

Relevance of Gandhi in Modern India

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Gandhi ji is known for his philosophy of truth and non violence which was recognized by the whole world. The world has witnessed that UN celebrates 2nd October as a non violence day which is indicative of the universal values of Gandhian ideas. Even in 1950, Einstein had stated that “Gandhi held the most enlightened views of all political men in our time. We should strive to do things in his spirit: not to use violence in fighting for our cause and to refrain from taking part in anything we believe is evil.”(World Focus, pp. 220) The Gandhian techniques of non violence had been successfully used by various African countries for their liberation and also by some of the leaders like Martin Luther King in the US, Nelson Mandela in South Africa, and now San Suu Kyi in Myanmar for the cause of oppressed people which is indicative of the continuing relevance of Gandhi. Gandhi in his book ‘Hind Swaraj’ wrote not only about how to achieve independence by non violent means but also what real swaraj means after political emancipation of India. In the 21st century when India is facing serious challenges to its socio, economic and political system, Gandhian ideas are quite relevant in the present context. In this chapter, I intend to discuss relevance of Gandhi in modern India.

Gandhian Modernity

In the age of globalization when the world is integrating at a very fast pace and western culture and values are becoming more and more globalised, Gandhi’s views are relevant in the 21st century as well. Gandhiji was of the opinion that only Britishers were not responsible for India’s enslavement but Indian’s themselves were also responsible for that. In his book ‘Hind Swaraj’ Gandhi criticized both modern civilization and western Parliamentary democracy. He was of the opinion that modernisation/ westernisation is identified with industrial advancement that gave rise to capitalism and the exploitative policies in the industrialised capitalist countries. He was quite

critical of British parliament and did not consider it democratic as most of the time British Parliament was busy devising policies for enslavement of different countries of the world and committing atrocities on people of these colonies. Gandhi ji while criticising the British Parliament compared it with 'sterile woman and a prostitute' because most of the time its policies were determined by selfish interests of the ruling party than for the welfare of all. In his opinion modern civilization creates immoral society by judging progress in terms of technological development. Modern civilization focused on consumerism, competitiveness, slavery of desires and subjugation to technology. (Surjit Kaur Jolly, Reading Gandhi, pp. 186). Gandhi ji considered modern civilization, the root cause of India's colonisation. Modern civilization was bad enough for Britain, but when imported into India and propagated there by Indians themselves, its potential for mischief became incalculable.'(Anthony. J. Parel.1997, Hind Swaraj and other writings).

Gandhi ji wrote his critique of modern civilization in 'Hind Swaraj' in response to Fitzjames Stephen (1829-94) views expressed in his book 'Foundation of Government of India'. In his book Fitzjames Stephen mentioned that only industrialised countries are fit for democracy. Non industrialised countries are fit for either authoritarian rule or colonialism. Due to their internal hostilities and disunities they are not qualified to rule themselves.

Gandhi ji refuted this argument and showed the route of India's independence, freedom and emancipation of India from the yoke of British rule, and its civilizational and cultural colonialism. Gandhi ji wanted Indian's to emancipate themselves from the influence of British superiority and feel proud of their traditional/past culture and heritage. For him civilization stands for good conduct, doing one's duty and having mastery over mind and passion. To Gandhi Indian culture is unique which is based on spiritual and moral values. According to Gandhi ji human body is not an assemblage of cells, tissues and organs. The body mind and soul combined form the human being. Humans without mind are animals and without soul. Human progress is not material progress but moral progress leading to higher level of consciousness.

Acceptance of Indian civilization is the only path to swaraj for Indians, in Gandhi's views. Gandhi ji considered Indian religion, dharma and cultural values essential not only to achieve freedom from British colonialism but also to establish Ram Rajya after independence. He believed that Indian religion induces set of ethical/moral values in an individual that will guide him to the right path.

In this context it is important to mention that Indians developed the feeling of inferiority towards its own culture as it was a handiwork of Britishers. In 1835, Lord Macaulay mentioned in the British Parliament that it was impossible to colonise / invade India. He mentioned that he travelled the length and breadth of India but did not come across a single person who was either a beggar or a thief. He further mentioned that Indians were highly calibered and people of high moral values. The only way to capture India was to break its back bone which was its culture. The culture of India could be changed by changing its education system. He felt that if Britishers could become successful in creating the feeling that English education was more valuable than Sanskrit then they would be able to create colonialism in India. Britishers became successful in their mission by changing the education system and in a way creating cultural imperialism in India. It also caused division in the society because the English speaking people were treated as superior to non English speaking people. By moving away from Sanskrit education, Indian lost their belief and confidence in their traditional cultural values which were very advanced and unique (emphasised the significance of limiting worldly desires .India has been a center of rich and developed civilization. Its cultural values got spread to different part of the world, particularly South East Asia in the past. In the contemporary time India's yoga meditation is becoming world famous to deal with the stress of modern life style.

Gandhi ji opined that modern civilization gives priority to bodily comfort over spiritual development. Predominance to bodily comfort gives rise to self interest which in turn leads to insensitivity towards other humans.

In this respect his views are close to Marxist philosophy that considers capitalism dehumanises man. Capitalism focuses on profit and leads to the exploitation of workers. The profit motive leads to more production and consumption of goods. Gandhi criticised modern civilization for its doctrine of materialism, rationalism, lack of morality, large scale production leading to excessive consumerism greed system and exploitation.

He treated life as an integrated whole with on distinction between public and private life. He aimed at non violent, egalitarian, sustainable and prosperous social order. In Gandhi's opinion, unless the moral and spiritual qualities of the people are appropriate, the best of political system and the constitution will not work. 'There is no politics that is devoid of religion.'

'Civilization in the real sense of the term consists not in multiplication, but in the deliberate

and voluntary reduction of wants. This alone promotes happiness and contentment, and increases the capacity for service.’ Gandhi defined yajna (sacrifice) as ‘an act directed to welfare of others- others embrace not only humanity but all life’. (World Focus 218)

For the purpose of socio economic reforms, he wanted to spread awareness, self help and cooperation among people. He had also established nongovernmental organisations (NGO) such as All India Spinners’ Association and All India Village Industry Association for constructive work as the instrument for building up democracy. Gandhi’s approach of constructive programme provides an excellent model for the NGO and corporate social responsibility in the contemporary world.

Gandhi ji felt that modern civilization which kept Indians under its influence had done more damage than colonialism. According to Parel, Gandhi ji wanted a reconciliation between the English and Indians because deluded by modern civilization they were treating each other as their enemies. Gandhi ji did not want Indians to close their doors for other cultures....Gandhi was influenced by Leo Tolstoy and John Ruskin who had also criticised the modern civilization.

Dharma

Gandhi ji wanted Indians to be acquainted with Dharma because Indian religion is not dogmatic but is a way of life that teaches morality, non violence, selflessness and harmony among people. In his view ‘religion does not mean sectarianism. It means a belief in the ordered moral government of the universe- transcends Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, etc-harmonizes them and gives them reality.

Gandhi was deeply influenced by idea of selfless work, dutifulness and nonattachment mentioned in ‘Gita’ and democratic administration in ‘Ramcharitmanas’. When he talked about Ram Rajya, he meant unto the last. The administrator should work for each and every one. Democracy is like an oceanic circle. Decentralised political power:

Gandhi’s Hind Swaraj has universal value and had postmodernist approach as it was written from the perspective of people on the margins. Gandhi’s concept of Swaraj included both ‘self rule’ and ‘home rule’” Real Home Rule is possible only where passive resistance is the guiding force of the people. Any other rule is an alien rule.

Gandhian swaraj included the concept of Ram Rajya or ideal state in which even the last

person in the society is taken care of by the state. Gandhi defined Ram Rajya as ‘kingdom of God on Earth’; politically ‘perfect democracy in which inequalities based on possession- colour, race or creed or sex vanish; inland and state belong to the people, justice is prompt, perfect and cheap and, therefore, there is freedom of worship, speech, press-- such a state must be based on truth and nonviolence and must consist of prosperous, happy, self contained--communities.’ (World Focus p216) For M.K.Gandhi the terms Swaraj, Dharam Raj or Ram Rajya was synonymous that aimed at securing peace and plenty of all including the last person. In Valmiki’s Ramayan, Ram Rajya is described as “There is happiness and cheer all around. All are contented. All are well nourished. All follow Dharma. All are in good health. All are without disease. And all are free from fear and hunger.”

Gandhi ji wanted to revive Ram Rajya where king should try to Take care of the destitute and the weak. The king in fact becomes the “strength of the weak and the orphaned, the eyes of those who can't see and legs of those who cannot walk”.

In Mahabharata also king is advised to work for the people on the margins in the society. According to Mahabharata, king should “always arrange for the welfare and livelihood of those who have no resources, those who have no one to look after them, those who are afflicted by the old age, and those who have lost their husbands.”

Dharma of the king was defined as “wiping away tears from the faces of destitute, the orphans and the old, and spreading cheer among all.”

His conception of true democracy is decentralisation of power or village swaraj as majority of population of India lives in the villages. The duty of ruler is to take care of all especially the one on margins. The polity will be like and oceanic circle whose center will be an 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. Therefore the outermost circumference will not wield power to crush the inner circle but will give strength to all within and derive its own strength from it. In Gandhian perception of Indian polity the last is equal to the first or no one is the first and no one is the last. There is evidence that before the arrival of Britishers, Indian polity was based on locality republics. Mahatma Gandhi while presenting his vision of the “Oceanic Circle” polity in 1946 on the eve of independence was only reminding

India of her own practices before the disruption caused by the alien rule.

In Gandhian view the state is constituted to protect and preserve the dharma of diverse groupings in the society; guarantee the harmonious functioning of these groupings according to their own inherent laws. In such a polity every individual, every household, every locality and every other grouping of people partakes of the sovereignty; every household and groupings has the sovereign right to decide what is right and what is wrong according to its inborn laws. The state does not lay down the law but protects the laws, the dharma, that is inborn to society.

He quoted from Mahabharata that people have right to kill the king who do not take care of their needs. King is the servant and not master of people's. Democracy cannot be established in 'midst of terrorism, whether governmental or popular.' State must be secular. He considered corruption to be such a serious offense that those responsible 'must be blotted out of public life'.

Oceanic circle

Swaraj means self restraint and not freedom from all self restraint. Swaraj is a state 'in which the poorest shall feel it is their country in whose making they have an effective voice.- no high class or low class of people.- all communities shall live in perfect harmony.---women will enjoy the same right as men.'(World Focus, p 216)

A antyodaya, unto the last, Ram Rajya, In today's world the political systems are devoid of morality and ethical values which leads to further sharpening the divisions of societies and increasing human miseries . Rudolph and Rudolph considers that Gandhi through his book Hind Swaraj 'inaugurated post modern era by criticising and rejecting 'modern civilization' and by articulating a civilization alternative to it.

Gandhi's views on religion were not purely Hindu but he drew principles from all religions and made them an integral part of his life and mission.

In the modern age, Dharma the way of life to be lead on which our traditional cultural value system is based will be more appropriate in the modern age. Gandhi's idea of global village based on Geeta "sarv dharm sambhav" is also based on the extension of community living from India to global level.

Gandhi on Science and Machinery

Gandhi was against the exploitative nature of modernity but was not against all aspects of western civilization or modernity, various aspects of modernity like democratic representation, equality, government through persuasion were admired by him he was critical of materialistic aspect of western civilization. In his opinion, railways, machines, press of new technologies introduced by Britishers in India were not beneficial to Indians rather they were introduced by Britishers to establish their control over India, therefore were quite harmful for India. He believed that civilization progress should be seen in terms of moral achievements. Controlling one's own desires greed would be the best sign of civilization advancement.

Western civilization was based on use of technology for the greed of capitalists; aggressive control over nature for materialistic purpose. Indian civilization believed in harmonious coexistence with nature. The Indian civilization was based on ethical and spiritual understanding of nature.

Gandhi ji believed that man is inseparable from nature. The cosmic law keeps universe in balance. He was against the Darwin's theory of survival of the fittest. To him it is cooperation not competition that determines the evolutionary process.

He was not against advancement but against the use of science for exploitation and dominance. For instance India also made significant advancement in the field of science, maths, astronomy, architecture, metallurgy, medicine, plastic surgery, eye surgery and ayurveda but these developments were not meant for exploration but in search of knowledge, to understand nature. He wanted development of science for the benefit of all.

Industrialisation has led to more production and consumption than required. It has reduced humans to helpless spectators and created new kind of slavery 'more comfortable and invidious and therefore more dangerous.' The development of industrialisation leading to modernisation has caused the loss of human identity, and human value system (sentiment of goodwill and community living system free from selfishness and immorality) but also harmful to the mother nature.

He was critical of 'knowledge without character' and 'science without humanity at the time of invention of atom bomb, Gandhi said that 'who invented the atom bomb has committed the greatest sin in the world of science.' Gandhi challenged the modern view of progress that led to holocaust, world wars and large scale destruction all over the world.

He was also critical of medical advancements based on experimentation on humans or animals. It is observed that Germans during Hitler's administration carried out most of the medical experiments on disabled or mentally challenged people.

Hardiman in his alternative of modernity referred to the environment protection movements in India as Gandhian technique of nonviolent protest.

Gandhi ji always stressed the imperative need for raising the moral structure of human beings, while attempting to raise their standard of material living. He was of the opinion that a nation did not become great by erecting huge buildings, establishing giant factories and multiplying wealth for economic prosperity. No doubt these are important but a nation really becomes strong and worthy of respect if its citizens imbibe the qualities of head and heart which inspire them to sacrifice gladly their individual goods for the larger interest of the nation. (Narayan, Shriman, Gandhi: The Man and his Thought, Publications Division, New Delhi, 2005, pp. 2-3) Gandhi wanted that individual and society should be free from seven sins: Politics without principles; wealth without work; commerce without morality; Education without character; Pleasure without conscience; science without humanity; worship without sacrifice. Gandhiji did not belong to an era or an age; he belonged to humanity for eternity.

In Gandhi's opinion the economy should not be devoid of moral values. The imperative of caring and providing for the poor and the weak flows from the essential understanding of the universe. The universe is a great cycle of give and take between different aspects of creation. Whatever is produced or earned by man is in fact taken from other aspects of creation and it may rightfully be consumed only after returning the share of all, only after propitiating and fulfilling other parts of creation. Consuming for oneself without having thus propitiated others indeed is stealing. The one who does not keep the cycle of mutual dependence, such living is waste. All classical Indian literature, the vedas, the upanishads, the itihisas and the puranas, present the same understanding of the universe in diverse ways.

Globalisation and Gandhian Concept of Economy

E.F. Schumacher in his book 'Small is beautiful' observed that Gandhi ji's ideas have relevance even in contemporary world. In Gandhi ji's words pores of the world can't be helped by mass production but by production by masses. The technology that suited them is 'simpler, cheaper, and freer than the super technology of the rich. For instance he considered spinning

wheel also a machine. He did not oppose singer sewing machine as it did not displace human labour and saved time.

In the age of globalisation as WTO policies are promoting production and consumerism, countries like India's indigenous industries are seriously implicated. The 21st century has been marked by Liberalisation, Privatization and Globalisation, its three decades experience of globalisation reflects increasing disparities, inequitable distribution of wealth, poverty, violence and extremism. In this context Gandhian ideals and moral values are extremely relevant for the cohesive socio economic societies.

Therefore Gandhian idea of Swadeshi and boycott is still relevant. Gandhi had noticed that whatever Indians do not like they do not oppose that but they do not follow such law either. The boycott policy paralyse the functioning of the adversary and it is a non violent effective technique to achieve India's objective in the present context.

Gandhi's concept of Swadeshi is relevant in the present context as he believed in decentralised economy, revival of local communities, mass employment and self reliance. Swadeshi would promote on sharing and self provisioning in development of indigenous resources and skills and reduction of wastage in marketing, transport and storage. In globalised economy of 21st century there is no place for equity, social justice and conservation that can give rise to serious socio- economic problems and can lead to inter and intra state conflicts. Therefore, states must ensure bread labour for all unemployed men and women." In a well ordered society, securing one's livelihood should be-- the easiest thing in the world--the test of orderliness in a country is not the number of millionaires it owns but the absence of starvation among its masses. (World Focus pp 217)

Gandhi ji appeared to be traditional but was quite modern. His path of advancement and progress was path of morality advocated by Hindu civilizational culture. He was modernist as he stood for reason, rationality and search for truth. He was against the exploitative character of modernity like colonialism, inequality, exploitation of nature, gender inequality and war. He was postmodernist as he questioned the rationality of science and its capacity to solve all human problems, worked for gender equality, and worked for peace and harmony.

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