

A Reflection on Gandhi's Concept of Man and Society

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explain and examine Gandhi's concept of human nature, society, and the relationship between individual liberty and collective responsibility. His ideas stress the importance of balancing personal aspirations with the greater good. Gandhi saw social reform as essential to attaining true freedom (swaraj), arguing that tackling social ills is vital for progress. Using a qualitative approach, this paper investigates Gandhi's views on humanity and society, scrutinizes the equilibrium between individual rights and social obligations, and emphasizes the need to address social issues to achieve authentic freedom. The paper focuses Gandhi's continued relevance, as social challenges persist in hindering human development, which is where the paper's relevance lies.

Keywords: *Freedom, man, society.*

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Introduction

The philosophies of Plato and Aristotle advocate that humans are rational and social beings. Humans are bound by societal norms yet capable of exercising freedom for personal and collective growth. Balancing individual desires with social responsibility is crucial, as unchecked individualism can lead to imbalance. Gandhiji says, “Unrestricted individualism is the law of the best of the jungle. We have learned to strike the mean between individual freedom and social restraint. Willing submission of social restraint for the sake of the well-being of the whole society enriches both the individual and the society of which one is a member.”¹ He believed social reform and the pursuit of *swaraj* are intertwined, as social evils hinder progress, hence, “To postpone social reform till after the attainment of *Swaraj* is not to know the meaning of *Swaraj*.”² Thus, there is no question of doubt that Gandhiji emphasizes the need to address social issues for true freedom.

Objectives: The paper aims to:

- (i) Explore Gandhi’s perspective on human nature and societal structure
- (ii) Analyze the balance between individual rights and social duties
- (iii) Highlight the need to address social issues for achieving genuine freedom.

Methodology: This study uses a qualitative approach, drawing on primary and secondary literature. It examines Gandhi’s writings and statements to understand his ideas. It explores Gandhi’s thoughts on human nature and society, and how he balances individual freedom with social duties. It also looks at his views on social reform and *swaraj*, with the goal of understanding how these ideas contribute to achieving true freedom.

Discussion and findings

Gandhi’s vision of humanity was deeply intertwined with society, where individual metamorphosis was the catalyst for broader societal shifts, necessitating a profound inner cleansing. He pinpointed entrenched issues like communal rifts, social disparities, self-reliance gaps, educational shortcomings, and pervasive fears as formidable barriers to this evolution and societal rejuvenation. It is important to note that Gandhi’s life was a testament to constructive nation-building, where he harnessed the latent energy of millions through inclusive efforts, illustrating that principled social action can be a potent antidote to humanity’s woes, and emphasizing a holistic path where personal and collective upliftment converge to realize authentic freedom, or *swaraj*. An amicable way to overcome humanity’s problems is through social force. For Gandhi, humanity’s problems, including inequality, can be overcome by adhering to the principles outlined below.

Bread Labour: Gandhi's bread labour concept emphasized valuing all work, aiming to reduce social gaps. He drew inspiration from various thinkers and texts, such as Tolstoy's writings and Ruskin's '*Unto This Last*', promoting a blend of physical and mental effort for personal and societal benefit. Gandhi highlighted the importance of balancing intellectual pursuits with physical labour, serving humanity's greater good. He believed individuals should work to sustain themselves and contribute to society, saying, "Every healthy individual must labour enough for his food, and his intellectual faculties must be exercised not in order to obtain a living or amass a fortune, but only in the service of mankind."³ This approach, Gandhi hoped, would lead to a world with equality, no hunger, and overall well-being.

It is interesting to note that Gandhi advocated for simplicity, suggesting people limit themselves to essential needs, as excessive consumption can deprive others. He linked over-accumulation to global hunger, emphasizing that labour should serve both personal and societal needs. Such work, according to Gandhiji, is essentially social service. He stated, "A person who labours for the general good of all serves society and is worthy of his hire. Therefore, such bread labour is not different from social service."⁴

Swadeshi: Swadeshi represents a selfless approach to community service, where focusing on one's immediate surroundings sparks a broader movement of kindness. By serving those closest to us, we initiate a ripple effect that extends far beyond our local boundaries. Gandhi's interpretation highlights the neighbour as the starting point, with the understanding that this act of service will cascade into a larger, more compassionate society. This philosophy champions localized service, acknowledging that global change often begins with individual actions and recognizes the limitations of human capacity, making it a potent strategy for fostering interconnectedness and empathy. As Gandhi said, "Swadeshi is that spirit which dictates man to serve his next-door neighbour to the exclusion of any other. The condition is that the neighbour thus served has in his turn to serve his own neighbour. In this sense, Swadeshi is never exclusive. It recognizes the scientific limitation of human capacity for service."⁵

Gandhi claimed that serving one's neighbour is a fundamental duty. However, this shouldn't breed exclusion or hatred towards others, including foreigners or fellow citizens. He recognized human limitations in serving others. He also believed that if everyone served their neighbour effectively, it would create a ripple effect of support, benefiting those in need globally. By focusing on serving those around us without excluding others, we contribute to a broader support network. For Gandhi, serving one's neighbour is a step towards serving humanity. This is how individual acts of service collectively save the world according to Gandhi.

It is important to note here that Gandhi drew parallels between *Swadeshi* and the Gita's *Swadharma*, describing "*Swadeshi* as *Swadharma* applied to one's immediate environment."⁶ He believed serving distant others at the expense of one's neighbour contradicts *Swadeshi*'s principles. This philosophy emphasizes selfless service. Here is what Gandhi states, "There is no place for self-interest in *swadeshi*, which enjoins the sacrifice of oneself for the family, of the family for the village, of the village for the country, and of the country for humanity."⁷ Thus, it reveals that Gandhi saw all beings as part of a global family, where individual actions impact the world.

The most pertinent question that needs to be addressed is: how can *Swadeshi* be achieved? At this juncture, it can be said that *Swadeshi* is attained through dedicated effort and can be seen as a means to spread love and non-violence. Gandhi believed that *Swadeshi* holds the key to liberation, extending its relevance to religious, political, and economic spheres. As a result, *Swadeshi* aims for spiritual liberation, freeing the soul from physical constraints. Gandhi says, "In its ultimate and spiritual sense, *swadeshi* stands for the final emancipation of the soul from her earthly bondage... A votary of *swadeshi*, therefore, in his striving to identify himself with the entire creation, seeks to be emancipated from the bondage of the physical body."⁸
Removal of Untouchability and other Reforms: Untouchability is a deeply ingrained prejudice within the Hindu community and religion. It is worth noting that those deemed 'untouchables' are often marginalized and disrespected, despite potentially being spiritually pure. Gandhi worked tirelessly to eradicate this untouchability as it is a social evil. Thus, Gandhi strove to bring about a change in the hearts of traditional Hindus.

It would not be an exaggeration if we claim that Gandhi strongly opposed untouchability. For Gandhi, the term 'human' is an umbrella concept as he believes that all humans are equal under one sky. No group should be marginalized from birth, according to Gandhi. It is everyone's responsibility to courageously end this evil and liberate those affected. The 'untouchables' are an integral part of the Hindu community. While Hinduism acknowledges certain circumstances for temporary untouchability, it is linked to actions, not inherent identity, and can be overcome. Furthermore, Gandhi saw no justification for untouchability by birth in Hinduism. He viewed it as a contradiction to the principle of non-violence that Hindus hold dear. Since all humans are God's creations, they are equal in God's eyes and under the law. Treating anyone as untouchable is a sin, implying superiority over others. Thus, instead of untouchability and distinction, Gandhi believed in equality among all people, with no hierarchy of high and low.

Here, one might ask: how can we overcome the barrier of untouchability? To reply to this question, it can be said that Gandhi believed Hindus must purify their souls, embracing their 'untouchable' brothers and sisters with love, recognizing humanity's shared essence. As he said, "Hinduism teaches us to regard the whole of humanity as one invisible and undivided family and holds each one of us responsible for the misdeeds of all."⁹ What it reveals is that *ahimsa* can dissolve these deep-seated prejudices, upholding Hinduism's core values.

Varnas and Communal Unity: If we look back, there was a *varna* system in ancient India. The ancient Indian *varna* system, meant to organize society, got distorted over time, spawning sub-castes and deep-seated prejudices that Gandhi couldn't ignore. He sought to revive the original intent, clarifying that the *varna* system aimed for harmony, not hierarchy. Simultaneously, he worked tirelessly to bridge Hindu-Muslim divides. Gandhi believed that his service was for humanity, beyond borders or creed. Thus, Gandhi's vision for India was rooted in unity, equality, and compassion, transcending narrow prejudices and man-made barriers, echoing his mantra of universal brotherhood and service to all.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it can be said that as a leading campaigner for a welfare state, Gandhi makes no distinction among individuals. For him, man is an important part of society. Man should work for his own development and that of society to a great extent. When there is no distinction among us, there is overall development. As a result, we can hope for the welfare of society and the state as a whole. In other words, Gandhiji envisions a human society in the broadest sense, where peace and harmony prevail. This is, in a sense, a social change aimed at creating a world community. Gandhi's philosophy was deeply rooted in the idea that individual transformation is the key to broader societal change. He believed in addressing social evils like untouchability, communal discord, and economic disparities head-on, advocating for a holistic approach to freedom – not just political, but social and spiritual as well. His concepts of bread labour and *Swadeshi* emphasized selfless service, equality, and compassion, urging individuals to prioritize the well-being of their immediate community and, by extension, humanity.

It is important to note here that through his tireless efforts, Gandhi showed that principled social action could be a powerful catalyst for change. He envisioned a society where individuals recognize their shared humanity, work towards the greater good, and transcend narrow prejudices. By embracing love, non-violence, and service, Gandhi believed India could pave a path to true *swaraj* – a path that leads to the upliftment of all, echoing his dream of universal brotherhood and interconnectedness.

Thus, his legacy continues to inspire those seeking a more just, equitable, and compassionate world. This, in brief, is how Gandhiji perceived a greater human society where there is peace and equality.

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