

# GANDHI'S VISION AND REALITY ON DEMOCRATIC DECENTRALISATION

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Villages are the soul of India. Mahatma Gandhi had commented that if the villages perish, India would perish too. So, destiny of India lies in villages. And, about fifty per cent of the 5.76 lakh villages of the country are situated in different terrain characterized by poor socio-economic conditions. Gandhi's greatest contribution to the social thought of this century is perhaps his insistence on decentralization of the means of production (i.e. say economic power). There are many who are ready to give thoughtful consideration to his theory because it is the only way out of the problem of unemployment in this country. They argue that it is desirable to go in for decentralization because huge capital accumulation is needed to industrialize the country through large-scale industries. They also contend that because large scale industrialization presupposes the existence of foreign markets which this country cannot have, decentralization is the only cherishable goal. In other words large-scale industrialization will be preferable in case the problems of capital formation and foreign market are solved.

Now this line of reasoning constitutes a danger to the whole theory of decentralization as put forward by Gandhi. It would be wrong to presume that Gandhi propounded his theory only to suit Indian conditions. On the other hand, Gandhi's theory of decentralization was the result of his keen and almost prophetic insight into the numerous political, social and cultural ills which the age of large-scale industrialization has brought in its wake.

This is what Bertrand Russell has to say as regards Gandhi's concept of decentralization: "In those parts of the world in which industrialism is still young, the possibility of avoiding the horrors we have experienced still exists. India, for example is traditionally a land of village communities. It would be a tragedy if this traditional way of life with all its evils were to be suddenly and violently exchanged for the greater evils of industrialism and they would apply to people whose standard of living is already pitifully low..... "

Therefore, one has only to understand the magnitude of those "horrors" of which Russell speaks, before one can truly appreciate Gandhi's idea of decentralization.

The term "decentralization" implies not only the devolution of powers, but also a process in which responsibilities and duties are transferred by a higher or central authority to the institutions or organizations at the lower levels, thereby providing to the latter adequate incentive for autonomous functioning.

Decentralization has spatial aspect i.e. when the activities of wide organization are spread over a wide geographical space, then planning and control of the widely dispersed activities may be done better not from central headquarter but away from it. The decentralized units' function better because of autonomy given to them and central control is reduced.

Large-scale industrialism is at the base of the centralization of political power in few hands. It is in the very nature of large-scale industries to centralize economic power in the hands of a few individuals. Under capitalism this power comes to be concentrated in the hands of individual capitalists and under socialism it is arrogated by managers, technocrats and bureaucrats. Thus, the centralization of power in the State negates the very conception of democracy.

This is why Gandhi did not favour the so-called democracy in the West. In his view, Western democracy was only formal. In reality it was totalitarian in so far as only a few could enjoy the political power in this system. Apart from the political consequences, there are the evil effects of industrialization on the personality of man. Industrialism starts by snapping the navel chord of man which binds him with soil and corrosive and all-enveloping shadow of giant machineries. As a result, he is reduced to a mere cog in the wheel.

Since industrialization is based on the division of labour, it limits man's self-expression. The famous illustration of Adam Smith that a pin has to pass through ninety hands before it is completely manufactured only reaffirms the above charge. Hence the work loses its variety, initiative and colour. No doubt such a division increases the productivity. But it obstructs the full foliage of man's natural skill.

Gandhi said that "A big country with a teeming population with an ancient rural tradition which has hitherto answered its purpose, need not, must not copy the western model. What is good for one nation situated in one condition is not necessarily good enough for another differently situated". So, he advocated non-violent culture and civilization which could only be built on self-reliant and self-contained villages. His earnest desire was to see rural millions as the formidable partners of India's polity and economy. He took life as one entity and his concern were to develop life as an integrated concept, simple but richer in quality in all spheres concerning economic, social, political and moral development.

Gandhi was of the firm view that if we wanted Swaraj to be built on non-violence, we would have to give the villages their proper place. Similarly, he pointed out that we could not build non-violence only on a factory civilization, but it could be built on self-contained villages as rural economy did eschew exploitation altogether and exploitation was the essence of violence.

The postulates of Swadeshi, Khadi, Trusteeship, Bread-labour (truth and non-violence being constant value parameters), non-exploitation, non-possession and equality were also rooted in the structure of our society, the religious and social faiths of people. In order to build up a just and equitable social order the development of villages is a necessity. Gandhi's view about village was neither narrow nor he intended to preach for keeping intact the old village devoid of sanitation having old rotten houses, etc. Rather, he visualized villages as productivity centres, applying adaptable technologies and having skillful workers and excellent environment.

## Rural Development as Envisaged by Gandhi

In Gandhi's scheme, in the structure composed of innumerable villages, there are ever-widening never ascending circles. Life is not like a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. But it is like an oceanic circle, whose centre is to be the individual, always ready to perish for the village, and the latter ready to perish for a circle of villages. (Harijan 1946: 236-237) Gandhi hoped "The individual being pure, sacrifices himself for the family, the latter for the village, the village for the district, the district for the province, the province for the nation, the nation for all" (Young India 1931: 123), a hope in consonance with his notion of oceanic circle. According to Gandhi, the rural and urban areas have complimentary relationship. They are now two sectors representing two groups or classes of people pitted against each other.

Gandhi's conception of village was not anchored on the modern (urban-industrial) notion of "development" but on the post-modern perspective of "quality of life", which today's men of ideas realized only after having the experience of the catastrophe wrought by modern urban industrialism.

Generally, village may be (i) a source of raw material, (ii) a market for goods produced in urban areas, (iii) an entity in itself. It cannot flourish under (i) and (ii) approach. The third system alone makes the village a worthy citizen. Gandhi emphasized, "A village unit as conceived by me is as strong as the strongest, my imaginary village consists of one thousand souls. Such a unit can give good account of itself, if it is well organized on a basis of self-sufficiency". (Pyarelal 1958: 361)

He ceaselessly insisted on a pattern of village life where in the quality was the crux: "my ideal village will contain intelligent human being. They will not live in dirt and darkness as animal. There will be neither plague, nor cholera nor small pox, no one will be idle, no one will wallow in luxury. Everyone will have to contribute his quota of manual labour". (Nehru 1960: 506)

Gandhi wanted to turn the villages from "dung heaps" into "model village", or into "tiny gardens of Eden". For Gandhi, reconstruction of villages must be Organized on a permanent basis. Contrary to the Gandhian view, lopsided approach towards rural development was adopted in the post-independence period. For example, the Community Development Programme (CDP) and National Extension Service (NES) were launched, but they failed to evoke popular initiative and participation of rural people. These programmes failed to touch the whole fabric of village community. Similarly, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI's) were established, but they lacked necessary powers and economic resources to produce the desired results. Gandhi, on the other hand, wants to galvanize village life as a whole. In his programme of constructive work, all aspects of village life such as economy, political organisation, health, sanitation etc. have been properly considered.

### Gandhi's Vision of Democracy

The vision of democracy, the instrument that Gandhi wanted to use to achieve his larger goals can neither be applied in totality nor ignored in totality. In fact, it needs to be contextualized according to the present circumstances. This conclusion has been substantiated by referring to few latest theories and concepts.

Gandhi considered arbitrary rule antithetical to the goals he had set for himself. He realized that democratic government coupled with an equitable society appeared to offer the greatest prospects to achieving his goals. According to him democratic rule fostered a diffusion of power and increased the prospects that equality and freedom would be pursued. Democracy, he believed, should be based on consensus and cooperation which transcended the majority principle and pursued the welfare of all. In his words, "The rule of the majority has a narrow application, i.e. one should yield to the majority in matters of detail. But it is slavery to be amenable to the majority, no matter what its decisions are... Under democracy individual liberty or opinion or action is jealously guarded... what we want, I hope, is a government not based on coercion even of a minority but on its conversion". (Dunn 1979: 27) According to him democracy as practiced in Britain, was bad because it believed in counting of heads, those who won 51 percent votes carried the day. The minority had to submit to the majority. While he believed that consent was the basis of all good governments, he wished to conceive the ideal state as the rule of selfless individuals. He dismissed liberal democracy, in which people compete for their own self-interest.

Democracy, for Gandhi, was not merely procedural but also substantive. Democracy, to him meant that the weakest should have the same opportunity as the strongest. He complained that democracy had come to mean party rule, or to be more exact, rule in the hands of the Prime Minister who often lacked honesty of purpose. In it, he held, each party thrives in horse-trading and sensationalism which is blown out of proportions by the press. (Mehta 1996: 219)

Gandhi placed his ideal democracy in the village, where life was simpler, power diffused and the economy decentralized. Consuming only what they produced themselves, the villagers would be self-sufficient. Work in the village would revolve around handspun cloth or *Khadi* and provide everyone with useful labour. Gandhi laid considerable emphasis on direct labour in the fields and handicraft industries and insisted that the worker must be able to control the machinery and not become so dependent on mechanized work that he could not earn his livelihood without it. He believed that distribution can be equalized when production is localized; or in other words, when the distribution is simultaneous with the production. By concentrating all activity in the villages, he believed that the means of production of elementary necessities would remain in the control of the masses. The villagers would work cooperatively, pooling their labour and goods and dividing their profits. He expected that the competition of capitalism would be replaced by the cooperation in an agrarian-based society in which each village would be largely economically and politically self-contained. The villages would be locally controlled by the panchayats (village council of five persons elected by the people). (Terchek 2000: 139-40)

Gandhi distrusted the standard idea about democracy. He denied that voting and elections are sufficient either to assure a government based on popular consent or to safeguard the autonomy of everyone. Gandhi considered representative democracy important but argued that popular rule required even more. He wanted to promote a regime where significant economic, social and political inequalities have been reduced and where all forms of power are dispersed. For him ideal democracy protects and reflects plurality, most especially responding to those who have been excluded in the past. In this spirit, Gandhi says, "This age of awakening of the poorest of the poor is the age of democracy." (Ibid: 194) To make it a reality he urged



democrats to struggle to make government simple and avoid hierarchy and domination. However, according to Gandhi, even ideal democracy can make mistakes, and he invests his citizens with civil disobedience to confront injustice.

### ***Concept of Freedom***

Gandhi links freedom to responsibility because in his opinion, freedom without responsibility is a contradiction. From his perspective a person who does not account for his actions cannot be free. The liberal formulation of freedom is also defective from his perspective because it is self-maximizing and refuses to recognize the social basis of human life. According to Gandhi, what we do affects others, we are affected by them, and we cannot make claims for ourselves at the expense of others. He insisted that rights and responsibilities are reciprocal, without the one, the other is impossible to justify. In his words, "Every duty performed confers upon one certain right, whilst the exercise of every right carry with its certain obligations. And so, the never-ending cycle of duty and right goes ceaselessly on." (Terchek 1986: 314-315) Gandhi insisted that people needed to be aware of the consequences of their own actions. Only when they realized that they are responsible for what they did and what they tolerated could they be said to be free.

### ***Concept of Equality***

Another important foundation of Gandhian democracy is equality. While talking about equality Gandhi did not mean absolute economic equality which applied to everyone in the same way. At the economic level, according to Gandhi, equality "simply meant that everybody should have enough for his or her needs." (Ibid.: 316) Although this kind of equality could be achieved through government ownership of all property, but Gandhi rejected such a solution because it rested on centralized power leading to curtailment of individual freedom. For Gandhi, equality should enhance individual freedom, not retard it. Accordingly, he wanted the range of economic differences significantly narrowed. (Ibid.)

Gandhi envisaged trusteeship as a post capitalist arrangement in order to transform the capitalist order of society into an egalitarian one. In his opinion, "Trusteeship provides a means of transforming the present capitalist order of society into an egalitarian one. It gives no quarter to capitalism, but gives the present owning class a chance of reforming itself. It is based on the faith that human nature is never beyond redemption. It does not recognize any right of private ownership of property, except in as much as it may be permitted by society for its own welfare." (Deutsch: 1986, 306) This suggests that new Gandhian outlook was of declining to receive what all cannot get. Gandhi did not believe in the doctrine of the greatest good of the greatest number. In his words, "I do not believe in the doctrine of the greatest good of the greatest number. It means in its nakedness that in order to achieve the supposed good of 51 percent the interest of 49 per cent may be, or rather, should be sacrificed. It is a heartless doctrine and has done harm to humanity." (Gandhi: 1961, 7) Thus, in Gandhi's opinion the only real, dignified, human doctrine is the greatest good of all, and this can only be achieved by uttermost self-sacrifice.

### ***Self—Sufficient Economy of Village***

Gandhi's ideal village has a maximum population of 2000. He lays emphasis on building of the capacity of the village to fulfil the basic needs like food, clothes, shelter and health. We have learnt the lesson from

the functioning of PRIs in India that without fiscal autonomy political autonomy is meaningless. Politicisation and economic development should go together. Over—politicisation at the cost of economic development creates a lot of conflicts in the villages. In the present set up, the goal of fiscal autonomy for PRIs has been sidelined. Gandhi lucidly presents the picture of his ideal village republic in these words: "if my dream is fulfilled, and everyone of the seven lakhs of villages becomes a well—living republic in which there are no illiterates, in which no one is idle for want of work, in which everyone is usefully occupied and has no wishing for food, well—ventilated dwellings, and sufficient Khadi for covering the body and in which all the villagers know and observe the laws of hygiene and sanitation, such a state must have varied and increasing needs, which it must supply unless it would stagnate..." (The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi: p. 212) Thus the village economy has sufficient resource base to fulfil basic needs and to provide full employment for the villagers. Gandhi often mentions about two chronic problems of rural India. They are poverty and unemployment, both of which are related to each other. His solution to these two problems is the establishment of a decentralized village economy.

For the economic self-sufficiency of village, Gandhi lays stress on all-round development of villages. In his view, agriculture is the foundation of village economy because most rural people are still engaged in agricultural activities. In the post-independent India, no integrated approach to the development of agriculture has been adopted so far. Even the Green Revolution has created regional and sectoral imbalances in the agricultural sector. The revolution led to success in some regions of India. The increase of production as a result of Green Revolution is mainly confined to the production of wheat and paddy. Contrary to this lopsided approach, Gandhi advocates the overall development of agriculture and his approach is eco-friendly. Therefore, he pleads for compost manure or bio-fertilizers in place of chemical ones. He also suggests co-operative farming to accelerate the growth of agricultural production. Gandhi is clear in his mind that only agriculture can fulfil the basic necessities of villagers. Therefore, he prescribes agro-based cottage industries for villages. He remarks, "Without a cottage industry the Indian peasant is doomed. He cannot maintain himself from the produce of land. He needs a supplementary industry." (Ibid.: 336) In the present context too, agriculture is a saturated sector and it has no potentiality to generate or provide employment, but agro-based industries still have enormous capacity to generate employment for rural people. For Gandhi, "Village economy cannot be complete without the essential village industries." (Ibid.: 173) He presents a list of village industries like soap-making, paper-making, match-making, oil-pressing, bee-keeping, shoe-making and Khadi. These village industries will be able to supply the daily needs of villagers, and only with the revival of these village industries the uplift of village is possible. Gandhi has a firm opinion that villages must be self-sufficient in food, clothing and the other basic necessities. He also permits limited use of machines for the village e.g., electricity for the lighting of villages. Precisely, Gandhian alternative to capital-intensive and mechanized industrialisation is labour-intensive and handcraft-based village industries, and the latter is the solution to the two chronic problems of poverty and employment. But the pertinent issue is the survival of cottage or small-scale industries in the era of globalisation.

### **Village as a Self-Governing Unit**

Gandhi believes in the primacy of morality, and for him, salvation of society lies in continuous generation of moral power which can function effectively only in a small community like village. Village

represents an ideal community not governed by political power, but by the moral principle. Like Rousseau's 'general will,' village community is based on the wills of citizens. In this way the village community is self-regulated. Gandhi is an ardent supporter of 'stateless democracy' or 'enlightened anarchy' in which there is no political power<sup>7</sup> Another remarkable feature of this small community is the individual's complete subordination to the community, and this provides an "alternative to liberal rationalist conception with the individual-oriented model of society and class-conflict oriented model of Marx." Beyond the majority principle, the village community is based on consensus among free citizens acting according to moral principles for the betterment of village life. For Gandhi, an ideal democracy can flourish only in a small community.

Gandhi is concerned with the participation of the poorest of the poor, and for this purpose, he wants to revive the village Panchayat. He is a great admirer of this ancient institution, and for him, the village must be governed by the Panchayat that is self-governing in the true sense of the term because it works according to its own laws. In the decision-making process of this institution, an individual has an effective role to play. "Here there is perfect democracy," remarks Gandhi, "based upon individual freedom. The individual is the architect of his own government." (Ibid.: 109) Thus an individual is a constituting and integral unit of the Panchayat. For Gandhi, Panchayat is the life—blood of rural people and no plan for village uplift can succeed without the revival of Panchayats. Gandhi has talked about the four limbs of government, namely, village Panchayats, district administration, provincial administration and central administration. Gandhian approach is based on generating power from below in place of the top—down approach. He gives an outline of the four limbs of government in the following way. "These villages having one vote will elect their district administration. The district administration will elect provincial administration which in turn will elect a president who will be the national chief executive." However, Gandhi has not enunciated a comprehensive organisational structure of all the four limbs. So far as the Panchayats Raj institutions are concerned, Gandhi refers to three tiers of Panchayats, but for him, Taluka and the District Panchayats have an advisory role. (Ibid.: 147) He does not see any necessity to give them a key place in the legal framework, and he is even doubtful about the necessity of their existence. In the writings and speeches of Gandhi, we find that he puts emphasis primarily on village Panchayats and the other two—tiers of Panchayats have not been discussed in detail. Basically, he is interested in the government at the village level. Gandhi suggests an outline of this government in the following lines. "The Government of the village will be conducted by the panchayat of five persons, annually elected by the adult villagers, male and female, possessing minimum prescribed qualifications." (Ibid.: 309) Sometimes he makes a reference of seven *panches*. One of the remarkable features of Gandhian scheme is the provision of minimum qualifications for the *panches*. In the contemporary scenario, many Sarpanches or Pradhans of village Panchayats particularly women are illiterate. At that time, when rural literacy was quite low, Gandhi's advocacy of minimum qualifications for *panches* deserve our serious attention.

The *panches* of a village Panchayat will be elected by secret ballot. Gandhi opines that for the purpose of the election of the *panches*, a public meeting will be called. The term of the elected *panches* is one year. It seems that Gandhi has some apprehensions about the control of Panchayats by entrenched sections of villages, and therefore, he suggests a short term for *panches*. Apart from the qualifications for *panches*, Gandhi also prescribes some qualifications for the voters. Voters should be from the age group of 18 to 50. Interestingly,



Gandhi's suggestion of denying voting rights to persons above the age of 50 provides great opportunity for youth to take part actively in the affairs of the Panchayats. The other qualification for voters suggested by Gandhi is manual work. He writes, "the qualification for franchise should be neither property, nor position but manual work... literacy or property test has proved to be elusive. Manual work gives an opportunity to all who wish to take part in the government and the well-being of the state." What Gandhi has in mind in this suggestion is an age-old stigma to manual work. On the basis of manual work entrusted to the lower castes of society, untouchability prevailed, and Indian society was divided between upper castes and untouchables. Gandhi wants to remove this stigma attached to manual work, and in his constructive programmes, restoration of the dignity of body-labour has been primarily focused.

In Gandhi's view, the success of village organisation depends upon good men. Therefore, he prescribes that criminal must be kept away from Panchayats. To quote Gandhi, "Those who have committed murder and taken part in riots, or those who are suspected of such acts, should be debarred from membership of the Panchayat." (Ibid: 122) Thus, Gandhi views that persons of good character should enter village Panchayats. It is a big and important measure to keep village Panchayats out of control of criminals even on the ground of suspicion.

Village Panchayat is the legislature and the executive of the village. Gandhi clearly states that the Panchayats have no criminal jurisdiction and they may try civil suits with the consent of the concerned parties. Moreover, in Gandhian scheme of village Panchayats, "No one should be compelled to refer any matter to the Panchayat. (Ibid.: 240) Similarly, village Panchayat will have no power to impose social boycott. The basic rationale behind all these suggested measures is to prevent village Panchayats from becoming political arenas. Another noticeable feature is that village Panchayats will work on the basis of consent and common good. If Panchayats are given criminal jurisdiction, the whole fabric of the Panchayat would be ruined. Gandhi suggests some important functions to the village Panchayat. These functions include attending to the sanitation of village, medical needs of the villagers, primary and secondary education, the upkeep and cleanliness of village wells or ponds, and uplift of untouchables. The main sectors in which village Panchayats have to work is health, hygiene and education. In the health sector, village Panchayats will adopt the method of nature cure and for village sanitation voluntary services will be required.

On the issue of resources of village Panchayats, one point is crystal clear. Gandhi does not want that village Panchayats should be dependent on grants. Instead, he stands for the self—sufficiency of the village republic. Village Panchayat will extract resources from the people for the services it will provide. In any case, village Panchayats will not try to get profit from those services. In the contemporary situation the PRIs have become grant—fed, and it is the biggest challenge for PRIs to be viable economically, especially in the era of globalisation. An important remedy suggested by Gandhi is that village Panchayats must generate their own resources at the local level and not depend on the state or centre. Once villagers are convinced that village Panchayats will provide useful services to them without extracting any profit out of the services provided, the villagers will voluntarily give food grains, cash and labour for the betterment of villagers.



## Conclusion

India is still a predominantly rural country and the welfare state with primacy on industrialisation and urbanisation has failed to solve the problems of villages. Similarly, thanks to free—market economy and globalisation, rural people have been marginalized, and the rich upper and middle class have consumed the fruits of economic development. The poor in general and rural in particular have been left aside. It is true that after the 73rd Constitutional Amendment the PRIs have been accorded constitutional status and their powers and functions have been enshrined in the Constitution. In the present scenario, PRIs in India lack sufficient economic resources and economic viability and it continues to be a matter of grave concern, especially in view of globalisation. Therefore, it is high time policy—makers and intellectuals of India looked seriously at the issues relating to rural development. Gandhian vision of village republic seems to provide a credible alternative for rural India. Gandhi believes in the unity of human life and he develops an integrated approach towards reconstruction of village in which political, social, economic and psychological aspects are interlinked and inter-dependent. Gandhi's message of 'back to the village' is still relevant for us because "India begins and ends in the village."

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