satyagrahi village communities works together on the basis of voluntary collaboration and dignified and peaceful coexistence. The non-existence of Mahatma Gandhi's ideal state is difficult to achieve immediately or in the near future. Even so, it is incumbent on people who live in state organizations to cultivate the nonviolence that is inherent in their nature and progressively increase it to an appropriate level. In addition, the democratic system should endeavor to promote nonviolence at the individual, community, social, and national levels. The climate of fear that we are witnessing, as well as the lowering of life's values and the emergence of new challenges, cannot be removed without further development.

Democratic Decentralization

According to Gandhi, decentralization of political power is a prerequisite for true democracy's development. According to him, a decentralized democracy based on nonviolence must be made up of groups living in tiny communities or villages where voluntary cooperation is the only way to live in dignity and peace. It is, in his opinion, the only method to achieve the value of democracy at the grassroots level since it allows people to participate in making and enacting decisions without being subjected to the rigorous and strict control of any higher authority. Furthermore, it is the sole option for reducing the government's involvement in people's daily lives. Gandhi was never a believer in



disinterested decentralization or half-way house democracy. He does not support decentralization solely for economic and political reasons. Decentralization, according to Gandhi, embodies and promotes the cultural or spiritual ideal of simple living and elevated thought. He isn't only interested in enhancing the level of living; he is interested in raising the standard of life. The Gandhian approach to decentralization is founded on the ideals of simple life and elevated thinking. Gandhi is opposed to all forms of power concentration, claiming that centralization is a threat to democracy.

Voters' Roles and Responsibilities

Voters would play an important role in Gandhian democracy. Their members are chosen on a first-come, first-served basis. Manual labour qualification will be required of voters. Gandhiji always highlighted their importance. Decentralized political system would be the result of village democracy. Electors will value candidates' character more than their positions. A man of character will demonstrate that he is deserving of any position he is given. Gandhiji was a staunch believer that a man without character could not perform national service. If voters cannot find a candidate worthy of their vote, they do not need to record their votes; abstaining in such a scenario is the same as voting.

Village Republics in Swaraj

For Gandhi, the only ethically acceptable alternative to the contemporary state was a Swaraj-based society, or 'true democracy,' as he put it. In addition to formalizing and institutionalizing lokshakti, or the authority of the people, it was shasanmukta, or (liberation from dominance and compulsion). People here were and recognized that they were the exclusive source of political power and that they were in charge of their own affairs. Swaraj entailed not only government responsibility on a regular basis, but also the everyday exercise of public power, not merely exercising one's political and civil rights, but the constant confirmation of one's authority over one's fate. Gandhi, on the other hand, was a harsh opponent of parliamentary democracy, describing the British Parliament as a "sterile woman and a prostitute" in his epic book 'Hind Swaraj', even if he believed that "good administration is no alternative for self-government (Kumar, 2014, p. 59)."

According to Gandhi, the core of such Swaraj for freedom must begin at the bottom, with a self-contained and self-sufficient village. A Panchayat, which will be a living political force and entity, will govern the village republic. The 'ever-widening circle of village republics' will bring panchayats together in a free and consensual partnership. Instead of an 'apex maintained by the bottom,' it will be an oceanic circle, which is constantly willing to sacrifice themselves for the village, the latter for the circle of villages, and so on, 'sharing the grandeur of the oceanic circle of which they are components.' Many people did not believe in decentralization of power with a village as the smallest unit, as Gandhiji recognized. He was well aware that many people wanted India to be the strong centre around which the entire edifice would be built. As a result, he hoped that the villagers grow into their own personalities and get the ability to express themselves as they should.

Constructive Programme

During the freedom movement, Mahatma Gandhi saw not just constructive labour as critical as Satyagraha, but also a constructive programme of socio-economic upliftment of the poor and weaker sections as an essential aspect of Swaraj. 'If we aim to reach Swaraj via truth and nonviolence, the only way is to gradually but steadily build up from the bottom upwards by constructive effort,' he wrote.



Contemporary Relevance

Thus, it is abundantly clear that the Gandhian concept of democracy is the only hope for the future, where it must be practised at the grass-roots level, party systems must be built on accepted principles rather than partisan lines, defection must be eliminated, and recalcitrant representatives must be recalled. The current democratic method of government must be free of flaws and shortcomings. People's power must be accepted in order for democracy to be secure; otherwise, if democracy is exploited or mistreated, people's futures are jeopardized.

Despite its potential for abuse, Mahatma Gandhi recognized the relevance and necessity of democracy for India. That is why he emphasized its continuous growth and maturation. He wished that his Ramarajya dream would become a reality through this. In the Ramarajya of his vision, everyone, strong or weak, has an equal chance to rise, and his safety and honour are guaranteed. In a nutshell, Gandhi's Ramarajya is a sort of advanced democracy. Now the question is whether Gandhi's dream of Ramarajya, or an advanced version of democracy, can be realized. If sure, when do you think you'll be able to do it? Mahatma Gandhi himself was unsure in this regard. He was well aware that humans, whether deliberately or unknowingly, make mistakes. He was also aware that he would not be able to get rid of them fully and soon. Similarly, a man-made organization cannot be completely free of evils immediately.

As a result, Mahatma Gandhi emphasized discipline, equal regard for the law by all, and the primacy of social will over individual will in a democracy, among other things. He believed that indiscipline, disobedience of the law, and giving individual choice precedence over collective will are among the fundamental sources of problems in a democracy. As a result, it is vital to reduce them in order to make democracy more disciplined and enlightened.

In addition, Mahatma Gandhi emphasized the need of a healthy public opinion and the need for responsible representation. The reason for this is that if public opinion in a democracy is not healthy and mature, instead of strengthening it, it might be turned into a mobocracy. This can be seen in many countries around the world, including India, on many occasions and at many levels.

Similarly, if representatives in a democracy are not accountable, they damage the system rather than strengthening it. As a result, Mahatma Gandhi urged people to keep the danger of democratic misuse to a bare minimum from time to time. He underlined the importance of making the democratic system of government robust, healthy, disciplined, and accountable once more. Mahatma Gandhi's call to prevent democracy from devolving into a mobocracy by making it more people-friendly and eventually transforming it into a swaraj is one worth considering.

Despite the vast number of individuals who came together, monocracy will never be a democratic reflection. A mobocracy cannot transmit the will of the people due to a lack of discipline and control over the multitude. As a result, a mobocracy can be more dangerous than a dictatorship. As a result, Mahatma Gandhi stated, "They (mobs) have no mind, no premeditation, they act in a fury."

How can a democracy prevent becoming corrupted by mobocracy? How can it be turned into a true people's government? How is it possible for it to become a swaraj? Mahatma Gandhi believed that it could be achieved by a continuous process of democratic change, rather than by avoiding it, and that this could be done in accordance with the demands of the time and the circumstances. Simultaneously, he correctly urged people to carry out their responsibilities and preserve discipline in order for



democracy to flourish. In this process, he also mentioned people's awareness, which he defined as people's understanding of their duties, rights, and responsibilities to the nation. On the one side, he established the responsibility of people's representatives, and on the other, he established the responsibility of the government. He was opposed to the idea of a democracy in which a small group of representatives, regardless of whether they were chosen for a set period of time by the people, sat in the centre to work for it. The true goal of democracy will never be realized in this manner; the system will never become self-governing. 'Democracy cannot be worked by twenty guys sitting in the centre,' said Mahatma Gandhi himself, because it must be built from the ground up by individuals (consciously) from every village'.

He felt that a democracy that served the common good would have minimal government participation in social life. He accepted swaraj from the parliament. 'Parliament is really barren,' he observed in 1924. I don't believe that nature has the power to change India, but I live in the hope that our Parliament will remain barren and not bear a bad son. Practical factors are something I can't ignore. There is just one ideal and that is Ramrajya... I propose a number of measures to ensure that the voice of Parliament is truly that of the people, rather than that of bought voters. With the aim in mind, I'm looking for a gadget that will allow us to listen to the entire population's voice. There are sure to be flaws in any system. We're searching for a system that will benefit India the most.'

Although Gandhi was vehemently opposed to the British Parliament's operation in the Hind - swaraj, he prescribed for India a parliamentary system based on universal suffrage. His swaraj concept placed a strong emphasis on a government built on the consent of the governed. The majority of the population's adults were supposed to vouch for the people's agreement.

As Gandhi said, "By swaraj, I mean the government of India by the consent of the people, as determined by the vote of the largest number of adult population, male or female, native born or domiciled, who have contributed to the state by manual labour and who have taken the trouble of having their names registered as voters (Kumar, 2014, p.60)".

He believed that for a democratic government to succeed, representatives should only be given broad instructions and should not be forced to detailed reliance on the electorate. If MPs were forced to consult their constituents on every topic, the legislature would be unable to function. He supported the 'Mandate' rather than the 'Delegate' theory for the representative.

Gandhi set six requirements for the emergence of 'True Democracy' in India, including: (i) Satyagraha manifested via Charkha; (ii) Untouchability; (iii) Growth of Village Industries; (iv) Non-violent organization of Labor; (v) Primary education through Handicrafts; and (vi) Communal Harmony. Gandhi also cautioned Indians against following the Western model. He stated that one nation that suited one condition was not necessarily good enough for another that suited another condition differently. As a result, he proposed developing a decentralized people's democracy based on nonviolent principles at the grassroots level.

'The objective to be sought is human happiness united with full mental and moral progress,' Gandhi said. Moral is a synonym for spiritual in my opinion. Decentralization will be used to attain this goal. Centralization as a system is incompatible with a nonviolent social structure.' His anti-centralization stance was founded on a fundamental principle. 'Centralization cannot be defended without significant force,' he claimed. According to him, the concentration of power in a small number of people's hands as a result of centralization deprives the public of its absolute capacity to choose public policy.



Furthermore, in an overly-centralized state, man loses his human dignity and becomes a cog in the huge and impersonal governmental machinery. Man loses his individuality. That is why he advocated for complete decentralization of political and economic authority. He wanted to give politics a new direction, so he went back to the beginning. Gandhi claimed that India could not exist without its villages. For him, the thought of a prosperous India with an undeveloped village is absurd. As a result, he advocated for a richer village life. He advocated for villages to become self-sufficient and self-reliant.

Gandhi advocated for the development of communities and the success of democracy, believing that democracy should begin at the grassroots level. He felt that for power to be effective and legitimate in the eyes of the people, he thought that it could only be done in small communities where it was truly in the hands of the people. 'A society founded on non-violence can only be made up of communities living in villages where voluntary collaboration is the only way to live in dignity and peace.' He portrayed the state as the people's servant, with the responsibility of carrying out the people's wishes. He advocated for the protection of rural people from all forms of exploitation. Village exploitation is organized brutality in and of itself. We must treat villages with respect if we want swaraj to be founded on nonviolence. He cried out for bottom-up democracy, Panchayati Raj, or rural swaraj as a result. 'True democracy cannot be run by twenty men sitting in the middle,' he claims. Every village's residents must work on it from the ground up.

An Assessment

M.K. Gandhi argued that in a democracy, self-determination must start from the bottom. It means that people at the grass-roots level must be able to make their own policies and implement them without the need for stringent and strict oversight from above. As a result, he believes that every village may become a republic with the establishment of a panchayat with appropriate authority and powers. This required that every town be self-sufficient and able to manage its own affairs, even defending itself against the whole group. At the end of the day, the individual will be the unit. He underlined that this did not rule out reliance on and willing assistance and cooperation from neighbours or the rest of the globe. It would be a completely voluntary and unrestricted exchange of forces. As a result, he desired India to develop a decentralized power structure based on the effective reconstruction of self-sufficient and self-reliant villages. The village was to be organized on the principles of constructive social and economic activities, sacrifice, and the avoidance of illegitimate self-interest.

Similar to this, he had said that Independent India's political structure would not resemble a pyramid with the base supporting the top. The toiling labourer and the wealthy capitalist have to be treated equally in the Panchayat Raj. There was to be a spirit of mutual freedom and harmonic cooperation in the solidarist spirit. The communal conflicts that were spreading from the cities to the countryside had to be addressed. The self-sustaining community was expected to run its own affairs. For defence, they were not to rely on the assistance of a central army. They should ethically evolve to the point where they are capable of surviving a self-defense attempt.

Gandhi fantasized about a village swaraj, in which each village would have its own government in the form of a panchayat, which would be autonomous in all aspects of governance. 'The village will be governed by a panchayat of five adults, male and female, who will be elected annually by the adult villagers who meet the necessary standards.' These will have all of the necessary authority and jurisdiction. This panchayat will act as the legislative, judiciary, and executive throughout its tenure because there won't be a traditional system of punishment. Every village republic's panchayat was, in



essence, a crucial institution for the decentralization of judicial, executive, and legislative authority. Every village was meant to stand for the principles of a real democracy, which shared authority and power among a variety of authorities and emphasized self-governance and self-reliance. The individual would have complete control over his or her future and could shape it whichever he or she desired. In such a village republic, the spirit of non-violence would saturate his thoughts and acts in an atmosphere of all productive actions. Gandhi thought that in such a setting, 'Perfect democracy' based on individual liberty could be achieved. Each person is the architect of his or her own government. He and his government are governed by the law of non-violence. Every village's law government expects him to die in the protection of his and his village's honour.

Gandhi believed that the only way to free the nation from its centuries of torment and frustration was to make India's villages self-sufficient and self-reliant through the decentralized structure of village republics. The villagers could only build their intellectual power and gain the social-economic knowledge required to imagine a non-violent society in the future if they did so alone. Decentralization, according to Gandhi, was a technique for reforming people's psyche in order to construct a more ideal society. Gandhi's great dedication to the concept of decentralization reveals the radical and fundamental nature of his democratic thought, as he wanted to start reforming from the ground up.

Conclusion

Gandhi's emphasis on the importance of a vigilant democracy is undeniably important. We should see no reason for a democratic institution to become unhealthy if its stewards are disciplined and accountable. If citizens become more aware, democracy will undoubtedly progress toward actual self-rule. A disciplined, accountable, and conscious democracy has the potential to become a true people's government. Such a law might be transformed into a Swarajya, paving the path for Mahatma Gandhi's Ramarajya. As a result, Gandhi's ideas on democracy must not be taken lightly. They must be thoroughly examined. It is necessary to hold an open discussion on their vitality and relevance in the current context. If they appear to be relevant in light of current events, they should be studied and embraced. Mahatma Gandhi's Ahimsa-based principles are now being studied by the entire world. Institutions of higher learning, in particular, are scrutinizing his ideas on democracy. In this context, the relevance, significance, and applicability of his ideas for India can be fully appreciated.

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