
Gandhi and his Concept of Democratic Decentralization

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ABSTRACT

The concept of Decentralization marks the culmination of Mahatma Gandhi's Experiment with Truth and Non-Violence in the varied aspect of life. It played a crucial role in fulfilling Gandhi's dream of rebuilding India from bottom upwards so as to strengthen the villages as self-sufficient and self-ruling units of administration. He was of the opinion that the soul of India consists in her innumerable villages. Gandhiji proclaimed that if once the villages perish India too will perish, find its fullest expression in his conception of village or Gram Swaraj. Gandhiji said, "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." Village swaraj provides the key to understand the concept of decentralization.

Gandhiji's concept of decentralization was not an isolated concept but the outcome of ethico-religious, sociopolitical and economic concepts and ideas. Gandhiji was of the view that life is a unity and hence it cannot be compartmentalized into ethical, social, religious, political, economic and so on. All the different departments of life act and react upon each other. Hence, the ethics of society necessarily involve ethics of other fields. All these directly or indirectly flow from the main theme of decentralization. This ethical outlook is the backbone of Gandhiji's life and message. Gandhiji's philosophy is nothing if not religious and moral.

Keywords: Gandhiji's concept, Gandhiji's philosophy, Truth and Non-Violence.

INTRODUCTION

Gandhiji was opposed to systems and methods that result in centralization and the concentration of power and authority for obvious reasons. According to him, 'power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely'. To him, swaraj or self-rule is the best form of rule for anarchy under home rule is better than orderly foreign rule. Swaraj is possible of attainment

only by turning the search light inward, so as to generate 'Soul-Force' or 'Love-Force'. Swaraj is to be realized through village self-rule or Gram Swaraj. Gandhiji repudiated the authority of the state for it represents violence in a concentrated and organized form. The state hinders the development of individuality and dignity of the individual. The state which is a coercive institution largely damages the moral will of the individual. The individuals are responsible moral individuals. Morality on the contrary, necessitates freedom of the will.¹ The compulsive nature of the authority of the state damages the moral nature of the individual. The state is vested with power and authority, which necessarily involves violence which is contradictory to the very conception of a non-violent state. Destroying individuality means exploitation which in turn leads to violence. The individual is with a soul whereas the state is a soulless machine. Hence Gandhiji pleaded for a progressively non-violent state founded on the principle of non-violence. Violence in any form should be avoided and in order to eliminate violence concentration of power should be avoided through decentralization. To avoid violence and to ensure facilities for the development of human personality, decentralization of political power must become a creed rather than a policy.²

REAL SWARAJ

According to Gandhi, the Real swaraj comes when the masses become conscious of their capacity to regulate and control authority when it is abused. Hind Swaraj is not rule by any one in particular but equally by all. It is government of the people, by the people and for the people. The non-violent state as conceived by Gandhiji is perfect democracy, in which non-violence became a creed, an article of faith rather than a matter of policy. These non-violent village communities are the basis of political power. The law of non-violence rules him and his government with a view to advance the greatest good of all. What is important is not the external form of the government but the non-violence of the average individual as the basis of the decentralized polity.³

ECONOMIC OVERTONES OF DECENTRALIZATION

The concept of decentralization has economic overtones as well. Gandhiji was indeed a true economist who can be considered as an economist of the masses. He has evolved an economic philosophy that is best suited for Indian soil. It provides a new and realistic approach to economic ills like poverty, exploitation, hunger and so on. He stood for both the moralization and humanization of economics. Economics that hurts the moral well being of an individual or a nation is immoral and therefore sinful. Gandhiji's approach to economics was essentially constructive with the individual at its centre.⁴

Gandhiji's economic theory has aimed at bridging the gulf between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' to the minimum and that there would be no exploitation of man by man. It also tried to obliterate completely the concentration of economic power by proposing economic decentralization at various Gandhiji's economic theory has aimed at bridging the gulf between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' to the minimum and that there would be no exploitation of man by

man. It also tried to obliterate completely the concentration of economic power by proposing economic decentralization at various levels.⁵ He preferred production by the masses rather than mass production. His preference for labour saving machinery and emphasis on Khadi, village industries coupled with nonviolent rural agrarian economy with a view to bring about an egalitarian socio-political and economic order were all significant milestones in the evolution of socio-economic and political decentralization.⁶

INDICTMENT TO MODERN WESTERN CIVILIZATION

Gandhiji's indictment to modern western civilization with its corollary heavy industrialization, technology and mechanization are detrimental to indigenous culture, for it is concerned only with material advancement and prosperity. Gandhiji suggested an alternate model with stress on moral and spiritual aspects of human life. Civilization, as conceived by Gandhiji, is a way of life, a mode of conduct.⁷ In true civilization, the basis of human relationship is morality and selfless love. Simplicity is the essence of civilization. It is, as he says, "that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty." The malady of modern civilization is rooted in the technological civilization of the west⁸

Gandhiji preferred the use of labour-saving machinery rather than heavy machinery. Gandhiji was against the 'craze for machinery for it enslaves mankind, making them idle and displacement of labour. Gandhiji suggested that small-scale industries with less machinery alone could increase the efficiency of rural production. He preferred non-violent rural economy with less exploitation, for exploitation is the essence of violence. Very often, the poor are exploited. He advocated that there is an urgent need to evolve a new way of life based on simplicity and reduction of wants. Civilization in the real sense of the term Gandhiji wrote, "Consist not in the multiplication but in the deliberate and voluntary restriction of wants. This alone promotes happiness."⁹

He found economic inequality in society and felt that non-violence could play a pivotal role in establishing economic equality. Economic equality is the master key to non-violent independence and a non-violent system of government which is clearly impossible as long as the gulf between the rich and the hungry millions persist. Rural economy can be strengthened only through the pursuit of decentralized economy.¹⁰ Gandhiji preached the gospel of rural mindedness. Gandhiji wrote, "You have therefore to be rural minded before you can be non-violent and to be rural minded you have to have faith in the spinning wheel." Rural development is a process of developing and utilizing natural and human resources, technologies, infrastructure facility, development policies and programmes to encourage economic growth in rural areas, to provide job and to improve the quality of rural life.¹¹

PHILOSOPHY OF GANDHIAN DECENTRALISED ECONOMY

Gandhiji's philosophy of decentralized economy has as its goal not the greatest good of the greatest number but the good and the welfare of all - even 'Unto the Last'. Gandhiji visualized an ideal social order wherein man and machine together would promote the basic human values. The approach of Gandhiji based on decentralization with its corollary people's

empowerment opens up a new chapter in the socio-economic and political order. Gandhiji sought to revive villages for it is impossible to have non-violence on a factory civilization which is essentially materialistic. On the contrary, Gandhiji advocated Swadeshi. Swadeshi is the spirit in us which restricts us in the use and service of surrounding at the exclusion of the more remote signifying that service has to be rendered to our immediate neighbors as our first duty. From the economic stand, point Swadeshi meant economic self-reliance and economic independence.¹² The Swadeshi Movement was indeed to organize the rural masses into economically and socially self-dependent. Gandhiji measured the progress of a nation or of a society in terms of morality and welfare of human kind.

DEMOCRACY

Gandhiji preferred democracy as the best form of government. Democracy should be disciplined and enlightened. Perfect democracy is possible only by perfect non-violence. Non-violent democracy has its basis in self-sufficient village republics. Every village has to become a republic or Panchayat having full powers. The non-violent democratic state of Gandhiji's conception will be a federation of more or less self-sufficient and self-governing village communities. The government of the village will be the Panchayat of five persons - the unit of local self government - the original custodian of all authority. The village republic envisaged by Gandhiji there is perfect democracy based upon individual freedom. Gandhiji's concept of Panchayat Raj is the only system which paves the way to real swaraj.¹³ Gandhiji's understanding of swaraj includes political, economic and moral independence. It makes room for Sarvodaya and self-realization. It is swaraj for the individual and for the nation. Panchayat as Gandhiji believed lead to individual and collective happiness.

POLITICAL DECENTRALIZATION

Panchayat Raj as Gandhiji conceived it is supposed to serve two main purposes namely, economic and political decentralization. By political decentralization Gandhiji meant taking democracy to the grass - roots and preparing every individual in the process of achieving real swaraj. Gandhiji longed for village swaraj or Panchayat Raj or grass-root democracy for empowering the downtrodden millions of India. Gandhiji used the term self-rule and good governance for decentralized governance. Since majority of the people of our country live in villages, the unit of development in Gandhian programme was the village itself. Identifying himself with India's poor, "he turned his thought of the nation to the needs for rural millions for whom 'life was an eternal compulsory fast' who 'live because they cannot die at will'".¹⁴ Hence he visualized that, 'the development of the country lies in the development of the rural masses and rural areas'. This is because; they are the backbone of the country." Gandhiji's ambition was to make village a 'republic'. He said "if my dream is fulfilled, and every one of the seven lakhs of villages becomes a well-living republic in which there are no illiterates, in which no one is idle for want of work, in which everyone is usefully occupied and has nourishing food, well-ventilated dwellings, and sufficient Khadi for covering the body..."¹⁵

CONCLUSION

Gandhiji's concept of political decentralization highlighting the evolution of the ideal political order along with the concept of non-violent state, non-violent democracy, swaraj and enlightened anarchy. Gandhiji's conception of Participatory Democracy, Village Swaraj or Village Republic and Panchayat Raj has been considered for it is a corollary to true democracy.

Gandhi had seen Panchayati Raj as not just a political arrangement but as a way of life, one in which the highest human qualities can be nurtured and attained. Therefore, it can conclude that Gandhian economic thought may be described as 'Pragmatic humanistic economy' because it is based on realistic approach to life with emphasis on human value and human dignity. , Gandhian approach to decentralization implies the creation of Panchayats that can achieve self-sufficiency and self-reliance as a bulwark against exploitation.

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