
GANDHI'S IDEA OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

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Abstract: Gandhi in his writings never failed to acknowledge those people, books and events which had caste an impact on his life and influenced his thoughts and ideas. Emerson has very truly remarked regarding Mahatma Gandhi, "The greatest genius ever is the most indebted person" committed by the British government against non-whites, the exploitation and inhumanly treatment met out to so-called untouchables by higher caste Hindus, the divide between Hindus and Muslims, deplorable position of women in all societies, consumerism, etc. According to him if the right of even a single individual is compromised in the process of seeking justice, the whole purpose is forfeited. Therefore, he believed in the principle of 'Unto the Last' i.e. if the person standing at the end in the line, the weakest of all, could be satisfied, everyone was satisfied.

Keywords: Gandhi And The Idea of Social Justice, Gandhi's Social Philosophy, Village Communities, Self Governance, Gandhi's Humanistic Values.

Introduction: The idea of Justice has occupied the center stage of human thought ever since the times immemorial. Aristotle, the great philosopher, declared Man to be a political-social animal. By this he meant that people always tend to live a community life full of interwoven relationships. Moreover, if anyone happened to live a solitary life, it was nothing else but a curse. As is the instinct of relationships, natural among human beings, so is that of dominance over each other. Individuals have always tried to dominate others individually, if not possible, through groups and still not feasible, through a still larger and stronger group. This leads to a relationship of dominant and dominated, the commander and the follower and ultimately the ruler and the subjects i.e. the ruled. When all men (including women) are born free and equal, how far is it justified that they fall in the above different categories of the relationships, especially for those who are subjects and being ruled? Why should they enter into such an arrangement where they are going to be at the receiving end for the whole of their lives? Not only they themselves, but their following generations are also compelled to be pushed to the same lower status. Such ideas and debates have bothered the human mind ever since the concept of thought and society began. Undoubtedly, an urge to dominate is persistent in human beings but so is the pursuit of a better, comfortable life where everyone makes a contribution towards development. People are hedonists and they are also themselves the biggest source to a better life. Getting the possible best out of everyone and making the maximum utilization of every available individual has always been tried to be worked out by the thinkers and intellectuals. Many a times, good beginnings have been made in providing a fair chance to every individual to grow, but somehow the urge to dominate has always crept in and pushed back all the efforts to the point from where those had begun. This way, the debate between the human instinct of dominance and of growth/progress at the same time, has brought the question of Justice especially, Social Justice to the fore-front time and again.¹

Gandhi and the Idea of Social Justice: Indeed the life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was a life full of experiments with Truth. For the better part of his life after reaching South Africa and later in India he kept himself engaged in fighting for the Justice. Gandhi believed in the maxim simple living and high thinking. He was sure that the needs of everyone could be fulfilled but not the greed. Therefore, one should leave aside ones material desires and try to live within minimum resources. He preached what he practiced and practiced what he preached. Truth, Love and Non-violence had always been very close to his heart which was often reflected in his ideas of *Satyagraha*, *Sarvodaya*, *Ahimsa*, etc. Contrary to the prevalent thought and literature of the West Gandhi believed that only that action was just which did not harm either party to the dispute (Gandhi, 1969, p.342).² His Justice was meant not only for himself or an individual or a community or his fellow countrymen alone but for the whole humanity. His concept

of Justice was struggled against the apartheid in South Africa, the atrocities. committed by the British government against non-whites, the exploitation and inhumanly treatment met out to so-called untouchables by higher caste Hindus, the divide between Hindus and Muslims, deplorable position of women in all societies, consumerism, etc. According to him if the right of even a single individual is compromised in the process of seeking justice, the whole purpose is forfeited. Therefore, he believed in the principle of „Unto the Last’ i.e. if the person standing at the end in the line, the weakest of all, could be satisfied, everyone was satisfied. Gandhi in his writings never failed to acknowledge those people, books and events which had caste an impact on his life and influenced his thoughts and ideas. Emerson has very truly remarked regarding Mahatma Gandhi, “The greatest genius ever is the most indebted person” (*Gandhi’s Source of Inspiration*, 2013).³

Gandhi’s Social Philosophy: *Perspective and Relevance* by B.N. Ganguli is a detailed work which tries to trace out the various influences on Gandhi’s philosophy (Ganguli, 2000).⁴ The author writes that Gandhi to a great extent was inspired by *Isha Upanishad*, Jainism and Buddhism and Gita. He developed an unshakable faith in *Varnashra* for which he even had to face a lot of criticism from different quarters. However, Gandhi has an answer to all those critiques as he believes caste to be a law of spiritual economics and has nothing to do with superiority or inferiority. The book also tries to create a linkage between Western and Gandhi’s meaning system by taking into account the influences of Tolstoy, Ruskin, Thoreau, Emerson and Kropotkin on him. The ideal social order envisaged by Gandhi is also given an important place in this book. He believes that it should be based on decentralization of power, co-operative farming, rural industrialization and significance of women as a partner in the social process. Usha Mehta has tried to bring forth various people who have influenced Gandhi’s life and thought and whom Gandhi has influenced or given a space to criticize, in her book, *Mahatma Gandhi and Humanism* (Mehta, 2000).⁵

Panchayats or village communities could be effective units only if those were self-sufficient. As the Political Justice holds no good in the absence of Economic Justice any institution which is not economically viable was not able to sustain and not serve the purpose it was meant for. Therefore, according to Gandhi only those village units would be successful which worked in a cooperative manner and were able to come up-to the expectations of its dwellers and meet their requirements. Otherwise the dependence on the outside world for meager things will not allow the villages to become units of **self-governance**. Expressing his expectations from such villages he wrote, “*every village’s first concern will be to grow its own food crops and cotton for its cloth. It should have a reserve for its cattle, recreation and a playground for adults and children. Then if there is more land available, it will grow useful money crops...The village will maintain a village theatre, school, and public hall. It will have its own water works ensuring clean water supply. This can be done through controlled water tanks or wells. Education will be compulsory up to the final basic course*” (Mathur and Mathur, 1962, p.323).

Gandhi’s humanistic values were the result of his deeply rooted spiritual experience. He felt that one need not wait for particular events or opportunities to express one’s love and concern for the humankind. People should adopt and practice their humanitarian values and ethics in everyday life at every possible juncture and if at all anybody was ever in doubt to take certain measures or how to move ahead, he offers an acid test to come out of the dilemma. He says, “*Whenever you are in doubt or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him the control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to Swaraj for the hungry and spiritually starving millions?*” (Gandhi, 1955, p. 52).⁷ Therefore, to have a holistic view of his concept of Social Justice one should go through the ideas of his routine practice. Gandhi had an unshakable faith in God and in the primacy of the spirit and believed that for resorting to *Satyagraha* whole heartedly one has to have a living faith in God and soul force. Giving a teleological argument in favour of the existence of God he said, “*The only weapon of a Satyagrahi is God, by whatsoever name one knows Him, without Him, a Satyagrahi is devoid of strength before an opponent armed with monstrous weapons. But he who accepts God as his only protector will remain unbent before the mightiest earthly power. It is significant that the non-violent resisters of the past*

have almost always been firm believers in God” (Kim, 1996, p. 166).⁸ However lucrative the untruth and dishonesty may appear but it is for sure that they were going to be short lived and it was always the truth which was going to triumph in the end i.e. “*Satya Meva Jayate.*” The strength to this principle of Gandhi was provided by his belief in rebirth where a single life span was too short to arrive at the ultimate consequence. As a matter of faith he held “truth quenching untruth” as the eternal rule. As *Satyagraha* is the means of realising the Truth one should be open minded in considering the positions and views of the adversaries. Explaining Gandhian view point on the practice of *Satyagraha*, Bondurant says that it does not allow administration of violence on the opponents but to try and convince the opponents for bringing them to one’s fold i.e. by the method of patient and sympathetic correction (Bondurant, 1965, pp. 161-167).⁹

Conclusion: People are the product of their environment and circumstances. Hence, the whole life around them exists as they themselves perceive it to be and not as the things actually are. Unless people stop looking at the world through the prism of their own value system instead of the objective reality, Social Justice shall continue to be an elusive virtue. The God has created everyone in the same way but undoubtedly not equal. One born into a family enjoying all the luxuries of life cannot be expected to have the same notion of justice being held by a person who is born pauper.

References:

1. After going through the available literature on the subject of Justice, it may be broadly classified into four primary dimensions i.e. Social, Economic, Political and Legal. However, Social dimension of Justice is one such dimension which stands central to all the others and is difficult to alienate from the primary idea of Justice. Moreover the scholars are convinced that all the other forms of Justice are in the process of leading one towards the Social Justice only. Hence, unless Social Justice is achieved the effort remains inconclusive. Moreover as the idea of Social Justice was more close to the heart of Mahatma Gandhi, this research revolves around the concept of Social Justice, primarily.
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