

State and Democracy in Gandhian View

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Abstract

This article analyses the Gandhian concept of democracy in perspective of Indian circumstances and how this democracy can be functional at grassroots level. While discussing the powers of the state the author delineates the idea of institutional governance that Gandhi implicitly cherished in connection with his scheme of administrative decentralization in India.

Keywords

Planning, Governance, Development, Authority, Democracy, Swaraj.

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Gandhi undoubtedly played a significant role in the social, political and economic impact of the first half of the 20th century in the history of India. However, it may appear to be a historical irony that after achieving independence, the political establishment of India adopted Parliamentary form of Government in preference to the Gandhian proposal of village based democracy.

Although the resolution on Aims and Objectives moved by Jawahar Lal Nehru envisaged the new constitution as dedicated to the goal of social revolution, no institutional mechanism to carry forward the task at the grass root level was specified. Notwithstanding considerable advance over the previous politico-administrative arrangement of limited decentralization of powers of the local bodies –especially after the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, 1992, the centralized structure of planning, governance and administration is as effective in essence as it was earlier. That Probable is partly the constraint of the “pyramidal” model of democracy and development, hitherto adopted in India. It is inherent in the logic of the pyramidal form, that devolution takes place downward in the form of delegation of limited powers with final decision making authority vested at the apex.

The Gandhian model on the contrary, visualizes an upward movement of authority from the ‘base’ to the ‘apex’, in the form of circles. It is significant to note Gandhi is a philosophical anarchist, who rejects state in all its forms in his ideal order. He stands for a stateless society. According to him, the state implies force and violence. We can not conceive of the state without the element of force as its essential attribute.

It is relevant to recall that besides Gandhi, other thinkers, especially the liberals have accepted a non-violent state as the ultimate ideal. The faith of liberalism in individual liberty, whether on utilitarian grounds or on moral principles, demands that human personality be free from coercion. The predominance given to reason in individual and social life by J.S. Mill throws the element of force into the background. T.H. Green gives explicit recognition to what is implicit in J.S. Mill when he says: “Will, not force, is the basis of the state”. Gandhi is more explicit in adopting the ideal of non-violence, which follows from his metaphysics. For him the state represents “violence in a concentrated and organized form. The individual has a soul but the state is a soulless machine. It can never be weaned from violence to which it owes its very existence.”¹

Accordingly in Gandhi’s ideal order of Ramraj as in Marx’s ideal communist society there is no place for political power as there is no state. This is truly a blissful idealized enlightened ‘anarchy’ absolutely self-regulated and ordered. Gandhi clearly

stated time and again that ideal of a stateless non-violent society, initially visualized in ‘Hind Swaraj’ with no police and military, no law courts, railways and centralized production was unrealizable in the given circumstances.

Realization of the ideal was subject to the attainment of complete personal ‘Swaraj’ by each individual, culminating into a spontaneous observance of social obligations without intervention of the state. Since the conditions were not ripe for “Poorna Swaraj” (i.e. the ultimate ideal), Gandhi being a political realist as well did not insist on the immediate abandonment of the state machinery and the related institutions, though he always considered them as necessary evils and would welcome their natural destruction.

Gandhi’s supreme objection of state power was its innate violence, as explained earlier. Violence, in his view, logically leads to decentralization. The “predominantly non-violent state” of his dreams therefore, is to be an essentially decentralist state, consisting of self-sufficient, self-governing villages in which voluntary cooperation is the condition of dignified and peaceful existence.² In this structure, composed of innumerable villages. Gandhi visualizes “ever widening never ascending circles.”³ Hence, in his vision of true democracy “Life will not be a Pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. But it will be an Oceanic circle whose centre will be the individual always 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.”⁴ Ultimately, therefore, it is the individual who is the unit of the democratic political structure.

Therefore, contrary to the *laissez faire* individualism of the 19th century, individualism of Gandhi’s conception is not of the nascent type. It conforms to the requirements of social progress and is, therefore, progressive. The above Gandhian assertion transcends the western liberal capitalist democratic syndrome of political discourse and political activity. It is in this specific sense that Gandhi’s insistence on *Swadeshi* as one of the key operative principles of a decentralist order is significant.

The decentralist core of the *Swadeshi* is supplemented and strengthened by the ethical precepts of non-possession and *bread-labour*, both implying an urge for economic equality and social justice. The predominantly non-violent order based on dignity of human labour and non-acquisitive world-view, will be a natural antithesis of the centralized order which thrives on concentration of political power, callous competitive market-system and exploitation of the masses. As he says: “A non-violent civilization could be built only on self-contained villages.”⁵

Therefore, Gandhi insists on personal *swaraj* that is perfect discipline and

control of oneself and the capability to resist injustice and tyranny, through satyagraha. Therefore Gandhi insisted on “educating the masses to regulate and control authority”. He warned time and again, against the western mode of pyramidal democracy. In his view, the modern western state was inhibited by corrupt electoral processes, over centralization of power and resources and slow and delayed functioning of the administration. It was also infected by the vices of industrial – capitalist economic structure. As a result, the human individual as well as the small, microstructures of society lost their prominent position in the wake of the centralized state system.

Hence, Gandhi remained a strong critic of the Western Parliamentary form of democracy for its mythicization of the very concept of individual dignity, its incapacity to protect individual freedom, ensure equality and deliver social justice. Therefore, as an alternative of decentralist democracy, Gandhi suggested, “the nearest approach to civilization based upon non-violence is the erstwhile village republic of India”.⁶ He redefined democracy as “the rule of unadulterated non-violence”.⁷ At the second Round Table Conference, Gandhi proposed an indirect scheme of elections. He suggested that seven hundred thousand villages of India would be organized according to the will of its citizens. These villages, each having one vote, would elect the district administration. The district administration will elect provincial administration, which in turn will elect a president who will be the national chief executive. This will decentralize power among seven hundred thousand units. There will then be among these villages voluntary cooperation, which will produce real freedom.⁸ The Panchayat of five persons annually elected by the adult villagers, male and female, possessing minimum prescribed qualifications, will conduct the government of the village. These will have the authority and the jurisdiction required. Since there will be the legislature, judiciary and executive combined to operate its year of office.⁹

Gandhiji stressed that the indirect election would ensure representatives tried and tested in public life and also substitutes active participation for the present day passive representation. Gandhi was convinced that his proposed scheme would reduce corruption and violence. The scheme would be perfectly feasible as accompanied by decentralization of political and economic authority and minimum jurisdiction of the state. Those who seek to contest election must have acquired personal swaraj. They should be selfless, able and incorruptible. As for votes, the requisite qualification “should be neither property nor position but manual work.”¹⁰

Gandhi was convinced that the “intelligent and conscious adoption of the ideal of bread labour will prevent voters from becoming mere pawn in the hands of politicians.”¹¹ As the state is rooted in violence, in a predominantly non-violence

society, the state will govern at least and use the least amount of force. This “least government” will be practicable when people acquire capacity for voluntary cooperation and concerted action and will learn to regulate their social life through voluntary organizations. Thus, he conceives of the village units as self-sufficient and “as strong as the strongest”.¹²

As a result, the bewildering multiplicity of functions, which the modern state performs, will be gradually reduced and transferred to voluntary associations. The state will perform its functions with the minimum use of coercion. The State will transfer as much of its judicial work as possible to the Panchayats i.e. adhoc arbitration tribunals, the personnel of which is usually determined by the parties to the case. Gandhi advocates cheapening of the administration of justice, avoidance of multiplicity of intermediate courts, simplification of general procedure, abolition of case law and the decisions of the Panchayats to be final except in case of corruption or obvious misapplication of law.¹³

Gandhi’s Panchyat Raj ensures that no interests are excluded from the governing process. Effective checks on the power of sinister interests are constituted through the moral authority of the community. Citizens are provided opportunities to pool their information and insights, deliberate together, criticize each other’s ideas and arrive at collective decisions. The very processes of political participation will make citizens feel “responsible” for their political actions, as well as for consequences will heighten awareness of their true interests as well as a communitarian concern for the wellbeing of fellow beings.

Hence, the Gandhian model visualizes an upward movement of authority from the base to the apex – in the form of circles, as explained earlier. Gandhi stands for a decentralized economic view of production and for a democratic control over it. In the sphere of production, the non –violent society will be built on self-contained villages and cottage industries. Gandhi is opposed to large –scale centralized production due to its dehumanizing impact. He would withdraw his objection, if the indispensable ‘centralized production is so planned as to subserve and not ruin villages and then crafts.’¹⁴

Gandhi is often accused of being an adamant pre-modern, anti-technologists; but in fact he is not against such modern technical facilities as can be used in decentralizing cottage industries. It is often contended that the decentralized small political communities of Gandhi’s dreams would be totally out of place in the current context of globalization and privatization.

True, amid the contemporary political reality of competitive power mechanism in all spheres of life and at all levels, Gandhi’s universe of small, simple, rural,

harmonious communitarian political units is clearly out-molded, in literal terms. However, the basic argument of Gandhi's alternative model of democracy, that is, Gram Swaraj goes beyond the structural parameters of institutional democracy. For Gandhiji the ultimate quest of a genuine democratic order is to revive the wholeness of man to him, to make him feel capable of determining the conditions and conduct of his own life as well of the life of the community. It is now an established truth that to give a person a share of the responsibility for governing the society, of which he is a part, is the most effective way of contributing to his moral and intellectual development. Man without power becomes apathetic, individualistic, or else rebellious.

Empowerment of an individual-man or woman and of the community is better assured in small units of political organization.

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