
UNIT 3 GANDHI'S VIEWS ON DEMOCRACY (GRAM SWARAJ)

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3.1 INTRODUCTION

In the modern Indian political discourse, the sharp contrast between the urbanised west and the poverty stricken villages of India had been a constant reminder that both western imperialism and its exploitative nature has kept multitudes of Indian people living in the Indian villages in total servitude and destitution. The Indian situation is comparable to the miserable conditions of the peasantry under the Czarist regime and with Gandhi's intimate knowledge of Tolstoy's concerns and writings he was well acquainted with the pathetic conditions of the peasantry of Czarist Russia. In the early twentieth century, in the background of the rise of Japan and its psychological impact on a section of the Indian intelligentsia and its nationalist leaders, Gandhi, in the *Hind Swaraj* (1909) categorically rules out the applicability of that model in the Indian condition.

Famine was a regular feature during the British colonial rule and in this situation the utmost necessity of rural reconstruction became an important component of the nationalist discourse in the wake of the *swadeshi* movement in Bengal at the time of the Partition of Bengal. Rabindranath Tagore wrote an important essay entitled *Swadeshi Samaj* (1904) in which there was an appeal for self-help in reconstructing the villages and solve the acute water shortage from which it suffers perennially. At this time there were lot of projections of parallel nationalist self-supportive, educational, industrial and cooperative enterprises to alleviate the miseries of the rural poor. However, none of these attempts had a comprehensive plan of an alternative development strategy for rural reconstruction and to reduce the gulf between the cities and the villages. Gandhi provided a philosophy of a village centred life which he described as the *gram swaraj*.

Aims and Objectives

After reading this unit, you will be able to understand:

- Gandhi's concept of Gram Swaraj
- Gandhi's critique of industrialisation
- Gandhi's criticism of Machinery

3.2 CITY AND VILLAGE

Within the larger framework of Gandhi's concern for majority alleviation he put the idea of the *gram swaraj* at the very centre of his social, political and economic philosophy. Since the overwhelming majority of Indians live in villages, Gandhi's primary concern is to concentrate on this important segment and provide a blueprint by which the face of rural India would drastically change for the better. The cities, remarks Gandhi, do not represent India. They are alien to it. He considers the cities as artificial, facilitating the exploitation by the imperialist powers; of sharing the plunder of the villages with the imperialist powers. "I regard the growth of cities as an evil thing. Unfortunate for mankind and the world, unfortunate for England and unfortunate for India. The British have exploited India through its cities. The latter have exploited the villages. The blood of the villages is the cement with which the edifice of the cities is built" (cited in Ganguli, 1973, pp.184-85)

Writing in 1921, he points out that the cities are "brokers and commission agents for the big houses of Europe, America and Japan. The cities have cooperated with the latter in the bleeding process that has gone on for 200 years" (cited in Ganguli, Ibid, p.184). He further laments that

Little do town-dwellers know how the semi-starved masses of India are slowly sinking to lifelessness. Little do they know that their miserable comfort represents the brokerage they get for the work they do for the foreign exploiter, that the profits and the brokerage are sucked from the masses. Little do they realise that the government established by law in British India is carried on for this exploitation of the masses.... I have no doubt whatsoever that both England and town-dwellers in India will have to answer, if there is a God above for this crime against humanity which is perhaps unequalled in history (cited in Ganguli, ibid, pp.184-85).

Gandhi provides an alternative of total rural reconstruction and rebuilding in the process of which the entire Indian situation would change. He identifies the survival of the Indian nation with that of the meaningful survival of the villages reviving the traditional ways and means of the rural life which have degenerated because of the superstitious beliefs and neglect of this aspect by western imperialism. He is conscious of the enormous gap that exists between the villages and the cities in education, culture, medicine, recreation and employment opportunities. The gulf increases and Gandhi wants to stop this process and allow the village to grow and prosper. Even though he is very critical of the cities, he never wants to eliminate them. He wants to reform them and place them in a natural setting. Furthermore, though Gandhi does not provide for concrete picture of the city's structure, he makes three general suggestions: (1) "the blood that is inflating the arteries of the cities run once again the blood vessels of the villages". (2) The cities did not need to send its people back to the village, rather "they should re-adjust their lives so as to cease to sponge upon the poor village folk and make to the latter what reparation is possible, even at this late hour, by helping to resuscitate their ruined economy" and (iii) "in my picture of the rural economy the cities would take their natural place and do not appear as unnatural, congested sports or boils on the body politics, as they are today" (cited in Ganguli, Ibid, pp.184-75).

Understanding the importance of the dynamics of power, Gandhi begins his argument pleading for the empowerment of the small village communities which would derive sustenance with cottage industries that would provide the economic bases of the rural society. Emphasising the darker side of industrialisation which devastates the rural life and uproots thousands of people from their natural habitat, the cottage industries would provide the economic basis

of a small community which is in a position to manage and to enhance the quality of life and happiness as Gandhi is convinced that the fulfilment and happiness of people is manifested when they live in small communities rather than in larger urbanised rootless communities.

Gandhi wants the development of a new partnership between the villages and the cities, a vision that Marx and Engels too had. He does not want prosperity in the cities at the expense of the village, where the majority of the Indian population live. The villages are as important as the cities, if not more. His views on industrialisation and modern technology might help us to understand his extraordinary emphasis on the need for regenerating village life.

3.3 GRAM SWARAJ

Gandhi is a virulent critic of all models of western industrialisation as though they produce material goods but are alien to our moral values. The village panchayat system and the village republic could create both a participatory model of democracy and would also allow an escape route to avoid the perils of western industrialisation. *Gram Swaraj* will be the essential framework of this alternative model with the promotion of self-sufficiency in providing the material conditions essential for fulfilling the needs of the individual and enhance the elements of self-respect and pride in oneself. Gandhi is conscious that the present day conditions of the villages are far from the ideal that he desires and it is because of this consciousness that he argues for a reformed rural setting where truth and non-violence would co-exist in a situation of harmony and promotion and practice of rural virtues of cooperation and performance of duties. His close associate, J. C. Kumarappa coins the term 'villagism', which Gandhi gladly accepts as an essential framework of realising rural *swaraj*. Gandhi desires a complete economic revival of India with *satya* and *ahimsa* as its foundation and the credit for preparing a blueprint along these lines goes to Kumarappa.

The framework for the village *swaraj* is provided in two books of Kumarappa: *Why the village movement: A plea for village centred economic order* and *Capitalism, socialism and villagism*. The first book is considered as the first normative statement of Gandhian economics and could be regarded as the manifesto of Gandhi's economic vision. Kumarappa is of the view that as economic autonomy for the individual is essential for freedom and that as majority of Indians live in rural areas, the village economy has to be the basis of India's social well-being. In the rapid process of industrialisation and urbanisation it is the countryside that suffers the most. He observes that "there can be no industrialisation without predation" and that agriculture was and is the greatest among all the occupations. Writing about the impact of industry and agriculture on the natural world, Kumarappa states:

In case of agricultural civilisation, the system ordained by nature is not interfered with to any great extent. If there is a variation at all, it follows a natural mutation. The agriculturalist only aids nature or intensifies in a short time what takes places in nature in a long period.... Under the economic system of the industrial society... we find variations from nature are very violent in that a large supply of goods is produced irrespective of demand, and then the demand is artificially created for goods by means of clever advertisements.

Kumarappa is against use of chemical fertilizers and desires the use of organic manure as a way of 'Economy of Permanence' as against the man-made 'Economy of Transience'. He strongly favours the use of night soil as manure thereby converting human waste into wealth and in overcoming the prejudices of caste. He criticises the British for their poor maintenance

of irrigation tanks and urges the conservation of ground water. He also favours small industry as a means of resource preservation. He argues that we should make Mother Nature our great teacher and never do anything that is contrary to her ways, for if we do that we will be annihilated sooner or later. "Water from the sea rises as vapour and falls on land in refreshing showers and returns back to the sea again ... A nation that forgets or ignores this *fundamental process* in forming its institutions will disintegrate". Kumarappa recognises the decay and regeneration in the 'cycle of life' as a fundamental process in which all creatures cooperate. Violence results if "this cycle is broken at any stage, at any time, consciously or unconsciously". He supports an economy that is close to the natural order as that is deeply moral with well defined rights and ethical obligations on every participant and contributes to the welfare of all. Crucial to Kumarappa's conception of an ideal society is the understanding that the economic freedom holds the key to individual's autonomy and that economic freedom forms the basis for political and social freedom. A non-violent social organisation is predicated on providing complete autonomy for every individual. The key to individual autonomy lies in the nature and purpose of work; if work unleashes the creative energies in the human being it would lead to happiness. He also realised centralisation as the primary road block to individual autonomy and freedom.

Gandhi clarifies that *swaraj* is self-rule and self-restraint grounded in the moral autonomy of the individual. He sees an intimate link between *swaraj* and *swadeshi* or self-reliance. "Swaraj for me means freedom for the meanest of my countrymen. I am not interested in freeing India merely from the English yoke. I am bent upon freeing India from any yoke whatsoever. I have no desire to exchange 'king log' for 'king stork'... there is no freedom for India so long as one man, no matter how highly placed he may be, holds in the hollow of his hands the life, property and honour of millions of human beings. It is an artificial, unnatural and uncivilized institution. The end of it is an essential preliminary of *Swaraj*".

3.4 CRITIQUE OF INDUSTRIALISATION

In the *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi severely criticises modern technology and the ill-effects of modern industrialisation so much that he does not compromise with any of its forms. The basic cause of human misery and the 'sin' of modern civilisation is the advent of technology and industrialisation. This view apparently takes shape during his formative years with his direct contact with the English process of modern industrialisation and his experiences in South Africa. Charles Dickens, Karl Marx, Thomas Hill Green and the Fabian socialists describe the horrors of the English capitalist industrial society. Towards the end of the 19th century, while Gandhi was still in England, factory legislations and enlargement of franchise ameliorated many of the evils of industrialisation. But they only diminished and did not eliminate the major effects of industrialisation. Gandhi could easily grasp the dark side of industrialisation.

In the early 20th century, many thinkers started to emphasise that modern industrial civilisation was not an unmixed blessing. The expressionist movement in philosophy and art were clamouring against the miseries of the emerging industrial giants. Philosophers like Bertrand Russell shared this anxiety. Eliot expressed it best in the following lines:

We are the hollowmen,

We are the hollowmen;

Leaning together,

Headpiece filled with straw, Alas!

This revolt against the industrial revolution is represented in India by Tagore's conception of freedom and Gandhi's denunciation of the West. Gandhi does not deny the immense rise in productivity and the consequent rise in the standard of living in the West. He does, however, deny the claim that industrialisation, in its current form, advanced human civilisation by promoting happiness and well-being among common people. He concedes that, because of industrialisation, in certain spheres like housing, the people have begun to live better as compared to earlier times. These advances are hailed as an advancement of civilisation, promoting 'bodily happiness'. Earlier, people wore skins and used spears as weapons. But, now, they wore a wide range of clothing and used firearms. If people in other parts of the world accepted the modern European practices, "they should have achieved civilisation. Furthermore, technology had enormously enhanced man's productive power and his capacity to accumulate wealth. These are also signs of civilisation; but, there was also another side to the picture now, self destruction" (Gandhi, 1938, pp.35-37).

Gandhi's indignation at the consequences of industrialisation is apparent. With a remarkable affinity to Marx's criticism of Adam Smith, Gandhi rejects the claims of the advancement as the present economic order is based on inequality. Gandhi, like Marx, also points out to the relative fall under the present industrial system. In spite of improved productive capacity, inequality persists and the workers live on subsistence wages. The prescription for eradicating inequality is the abolition of industrial civilisation. He found human salvation in a return to nature. The hidden meaning of the *Hind Swaraj* is the need for the freedom of the working class and the common people. This becomes evident from the Italian example. Gandhi clearly states that Mazzini's Italy is still in slavery, for it does not cater to the needs and aspirations of the ordinary people. Political independence by itself is irrelevant unless there is improvement and elevation in the lives of the ordinary people the poor, the underprivileged and the toiling masses. Dalton states that:

The substance of the view of civilisation advanced in *Hind Swaraj* remained intact throughout Gandhi's life and deeply affected his conception of the nature of the good society. At its worst, this view manifests itself in a negative suspicion of the West and a highly provincial world outlook. At its best, it moulded a theory of the good society suited to the Indian situation; a theory of social order of small communities, each seeking attainment of individual freedom and social equality through mutual cooperation and respect. This was his vision of *Sarvodaya*, the 'Welfare of All': the pattern of an Indian society that had indeed achieved *Swaraj*.

Gandhi's economic point of view, as Gyan Chand points out, like his political and social viewpoints, "was and is an integral part of Gandhi's whole philosophy of life; and it can be fully understood and duly appreciated only if this basic fact is borne in mind". This perspective broadens the whole concept of economic life and includes:

- (1) The primary importance of man in production, distribution and exchange. In other words, the primary purpose of the economy is the well-being, growth and development of man.
- (2) Specially, this principle applies to the use of machinery in the production process. "Machinery for man and not man for machinery has to be the cardinal principle of mechanised production".
- (3) From the preceding point of view, industrialisation involving mass production, centralisation of initiative, power, authority and policy formulation is undesirable and is to be reduced to the barest minimum.

- (4) A logical consequence of this is that decentralisation of production is to be carried to the maximum possible extent.
- (5) "Small communities of producers means economic and social democracy, reduction of inequalities within a very limited range and decentralized initiative".
- (6) These changes have far reaching implications and can only be brought about with radical changes in society.

The radical changes need a social transformation that would be non-violent through mass awakening, widely diffused social awareness and the use of the people's power for fundamental social transformation. This awakening and awareness would be based on a vision of a society based on justice, equality and freedom. The goal of economic equality is what unites Gandhi with the socialists but where they depart is with regard to the means of reaching that goal. For the socialists, the basis of economic equality is the abolition of private property and the social ownership of the means of production. Gandhi desires economic equality but without wanting to abolish private property. He expects the rich to act as trustees of the entire society. Since they would act neither for private gain nor for profit, there would be differences in the amount of wealth, but there would be no differences in services and lifestyles. Private ownership would continue for Gandhi, except in large-scale industries, it would be imbued with public purpose. The development of social spirit and socialist consciousness are the two cardinal principles of Gandhi's concept of trusteeship. The deeper meaning of his concept of trusteeship is akin to the Weberian notion of puritan ethics, which does not decry the increase in production but prohibited conscious consumption. It has a Calvinistic overtone and is beneficial to societies like ours where wide disparities are an eyesore and exist without any effective social sanction and control.

Gandhi acknowledges the existence of social conflict and different conflicting class interests but he believes that such conflicts would be resolved by non-violent mass action. He alludes to the existence of conflict in three sectors: (1) conflict of labour and capital in industry; (2) conflict of tenant and landlord in agriculture and (3) conflict of village and city. He is confident that these conflicts could be resolved through trusteeship and passive resistance with help of non-violence without class war. Gandhi rejects the idea of revolutionary seizure of state power and stresses on the transformation of relationship through peaceful transfer of power. While Marx rejects capitalism but not industrialisation, Gandhi wants to restrict industrialisation.

3.5 CRITIQUE OF MACHINERY

Gandhi is keen to limit and not eradicate machinery. His views on machinery and modern industry are derived from the influence that John Ruskin (1819-1900)¹ had on him. He supports mechanisation, which would help the individual and not encroach upon individuality. He clarifies about the misconceptions to his opposition to machines.

"How can I be when I know that even this body is a most delicate piece of machinery? The spinning wheel is a machine; a little toothpick is a machine. What I object to is the craze for machinery, not machinery as such. The craze is for what they call labour-saving machinery. Men go on 'saving labour' till thousands are without work and thrown on the open streets to die of starvation. I want to save time and labour, not for fraction of mankind but for all. I want concentration of wealth, not in the hands of a few, but in the hands of all. Today, machinery merely helps a few to ride on the backs of millions. The impetus

behind it all is not the philanthropy to save labour, but greed. It is against this constitution of things that I am fighting with all my might....The supreme consideration is man. The machine should not tend to atrophy the limits of man. The machine should not tend to atrophy the limbs of man. For instance, I would make intelligent exceptions. Take the case of the singer's sewing machinery. It is one of the few useful things ever invented, and there is a romance about the device itself".

Gandhi supports those machines that are necessary to satisfy the basic human needs. He also feels that industries should be socially owned by which he means welfare of society. He wants limited industrialisation to satisfy limited wants such as food production, shelter, health care and basic education. He also points out the impersonal and monotonous life that industrialisation entails. But he is ready to accept it if it helps satisfy the basic human requirements and if it is socially controlled. He is aware of the enormous differences among countries and points out that the choice of technique depends on circumstances. Countries like India with abundant labour and large-scale unemployment and underemployment should restrict the use of machinery.

Gandhi's antagonism to the use of machinery and industrialisation set him apart not only from earlier Indian thinkers like Ranade and Gokhale but also among some of his contemporaries like Jawaharlal Nehru. Gandhi rejects mechanised industrialisation on moral and economic grounds. He considers machines as sins of modern civilisation. He dislikes the migration of people from villages to cities in search of jobs, low wages and poor working conditions of workers and unemployment. He laments about the under-utilisation of available labour in view of the seasonal nature of agriculture which depends heavily on monsoons. He points out that machines displace human or animal labour, instead of merely supplementing it or increasing its efficiency. Unlike human labour there are no physical limits to the growth and expansion of machines. Gandhi's case against machines is "because they deprive men of their employment and render them jobless. I oppose them not because they are machines but because they create unemployment.... If one machine does the work of a hundred men, then where are we to employ those hundred men"?

Gandhi points out that the aggregate demand for labour is given and that as a result of specialisation in the production process, workers have highly specific skills and cannot be employed elsewhere in the economy even if there arises an opportunity for employment. In general, he rejects machines because it displaces human labour and is disturbed by the fact that with the proliferation of highly mechanised capital intensive industries in a country like India with high population, it would lead to large scale unemployment with damaging social effects. Large scale mechanisation also leads to concentration of production and distribution in few hands and that would result in concentration of economic power.

Gandhi stressed on self-reliance through labour for all citizens of future India and he is categorical that winning and maintenance of freedom is impossible without such work discipline. It is for this reason that the spinning-wheel takes pride of place in this campaign, as he believes that it provides the best means through which the poor could earn a supplementary income or save money by producing their own cloth. Spinning-wheel, for Gandhi, epitomises the spirit of self-reliance.

According to Gandhi, the cause of poverty is the covetousness of the rich and the exploitation of the needy by the greedy. Incomes would have to be redistributed for raising the output and fulfilment of the basic needs of the masses; this would depend a lot on limiting the wants of the rich. If the masses are prepared to reject the evils of capital

accumulation, "they would strive to attain a more just distribution of the products of labour. Under the new outlook multiplicity of material wants will not be the aim of the life, the aim will be rather their restriction consistently with comfort. We shall cease to think of getting what we can, but we shall decline to receive what all cannot get". To get rid of poverty there is a need for a revolutionary change in prevailing attitudes to consumption and to wealth in affluent societies as well as in the poorer countries which are caught up in the 'revolution of rising expectations'.

Gandhi's *Swaraj* is far removed from the Marxist ideal of a socialist stateless, classless utopia. Like the Marxists and the socialists, he desires an egalitarian society but opposes their deterministic view of history and human nature, and their espousal of violent revolutionary changes. Like Marx, he accepts social conflict but does not think that violence is adequate to resolve it. He admits that violence has helped in bringing about political liberty in certain cases but it "has always brought the form and not the substance of freedom" for "the results of violent revolution are always liable to be lost by violent counter revolution". For Gandhi, commitment to non-violence is total but it is the non-violence of the brave. A non-violent revolutionary does not advocate a revolutionary seizure of state power but a transformation of relationships culminating in a peaceful transfer of power.

Gandhi, like Marx, accepts that contemporary situation is full of conflict but differs from Marx in focusing on the conflict between the city and the village. Marx's philosophy is essentially urban-oriented as he dismisses village culture as an 'idiocy'. Gandhi contends that India lives in its villages and that city culture is not only exploitative but also unequal. Gandhi, unlike Marx, rejects the notion of class struggle, class polarisation and antagonisms. He admits his attraction to the Marxist ideal but expressed doubts about the means to achieve it. He also, unlike Marx, rejects large-scale industrialisation and common ownership of property. Gandhi accepts, like Aristotle, that property is necessary and acknowledges the talent in those individuals who have the ability to create wealth but insists that this wealth be used for common good. Gandhi proposes the Trusteeship system to ensure harmony between the property owners and the non-propertied. Like Marx, he is conscious of the notion of relative fall. Under the present industrial system, despite enormous and improved productive capacity, inequality not only persists but has also increased. In this sense, he accepts Marx's criticism of Adam Smith for ignoring social nature of our needs. However, while Marx only rejects industrial capitalism, Gandhi rejects Western civilisation along with its attendant features like mechanisation and industrialisation as it is based on extreme inequality and it dehumanises the human being. Like the Marxists and the socialists, Gandhi desires an egalitarian, just and non-exploitative society.

If we differentiate between the transient and the permanent, the local and the perennial, the essential Gandhi emerges in a different perspective bringing out the similarities between Gandhi and Marx. There is an agreement on basic issues though their methods of reaching the ideal differ. Both accept the imperfection of the modern society since it is based on conflict and inequality. Both dislike mechanical interpretation and emphasise the dynamic role of the human being in bringing about the necessary transformation in society. Both are confident of human capacity to transcend the present stage of irrational existence and reach a higher stage based on harmony and fulfilment of individual needs.

The only Western parallel to Gandhi is Rousseau, for like Rousseau, he too idealises a glorious past but realises that since there is no going back, salvation lies in small, independent, self-governing and self-sufficient communities. Gandhi's ideal is an "anarchist society where each individual is a law to himself, living peacefully and with goodwill towards all, controlling

all his passions and living by his own labour". The Indian Marxists underrated Gandhi's social criticisms and his resolve to bring about a better and equitable social order.

3.6 CONCLUSION

Gandhi is a severe critic of contemporary society and is conscious of its divisions, structural fallacies and many inadequacies. He emphasises the human factor in any kind of revolutionary transformation as he desires the elimination of misery and conflict. He provides a framework for resolving conflicts and for building a social, political and economic order based on consensus. Both his commitment to non-violence and his own initiatives in resolving conflicts between the different segments were with the aim of establishing a non-exploitative, equal and just order. He sought to transform by relying on moral persuasion and pressure on the propertied and the advantaged. The idea of moral coercion lay at the heart of non-violent *satyagraha*. Rabindranath Tagore, like Gandhi, is conscious of the acute differences and conflicts in the Indian society but believes that it is society and not politics that has to be the primary focus.

The distinctiveness of Gandhi's outlook is that he points to the gap that exists between the village and the city and that the gulf would increase in the coming future. His desire is to narrow the gap and create a framework for the village to grow and prosper without destroying the city. He desires their reform so that a new partnership could evolve between the village and the city. He also points out to the differences among countries. Countries like India with abundant labour and, unemployment and underemployment ought to restrict the use of machinery. On both these scores, the Gandhi's blueprint is of immense importance to us. The prosperity of the village is the key to create a new balanced India, for checking the uncontrollable migration to cities that are bursting in its seams and not in a position to offer the means for decent and dignified life and also ensuring a balance between agriculture and industry.

3.7 SUMMARY

Gandhi's concern for majority alleviation makes him place the idea of the *gram swaraj* at the very centre of his social, political and economic philosophy. Since the overwhelming majority of Indians live in villages, Gandhi's primary concern is to concentrate on this important segment and provide a blueprint by which the face of rural India would drastically change for the better. He considers the cities as artificial, facilitating the exploitation by the imperialist powers; of sharing the plunder of the villages with the imperialist powers. He identifies the survival of the Indian nation with that of the meaningful survival of the villages reviving the traditional ways and means of the rural life which have degenerated because of the superstitious beliefs and neglect of this aspect by western imperialism. Even though he is very critical of the cities, he never wants to eliminate them. He wants to reform them and place them in a natural setting.

3.8 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. How does Gandhi distinguish the village from the city?
2. Describe Gandhi's conception of '*Gram Swaraj*'.
3. Discuss Gandhi's criticism of industrialisation.
4. What are Gandhi's criticisms of machines?

SUGGESTED READINGS

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(Endnotes)

Ruskin violently attacked capitalism for its distorted affections and responsibility in social relationships. He did not think socialism would remedy.