
**GANDHIAN PERSPECTIVE OF SOCIALISM
(RELEVANCE IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA)**

Sonu Kapila*

ABSTRACT

There is need to re-assess the value of Gandhi's social and economic ideas in the context of contemporary problems of not only India but also world. India will be really independent if it becomes independent in terms of economic self-dependence and basic facilities are provided to all. Similarly, in the reckless world of Capitalism, Free trade, Liberalisation, Globalization and Privatisation, Gandhian philosophy teaches us not to forget the welfare of whole humanity. Gandhi was primarily a social reformer. He called himself a 'social revolutionist'. He had to enter politics because political handicaps stood in the way of the realization of his ideals of social change. He was the first Indian politician to give a social dimension to the Indians struggle for freedom from British rule. The Congress in its earlier days, had repeatedly turned down the suggestion to devote its attention to the social problems under the fear that this would divide the national political front. Gandhi removed the distinction between social and political activities. In today's political scene, only the political objectives have become prime concern whereas Gandhi felt that socio-economic issues should be of primary importance as compared to political goals of a party. Gandhian ideas on socialism need to be studied in today's competitive world of profit-making and lop-sided development.

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*Assistant Professor, PG Dept. of History, D.A.V. College, Abohar-152116 (Punjab) India

INTRODUCTION

What is Socialism? According to Dictionary of Philosophy, “Socialism is a social system which comes into being as a result of socialist revolution (q.v.) setting off the transition from capitalism to communism. Socialism is based on public ownership of the means of production, which precludes the existence of exploiter classes and of the exploitation of man by man, and provides for relations of comradely co-operation and mutual assistance in society.”¹ There is need to re-assess the value of Gandhi’s economic and political ideas in the context of contemporary problems of not only India but also world. India will be really independent if it becomes independent in terms of economic self-dependence and basic facilities are provided to all. Similarly, in the reckless world of Capitalism, Free trade, Liberalisation, Globalization and Privatisation, Gandhian philosophy teaches us not to forget the welfare of whole humanity.

According to Gandhi the meaning of Socialism is different. Gandhi had no love for text-book socialism, communism, or Bolshevism. He could not approve of any action to gain an ideology if it meant use of violence. The individual was the corner of the edifice of social reconstruction. Gandhi’s conception of socialism is gleaned from the following texts : “Socialism is a beautiful work and, so far as I am aware, in socialism all the members of the society are equal – none low, none high. In individual body the head is not high because it is the top of the body nor are the soles of the feet low because they touch the earth. Even as members of individual body are equal, so are members of the society. This is socialism.”² Also, he did not believe in class-struggle as the Marxist believed. He had his own vision of socialism. Gandhi was primarily a social reformer. He called himself a ‘social revolutionist’. He had to enter politics because political handicaps stood in the way of the realization of his ideals of social change. He was the first Indian politician to give a social dimension to the Indians struggle for freedom from British rule. The Congress in its earlier days, had repeatedly turned down the suggestion to devote its attention to the social problems under the fear that this would divide the national political front. Gandhi removed the distinction between social and political activities by frequently taking up the cause of those who suffered glaring social and economic disabilities, and gradually inspired the Congress to identify by itself with the poor, oppressed and toiling masses of India.³

SOCIAL PROGRAMMES OF GANDHI

The main social goal towards which Gandhi strove all his life was the establishment of a village-based Indian society free from all forms of exploitation. That to him meant *Swaraj* and the

spinning wheel with all that it implied was the primary means to achieve it. Besides *Khadi*, the other chief plank of his social platform were; (1) promotion of Hindu-Muslim unity, (2) removal of untouchability, (3) prohibition of intoxicating drugs and drinks, (4) amelioration of the condition of women, (5) substitution of Indian Vernaculars for English as medium of instruction, (6) popularization of Hindi as the national language of India, (7) improvement of the breed of cow and its progenies, etc. These goals suggest that he wanted to work for the overall social development of the masses. All the social problems of Indians concerned him. A balanced development of all the members of society was his prime motive.

SOCIAL IDEOLOGY OF INDIAN NATIONAL MOVEMENT

A major ideological dimension of the national movement was the over-all social outlook of Gandhi and the Gandhians. Gandhi did not accept a class analysis of society and the role of class struggle. He was also opposed to the use of violence even in defence of the interests of the poor. But his basic outlook was that of social transformation. He was committed to basic changes in the existing system of economic and political power.⁴

He universalized the scope of Indian politics, emphasizing the world-historical character of the Indian struggle as representing the struggle of the oppressed and the exploited against all oppressors and exploiters. He thought of himself as fighting for a better world-order and not simply for a free India. Indeed, until comparatively late in his political career, he did not emphasize so much the freedom of India, as he did a reformed British Commonwealth in which India could be a self-respecting and valuable partner. In his own view, the Indian movement was not national but universal-human – one global in scope and paralleling the Marxist movement.⁵ Prior to coming of Gandhi in Indian politics, Congress lacked social programme and ideology and hence had no mass appeal. It was given a new lease of life when a definite ideology for the overall development of masses was inserted by Gandhi.

Swaraj and Socialism

The word *Swaraj* had a very limited meaning before Gandhi broadened its concept. The Congress had adopted it as its goal in 1906, but this *Swaraj* simply meant attainment by India of a political status. As such it did not satisfy Gandhi. In his famous pamphlet *Hind Swaraj* or *Indian Home Rule* published from South Africa in 1908 he plainly observed that it was ‘the English-knowing Indians that have enslaved India and hence the mere transfer of political power from the English into the hands of these Indians would do no good to the Indian people. The real

problem, according to Gandhi, was ; “how can the millions obtain self rule?” By *Swaraj* he meant making the people of India economically self-reliant, politically self-governing and morally self-respecting and courageous. The dream of real *Swaraj* of Gandhi is still unfulfilled until there is even one poor person in India. Even after 66 years of independence according to a data still there are about 35 crore poor people in India.

Peasants as the epitome of Indian Freedom Struggle

The disintegration of the Indian village community as a result of economic exploitation of the peasantry by the foreign capitalists and their agents, the Indian towns-people, was to be stopped by revival of the old village industries and restoration of the traditional village institutions of self-government. The traditional faith of the Indian peasantry in passive resistance to resist oppression and injustice was to be revived and reinforced. The Indian peasants, in Gandhi’s opinion, had been practicing passive resistance since time immemorial against successive hordes of invaders, and this, according to him, accounted for survival of the rural India through the ages, “Peasants”, said Gandhi, “have never been subdued by the sword and never will be. They do not know the use of the sword and they are not frightened by the use of it by others.”⁶ The most remarkable development was Gandhi’s shift towards agrarian radicalism. Hamza Alavi says in her article that Gandhi used to inspire leaders of the Congress like Jawaharlal Nehru to go the peasants. Nehru says, “He sent us to the villages and the countryside innumerable messengers of a new gospel of action. The peasant was shaken up and he began to emerge from his quiescent shell. The effect on us was different, but equally far reaching, for we saw for the first time, as it were the villager.”⁷ In 1937, he said: “That the land today does not belong to the people is too true... (But) Land and all property is his who will work it. Unfortunately the workers are or have been kept ignorant of this simple fact.”⁸ The main thing was to rid the agriculturists of their fear by making them realize that the officials were not the masters but the servants of the people, inasmuch as they received their salaries from the taxpayer. And then it seemed well-nigh impossible to make them realize the duty of combining civility with fearlessness.

Satyagrah, Aprarigraha and Socialism

Satyagraha, Passive resistance, as enunciated in the *Hind Swaraj*, is a method of securing rights by personal suffering. It is the art of using soul-force against brute-force and thereby dissuading the adversary from acts of injustice.

Gandhi was against “mass-society.” He was uncompromisingly opposed to modern industrial technological society and civilization. He knew what forces, what propensities underlie such a socio-cultural system; and unlike most contemporary thinkers and leaders, he remained relentlessly consistent and thorough going in his opposition to these forces. He went to the root of the matter and attacked the very concept of a rising standard of living. He could see most clearly what this really meant, viz., a continually rising standard of consumption even to the point when rapid, built-in obsolescence and wanton destruction become the controlling principles of the economy. In opposition to this economic theory, he boldly set-up the theory of *Aparigraha* (non-possession, non-acquisitiveness) and the minimisation of wants. The principle of *Aparigraha*, it is to be noted, is one that emphasizes the present and hence it severely limits the cumulative process and thus undermines a capitalist as well as a State-planned ‘Socialist’ production system. Indeed, the ideas of minimal wants and of non-possession pre-suppose a world outlook that is quite incompatible with the currently accepted ideology for a planned society.

The Social Aspects of Non-Cooperation and Khilafat

At Nagpur the goal of the Congress was redefined, at Gandhi’s instance, as ‘the attainment of *Swaraj* within the British Empire if possible and without if necessary.’ The Nagpur Congress, again at Gandhi’s instance, made it obligatory for every Congressman to wear *Khadi*. By doing so the Congress, to use Gandhi’s own words, “established a living bond of relationship with the ‘skeleton’ of India.”

The social objectives of the Non-Co-operation Movement was to bring about a unity of interest and purpose between the urban middle class, who had hitherto dominated the social and political life of the country, and the rural masses, on whose labour they used to subsist. Gandhi found in *Khadi* and the spinning-wheel the most suitable means of achieving this objective. His idea was that hand-spinning would provide useful employment to the poor peasants during the long period of their enforced idleness. The wearing of *Khadi* by all would not only stop the flow of money from the villages to the towns and thence to the foreign countries, but also ensure the regular flow of money from the towns to the villages.

The Social Aspect of Bardoli Movement

In 1928 the peasants of Bardoli were allowed by Gandhi to prove their mettle under the leadership of Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel in a peaceful revolt against the British authorities to

resist enhancement of rent. The Bardoli peasants suffered all forms of repression at the hands of the Government but continued their heroic struggle till the Government capitulated and cancelled the enhanced rent. The whole of India which had looked at this movement with the greatest attention regarded it as a great triumph of *Satyagrah*.

The Social Aspect of Civil Disobedience Movement

The massive participation of the peasantry in the Civil Disobedience Movement throughout the length and breadth of India rendered it obligatory for the Congress to pronounce its social objectives. This was done by well-known Resolution on Fundamental Rights and Economic Policy passed at the Karachi session of the Congress in March 1931. The preamble of the resolution declared, "In order to end the exploitation of the masses, political freedom must include real economic freedom of the starving million." The object of this resolution, in Gandhi's words, was "to indicate to the poor inarticulate Indians the broad features of *Swaraj* or *Ram Raj*."

Village as the Keystone of Indian Social order

His civilization is village and not city civilization. Nothing will be allowed to be produced by cities which can be equally well produced by the village products. The villages therefore needed protection against the inroads of the cities. At one time the cities were dependent on villages. Now it is the reverse. Villages are being exploited by the cities. The revival of the village is possible only when it is no more exploited. Industrialisation on the mass scale will necessarily lead to the passive or active exploitation of the villages as the problem of competition and marketing comes in.

Belief in theory of Trusteeship

Gandhi's theory of Trusteeship was enunciated in reply to socialists who wanted to deprive *Zamindars* and ruling chiefs of their privileges and wealth. Indeed at the root of this doctrine of equal distribution of wealth must lie that of the trusteeship of the wealthy for the superfluous wealth possessed by them. For according to the doctrine, they may not possess a rupee more than their neighbours. The rich will be left in possession of his wealth of which he will use what he reasonably require for his personal need and will act as a trustee is assumed. If the rich did not behave as trustees of their wealth. Gandhi advocated non-violent, non co-operation, and civil disobedience as the only infallible remedy.

CONCLUSION

In today's political scene, only the political objectives have become prime concern whereas Gandhi felt that socio-economic issues should be of primary importance as compared to political goals of a party. More than once, he made social issues as the main issues of Indian National Congress whereas political parties are running after political power in contemporary India. People understand the political gimmicks of such parties. They are trying to find new options in the form of AAP. Social aspect has to be of prime concern especially in context of privatisation and globalization. Although a great political leader, his inner heart delighted not in discussion with diplomats, statesmen and governors but in serving the sick and poor whom he considered the neglected children of God. Like the democracy which is the one pillar of our country's political setup similarly, social welfare should be the other pillar of our country's social setup.

In today's world of free trade, if the objective of big economic powers and corporations will be to earn only profit, how could they develop countries like India as world market. In this context, Gandhian principle of trusteeship is very important. The government of India should make it mandatory for the international corporations in India as well as the indigenous giants to set aside a fixed amount of their surplus for social spending to fulfill of dreams a socialist India as envisaged by Gandhi.

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