

Gandhian Concept of Just Society

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Abstract

Gandhi has witnessed that there was a lack of equal opportunity for all on the fronts of caste consideration, education, health care, availability of food, liberty in living, etc. These are the basic needs of a just society. Gandhi while seeking justice for all he has aimed at a just society. He has revised the concept of God, ideal social order, and human freedom as per the needs of the Indian society. In the practical approach to the issue he has emphasized of two important aspects, namely, equality and non-violence. In this value-degraded society Gandhian ideal of a just society is a matter of concern.

Keywords

Truth, Equality, Sarvodaya, swaraj, ahimsa, and freedom.

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It is a fact that Gandhi has witnessed a very precarious condition of the Indian society which has prompted him to think of taking steps to proceed towards a just society. The lack of equal opportunity for all on the fronts of education, health care, availability of food, liberty in living, etc. were the basic facts of the then society. There was no respect for the rights and liberties in any manner. Rather various types of exploitations were in operation in every corner of India. In seeking justice for all he has aimed at a just society.

Just Society

If we think of the basic factors necessary for a just society the following conditions appear to be quite significant. It is necessary to treat all individuals equally not before the law but in every respect of living in the society irrespective of wealth or caste or any other thing that matters. The basic facilities for the common man should be available regardless of the race, sex, religion, ethnicity, etc. All types of distinctions need to be diminished. There should be equal opportunity for everyone and equal respect for all. The minimum requirements should be the opportunities of free basic education to all, free basic health care to all and also a simple living condition for all. To achieve such a state Gandhi wanted to attach emphasis on the following issues in his own line of thinking.

He has planned to fight against the injustice related to the caste system, untouchability, human freedom, equality, etc. He wanted that everywhere there should be proper respect for the truth. He has introduced a new concept of *satyagraha* to be practiced within his programs. He has placed maximum emphasis on the method of non-violence without which the practice of *satyagraha* would not have been possible. Thus few of his basic ideal concepts are: Truth, Non-violence, Equality and Human Freedom, on which the discussions will follow briefly.

Truth

Attachment to the importance of the concept of truth is not new either in India or abroad, either in philosophy or in any other knowledge-seeking literature. But the way Gandhi has attached importance to truth is somewhat exceptional and remarkable. He has considered truth to be the highest ideal to be practiced in life. It is not merely a property of a proposition or judgment. For him to follow the truth is as good as following morality. Truth also represents the inner conscience. And for him Truth is not different from God. He has written that "For me truth is the sovereign principle which includes numerous other principles. This truth is not only truthfulness in word, but truthfulness in thought also, and not only the relative truth of our conception, but the Absolute Truth, the Eternal Principle that is God."¹ It shows that he has viewed truth ontologically and also morally.

Gandhi has used the concept of Truth mostly in the absolute sense. At the same time he has maintained that it is not easy to attend to the absolute truth. To attend to Absolute Truth is as good as the attainment of *moksha*. So he has also emphasized on relative truths and has suggested that the initial attempt should be to know and practice the relative truths. He suggests that it is relative truth which guides our thoughts and actions. For him the relative truths are definable and describable. Relative truth is attainable in this temporal world in human form. The practice of love and non-violence in thought and action can be considered as the influence of the relative truth. For him relative truth is the means and the Absolute Truth is the end. It is like ahimsa is the means and Truth is the end. The former can be taken as relative and the latter to be the Absolute. The Absolute truth is the ontological absolute and the relative truth remains contained in the epistemological and ethical level.

According to Gandhi “The word *satya* comes out of *Sat*, which means ‘to be’, ‘to exist’. Only God is ever the same through all time.” This has prompted him to ascribe absolute status to truth. The truth is absolute in the sense it has no boundary. He has viewed Truth as a metaphysical reality rather than as be moral or epistemological principle.

Truth is God

The concept of Truth happens to be the most important concept for Gandhi. It is clear from the fact that he identifies Truth with God. Gandhi knew that there was difference between *Satya* (truth) and *Sat* (reality). He also realized that the *Satya* has been derived from *Sat* or reality. Gandhi did not find any difficulty in identifying Truth and reality. He has said “My uniform experience has convinced me that there is no other God than Truth...”

Gandhi, at one stage, has realized that one can reject or accept God but one cannot reject the Truth. One may say God is one or many. Or one may say X is God. or Y is God., etc. There can be a thousand names for God. It is conflicting and confusing. But Truth always is one. There cannot be any conflict regarding Truth. The supposition about God may differ from person to person, from religion to religion, etc. But Truth cannot differ. So it is better to accept Truth is God. According to Gandhi reason can reject anything but not Truth. For him, in Truth such force is present that could unify even conflicting ideas and ideals. He considers that it is not possible to describe God. To describe God we can easily say ‘God is Truth’. But Gandhi goes one step ahead to say that ‘Truth is God’.

Mankind can be divided into two groups on the grounds of believing in God. The believers will be theists and the non-believers will be atheists. But the

theists-atheists division will not arise if it is accepted that 'Truth is God'. Truth provides a common platform both to theists and atheists. So by accepting Truth is God we get religious value and pragmatic value out of it. The 'worship of Truth' can very well be the basis of universal religion. He has said "You will see the fine distinction between the two statements, namely that God is Truth and Truth is God. And I concluded a continuous and relentless search after Truth."² In this context B. K. Lal remarks that 'These implications have both a pragmatic value and a religious value. One very significant implication of this assertion is that the object of worship is not God but Truth. This can very well become a basis for a Universal religion.' The reason behind is this that the worship of Truth is one thing that can bring persons of various castes, creeds and nations together.

He says God should not be only for intellectual satisfaction or curiosity. A faith in God should enable us to bring peace in the world. The existing conception of God is not helpful in this respect. Rather the worship of Truth will definitely be able to establish peace in the world. The worship of Truth can bring persons of every caste, creed and nation together. It is clear that God can be pantheistic, polytheistic, etc. But Truth is one and has the most clear picture everywhere.

The blind religious importance of God sometimes has caused damage to the mankind. But this problem will not to be there if the importance is attached to truth. Gandhi says "I do not care for God if he is not anything but Truth". "He is no God who merely satisfies the intellect, if he ever does. God to be God must rule the heart and transform it."³ Gandhi identifies God with morality with the understanding that "Goodness is God. ... We try to become good because we want to reach and realize God. All the dry ethics of the world turn to dust because apart from God they are lifeless."⁴ According to Gandhi, "My uniform experience has convinced me that there is no other God than Truth...the little fleeting glimpses, therefore, that I have been able to have of Truth can hardly convey an idea of the indescribable luster of truth, a million times more intense than that of the sun we daily see with our eyes. In fact what I have caught is only the faintest glimmer of that mighty effulgence."⁵

It is important to note that Gandhi did not remain contended in saying 'God is Truth.' Rather he has attached maximum emphasis by saying that 'Truth is God'. He has clearly mentioned that "If it is at all possible for the human tongue to give the fullest description of God,... then we must say that God is Truth....But I went a step further and said Truth is God....I never found a double meaning in connection with truth,...Hence the definition 'Truth is God' gives me the greatest satisfaction."⁶ Very often attention is drawn to Gandhi's conversion from "God is Truth" to "Truth is God". This simple conversion is within the scope of the rules of conversion when

the subject and the predicate have equal extension. But 'Truth' and 'God' are abstract concepts and have no extension; so these statements cannot be understood in the ordinary way of referring to equal number of entities for this simple conversion. This only expresses a change of emphasis from a God-centred way of life to a Truth-centred way of life.

Non-violence

Though the concept of non-violence or *ahimsa* is very old so far as the Indian religions and philosophical tradition is concerned, undoubtedly Gandhi has given a new dimension to it. It was his key weapon to materialize all his dreams and plans. To establish a *Sarvodaya* society, which was his dream, not only freedom or equality was felt to be essential but the practice of non-violence was also considered to be essential. To Gandhi non-violence was not mere non-killing. Non-violence was non-exploitation and the exposition of the innate goodness of man. Gandhi considered non-violence as the law of the human race and violence as the law of the brute.

In the Gandhian framework *ahimsa* has to be considered as a primary concept being closely related with the concepts like truth, *satyagraha*, *sarvodaya*, peace, etc. The practice of it is treated as the panacea for the social and moral problems. His basic assumption was that sooner or later violence would fail to achieve anything tangible. Ahimsa if properly utilised, by definition cannot fail. Ahimsa is preferred because it is the nobler, swifter and surest means to success.

Gandhi has attached the highest importance to non-violence as *ahimsa* was considered by him to be the highest (*parama*) dharma. For him the practice of *ahimsa* is the highest moral principle that one can cultivate for any kind of altruistic ideal. The foundation of *ahimsa* is tolerance and love. All virtues require some amount of self-sacrifice and this is possible through love. Love for a fellow being is essential factor for any ideal society or peaceful society. His ideal society being *Sarvodaya* which aims at the upliftment of all the practices of non-violence is an essential requirement.

Ahimsa as a weapon was utilized by Gandhi to fight against British rulers to achieve the freedom of India. The success in achieving the freedom for India through *ahimsa* as the chief weapon not only proved the importance of *ahimsa* in the political field but also became one of the key concepts of the Gandhian political Philosophy. Gandhi's emphasis on *ahimsa* is not an emotional outburst but rather a political strategy on the ground that the result of French Revolution (through violence means) instead of inviting a sound consequence reversed the situation. His inclination for *ahimsa* is very strong for the reason that the force behind it can be effective in any

hard situation which is very difficult to achieve through the method of violence. Raghavan very aptly assesses that “Gandhi’s extreme advocacy of ahimsa is clearly bound up with his presuppositions about nature, man and history”.⁷ For him Gandhi was not merely a believer of the principle of ahimsa but he was both an exponent of ahimsa and a propagandist also. It is known to us that Gandhi was firmly opposed to violence or terrorism in any form. Gandhi believed that a faith in Western civilization and blind adherence to modern civilization would somehow invite violence.

According to Gandhi absolute *ahimsa* is not possible. Absolute *ahimsa* is an attribute of God only. Since man shares divinity in him, and for his implicit innate goodness, it is expected that man can rationally think to develop tolerance and love for all others including the animals and creatures. This endeavor will help in the achievement of the principle of *ahimsa*. He considers that somewhere in some form *ahimsa* is inevitable.

Why non-violence?

1. Non-violence is a method of self-purification. To practice it is to purify the self and then proceed to follow it. It is because Non-violence requires using the soul force. So non-violence is a training that requires dedication and discipline.
2. Non-violence has the potency to change the mind of an evildoer.
3. The strength of non-violence is to prove that man is not only for himself but for others also. He is for man and also for animals. He should never be cruel to other men or animals.
4. Non-violence is always higher or superior to violence. It is very easy to become violent. But it is difficult to remain non-violent all the time.
5. Non-violence is a more powerful weapon than violence. It is because the end of violence is always defeated. But there is no defeat in non-violence.
6. The end of the application of non-violence is victory. It is victory of the humanity, not the person. So non-violence is a moral virtue.
7. Non-violence is not cowardice. Rather it is a strong weapon to fight the evils. So fearlessness is an essential requirement for this. Gandhi has written that “Non-violence and cowardice go ill together. I can imagine a fully armed man to be at heart a coward. Possession of arms implies an element of fear, if not cowardice. But true non-violence is an impossibility without the possession of unadulterated fearlessness.”⁸
8. Non-violence is applicable in all kinds of human affairs. He has written that “We have to make Truth and non-violence, not matters of individual practice

but for practice of groups and communities and nations. ... Ahimsa is the attribute of the soul, and, therefore, to be practiced every day in all affairs of life. If it cannot be practiced in all departments, it has no practical value.”⁹

9. Non-violence is possible when there is absolute faith in God.

Some scholars point out that Gandhi was not successful in giving empirical arguments for ahimsa as a policy as he had taken for granted that it would be effective by definition. The other objection pointed out against him was he has failed to make a distinction between *ahimsa* as a creed and policy. If it can be proved that *ahimsa* is unavoidable then the basic assumption of Gandhi would be at stake. But no cultural tradition has ever tried to establish that *ahimsa* is unavoidable. Only terrorists who have no principle to follow except violence may advocate in support of violence. The governing trend of terrorism and violence in the society will face a big social crisis.

Equality

It has been made clear that the primary aim of Gandhi was to bring reformation in the society. One of the major problems of the society was the consideration of inequality in various fronts in various manners. Gandhi has emphasized on equality in both the generic as well as the specific ways. He had specifically emphasized on equality while planning to establish *the Sarvodaya* social order. And in general he emphasized on equality to bridge the extreme gap between the rich and the poor, facilities for men and women, the superiority and inferiority complexes, etc.

The feeling of superiority with many was the main factor leading to different types of exploitations. His primary concern was to establish social justice. And there cannot be social justice without social and political equality. Moreover it is seen that the consideration of equality was very much important for Gandhi for the reason that without it neither non-violence can be implemented properly nor freedom can be possible. Both non-violence and freedom were essentially needed values for him. So he was also aiming at equality both on the social, economic and political fronts.

He considered that an individual should not be deprived of his basic needs. There should not be huge gaps in respect of the wages. He was interested in following the principle of ‘equal wages for equal work’. It comes under economic equality. To achieve economic equality Gandhi has suggested the following two methods and those are trusteeship and bread labour. The trusteeship stands for giving up the practice of individual ownership of the land and properties. There should trusts as

the owner and distributor of properties. Similarly bread labor stands for the consideration that every individual must contribute some labour for the production of the food materials.

No work should be treated as a higher type in comparison with other works. A teacher, a carpenter, an engineer, an advocate or a person belonging to some other profession needs to be treated as one cadre. This consideration comes under social equality. Gandhi knew that complete equality or absolute equality could not be achieved. Knowing that it is unattainable Gandhi wanted that there must be an attempt to establish equality as far as practicable not through any rigid methods but by the application of moral-force or love-force. This approach of Gandhi has become more idealistic and became less practical.

Human Freedom

The concept of freedom is used in different spheres in different ways. In Indian philosophy mostly it is used in the sense of absolute freedom of freedom from bondage referring to the release from the birth–rebirth cycle that human beings undergo. But in political philosophy it refers to political freedom mostly in the sense of enjoying certain fundamental rights being sanctioned by the government or the ruler. The freedom of the nation is different from the human freedom. The former refers to the cases where the ruler is a foreigner to the nation. The latter refers to the availability of the opportunity for a free-living style.

However, it is clear that ‘freedom’ refers to absence of any kind of compulsion and the availability of free choice. However the availability of free choice is not enough to understand Gandhian stand in respect of human freedom. It may be made clear that Gandhi was not expecting the freedom available to individuals either through democratic or communistic governments. The freedom emphasized in the constitutions of the democratic setups are limited with respect to above mentioned view about freedom. Marx also emphasized on freedom and equality aiming at a classless society. So his concept of freedom was linked to the interest of ‘class’ instead of ‘individuals’. But Gandhi has speculated the concept of freedom which should have a moral basis. It is because his emphasis on freedom cannot be separated from his notion of *swaraj*. He conceived freedom as a means for the attainment of *swaraj*. For Gandhi, freedom stands for a voluntary moral activity. It is a kind of moral responsibility or a moral choice, which is to be exercised by the individual for the courses of activities to be undertaken by him. There should not be any type of pressure on the individual to act aiming at the self-rule. The pressures very often do not leave scope for honoring the inner

conscience. Gandhi wanted that the individual should be capable of acting as per his inner voice to enjoy proper freedom.

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