

A Study on the Relevance of Gandhian Philosophy in Political Development of Democracies

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Abstract

This paper attempts to study the way **democracies** move towards the outlook of slower political growth and **Gandhi's relevant views on the organized institutions of political power**. Today the world is facing the adverse effects of violence. Countries which once thrived on violence and terror are fast realising the futility of hatred. Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence is being accepted worldwide to create a peaceful and harmonious society.

Gandhi is now emerging as the saviour of a world threatened by superpower violence, even in Gandhi's life time great minds of the world saw in his work the promise of a new world. One of them is Romain Rolland (1866-1944) who wrote in his Mahatma Gandhi: The Man who Became One With the Universal Being (1924): "With Gandhi everything is nature, modest, simple, pure - while all his struggles are hallowed by religious serenity." Gandhi's gentle religious temper which was active in his politics was, however, observed 15 years earlier in his first biography Joseph J Doke's Gandhi, A Patriot in South Africa (1909).

If you wish to seize the essence of Gandhi's political philosophy read his presidential address at the annual session of the Indian National Congress held at Belgaum in 1924. The Mahatma said at the end of his address: "Satyagraha is search for truth; and God is Truth. Ahimsa and Nonviolence is the light that reveals that truth to me. Swaraj for me is a part of that truth". Whether Gandhi's understanding of state can lead to reconciliation or opposition between the political and spiritual? Iyer among the earlier interpreters of Gandhian thought mentions that there is a paradox between non-violence on the one hand and the state on the other. State as soulless machine cannot accord with individuals with its very tendency of violence and coercion. Individuals with enlightened anarchism is purely a perfect condition to lead towards spiritualism. Gandhi was tilted towards the end to a stateless society. Iyer was not convinced with the argument that the pursuit of *artha* and *dharma* can go together. The state by its very nature is unparalleled with man's spiritual and moral quests. The incompatibility between state and individuals emerges due to soulless and soul. The abstraction of soulless machine hinders in the moral progress of spirituality. The ground was not fertile for individuals to attain *moksha* within the domain of modern state. It is always in this regard urged to find an alternative space for the organized lives of individuals. Partha Chatterjee interpreted Gandhi's position from a Marxist viewpoint. He viewed that this state is Utopian in nature. A vision impossible for it constructed a position between two contradictory ideas: political swaraj and true swaraj.

Key words: Democracy, Gandhian philosophy, political development , swaraj

Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi is slowly but steadily emerging as a spiritual and moral hero on the international scene. The Great German existentialist philosopher, Karl Jaspers (1883-1969), wrote in his *The Future of Mankind* (1958): "Today we face the question of how to escape from physical force and from war, lest we all perish by the atom bomb. Gandhi, in word and deed, gives the true answer: only a supra-political force can bring political salvation." This is the voice of the world conscience and this is an echo of the voice of Gandhi. The voice may not reach all ears. But they have reached at least some ears. What is strange is that Germany, a country responsible for the Second World War, is the country which is now stressing the need for Gandhian non-violence in the modern world. Actually Germany began to understand Gandhi as early as 1931 when Rene Fullop-Miller published his *Gandhi: The Holy Man*. He said that political problems must be solved in the Gandhian way: "Gandhi's nationalism contains none of those elements which makes nationalist movements of the West seem a menace to peace." This is a plea for a Gandhian approach to political problems which is now, generally speaking, the German elite's view of Gandhi's nonviolence. Let us see the attitude to Gandhian nonviolence of the greatest physicist of the modern world after Einstein, Werner Heisenberg. In an essay on Gandhi he says that "Gandhi's teaching of nonviolence could prove to be stronger than the vague impersonal conception of an international court of justice. Gandhi's unique example shows that a true personal involvement together with the total rejection of force could be very successful politically."

In 1969 Dr Heimou Rau of Max Mueller Bhavan, New Delhi, edited a collection of essays which was published with the title *Mahatma Gandhi As Germans See Him*. It contains 16 essays by eminent German intellectuals on the life and teaching of Gandhi. The essays show how Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence has influenced the German mind.

How Gandhi's ideal has touched the soul of the Anglo-saxon world we can see in Ronald J Terchek's *Gandhi Struggling for Autonomy* (1999). The work explains Gandhi's idea of the swaraj of our soul which alone can fulfill our political and social obligations. No less important is Gandhi in *His Time and Ours* by David Hardiman, a professor at the University of Warwick. Hardiman seizes the essence of Gandhi's ideas when he says: "Gandhi's approach represented a state of mind and not any theory."

Gandhi's spiritual and moral approach to our political problem is particularly important today after the US declaration of war on terrorism. To realise this we have to value Gandhi's idea of reflection on our self and see what we are. The Pentagon's hitting power will not end terrorism. It will only make it more rampant. You cannot bring peace through violence. The most effective answer to violence is nonviolence. Gandhi said in

one of his articles in his Harijan (1938): "If even one great nation were unconditionally to perform the supreme act of renunciation, many of us would see in our lifetime visible peace established on earth."

Objective:

This paper intends to explore and analyze **Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of the democracy** -fully encircled with non-violence and dignified and peaceful co-existence are relevance in the context of democracies in general.

What is Gandhian Political Theory?

Whether Gandhian political theory is essentialist or relativist is a moot question. The debate swings into both the directions. I argue that Gandhian political theory is essentialist in nature. In claiming Gandhian 'political theory essentialist in nature, I rely on the methodology of the intellectual tradition of India.

Essentialism searches for the intrinsic nature of things as they are in and of themselves. The opposite of essentialism is relationalism. In analytic philosophy, essences are called natural kinds. Natural kinds are those to which terms and classification refer when they are true and constant in all possible worlds. These terms became what Kripke calls - "rigid designators."¹⁰ Natural kinds are things-in-themselves, after they have reached their true state and unfolded their inherent potential. They cannot be imagined otherwise. The preferred logical mode on essentialism is necessity, worked in formal syllogisms, deductions, definitions, tautologies, and the like. Natural kinds always exist, or seem to exist, independent of relationships, context, time, or observer. The properties of natural kinds are those that make a thing what it essentially is; the rest is merely accidental, or contingent or historical. Essentialism makes either /or distinctions, rather than variable distinctions in degree. It posits polar opposites, instead of gradations and empirical continuity. Plenty of examples are available. Science is driven by either method or without it; action is either rational or interpretative; the nature of art is to express subjective experience; the nature of technology is impersonality; knowledge either corresponds to the world or is socially constructed; the mind is either a machine or a conscious; the nature of method in social science is ideographic hermeneutics; society is either *Geminschaft* or *Gesellschaft*, but not both at the same time.

In essentialism, the preferred mode of operation is static typologies and rigid classifications, whose grids separate things that are everywhere, and under all circumstances, really separate. Essentialism is often accompanied by a dualistic cosmology that draws deep distinctions between things natural and social, body and mind, behaviour and action, cause and intention.

Gandhian essentialism rests on the fact that he underlines the distinctive tradition of Indian life which has developed from a very long period of time. Modernity and its impact on society undermine the ancient virtues of good life both in the West and the East. Gandhi makes an essentialist judgement as to which yardsticks

and principles should constitute the true and spirited life. He uses the political and moral concepts in a way to lead the virtues of good life free from the unending quest for materiality.

The distinctive features of Gandhian political theory, specifically the conceptual analysis of political and moral categories, presented as a separate entity in which one can recognize the specialty of Gandhi as a political thinker and a practitioner of intellectual history of Indian tradition. The distinctiveness of an idea of Indian political theory, like the British or American or African political theories, is inherently rooted in the distinctiveness of the social and cultural traditions of India. Indian civilization being one of the oldest civilizations of the world, stored many thought provoking ideas in its history. In course of the progress of civilization different religious creeds were also developed. The discourse in religions developed central ideas as to how human beings would pursue a good life, how they should behave in society and polity. From *yurancic* and *vendantic* traditions, monarchy was developed as mode of ruling in the society. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* gave a vivid description of India's past distinctive administrative mechanism. The establishment of the Mughal and British rule provided new dimensions to the cultural tradition of India. Colonial rule in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries inculcated western spirit and values to the traditions of India. The western ideas guided by the enlightenment influenced the pattern of British hegemony over non-western societies through colonial and imperial domination. And in this colonial and imperial context, started the nationalist movements - as liberatory movement - giving birth to many strands of indigenous thought processes as part of the rich historical and cultural tradition. During the nationalist movement in India, the social reformers took the lines of argument of British rationalists as well as reinvented ideas from the traditional Indian sources such as *vedanta* and *purana*. Thinkers like Dayananda, Vivekananda, Bankim Chandra and Gandhi developed an Indian nationalist consciousness from the *vedantic* and the Hinduistic perspectives. They tried to counter British rule and western ideas from the standpoint of Indian philosophical perspective. In this context, it is argued that "the Indian political thought as a field of study is a part of liberative knowledge. The study of how Indian thinkers have reflected upon issues of power and freedom is very significant to understand the history of institutions and movements in India"¹¹ In this context, it is very relevant to bring out the contribution Gandhi made to the great political canon of India. His leadership and personal charisma during the freedom struggle had impressed many people both inside and outside India. The sources of these ideas which he presented in *Hind Swaraj* and further writings demonstrated a distinctive Indian way of life

Relevance of Gandhian philosophy

Gandhian political theory has been broadly debated from two important perspectives. One argument places Gandhian political theory as a relative or a reconciled pattern of both Western and Eastern traditions. The other argument suggests that Gandhi is an original thinker, in the sense that he is a unique innovator of

political concepts, inherently based on Indian traditions. In this way, it can be argued that Gandhi developed a distinctive and an alternative version of political theory compared to Western notion of political theory. I shall argue in the same line. My concern is to emphasize an alternative version of political theory that Gandhi had dealt with; it is to stress the essential character of Gandhian thread running through the traditional thought developed in India.

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Gandhian Thought political development of democracies.

Coming to the political thought of Gandhi, we have to remember certain dispositions of Gandhi. First of all, Gandhi was not a system builder in an academic sense. He was not a political philosopher. For all his sayings were pouring from his deep feelings and sincere realization of the truth. Without going into disputes, it can be agreed that he was not committed to any exclusive school of thought. His speech and pen had generally come from responses from particular situation. Gandhi even at the fag end of his life spoke of himself that he had never ceased to grow and therefore, he had been learning from "Experiment with Truth". as he named his autobiography. Thus Gandhi had revised his opinions from time to time though his conceptual framework remained the same. He had not altered from his basics.

Gandhi's political thought stems from different traditions, Eastern and Western. Though he had inherited many traditions he had not agreed in to with any one of them. He had picked up many traditional concepts from his immediate predecessors as well as from ancient texts. Gandhi did never claim to be an original thinker. But when we look into all his sayings we find a conceptual framework, common to a philosopher. Moreover, when we find that his theoretical formulations and practical pursuits are identical, we have every

reason to accept him as a philosopher in the Indian sense. But unlike other philosophers and political scientists of both the East and the West, only he could emerge not only as the man of destiny of the nation but also as the man of the millennium.

Many political Scientists thought that Gandhi was a combinations of a prophet and a politician of the highest caliber. So he had combined within himself aspects of the Philosopher and politician. Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, a great admirer and critic of Gandhi, once said that Gandhi had to play the roles of a world teacher as well as the Supreme leader of the Indian National Liberation Movement. In a tone of criticism he further said, often his former role that is the role of a world teacher became so prominent that he had to compromise with his other role. One may or may not agree with Netaji Bose but it appears that in the context of national liberation movement there is truth in it. But when we go into the depth of Gandhi's Philosophy, we feel that there is no dichotomy in Gandhi's perception. It can be said that Gandhi considered politics as an instrument for the uplift of mankind in social, economic, moral and spiritual spheres. Gandhi himself admitted to his South African friend that his bent of mind was religious and not political. Romain Rolland in his biography of Gandhi written in 1924, had remarked that if Tilak would not have died Gandhi might have chosen a religious life rather than a political. TO Gandhi politics itself was his religion. He was opposed to politicizing religion. He was for spiritualizing religion but he was essentially a worldly man and never sought this own salvation secluded from the world. For him politics had encircled him like the coil of a snake. He must wrestle with the snake, there is no respite. He could have thought of avoiding politics, if without politics food and work could be provided to the hungry unemployed people of India. He strongly felt hat without involving himself in politics it is not possible to remove socio-economic exploitation and political subjugation and thereby moral degradation of the people of Indian unless he involved himself in politics.

In this perspective we have to understand Gandhi's confrontation with the coil of a snake. No matter how much tough, the task might be, we have to come out from it by wrestling with the snake. This can be successfully performed if we can alleviate the present state of politics to Dharmic politics. By Dharmic, Gandhi meant that it should be remove from corrupting influences and sectarianism. This politics should be the privilege of all. Gandhi was not prepared to accept any fixed dogma or mechanical way for either of politics or religion.

Gandhi had a vision of transforming the socially and morally degenerated and separated individuals in a manner where individuals can enjoy their freedom in a spirit altruism. To understand Gandhi's politics it is also necessary to understand Gandhi's concern for the cleavage between state and civil society. The community life is fast diminishing and civil society could not formulate any mechanism to control it.

Gandhi was concerned since his days of Hind Swaraj that the Western civilization had been hedonistic, in the sense of self-pleasure centred, pragmatic in the sense of immediate material benefit and individualistic in the sense of egocentric in the sense of sovereign individual oriented. He found British parliament had become a sterile women, where naked display of self interest or party interest (or power only) had been manifested. He blamed disease lying with the western civilization itself. Gandhi found that the whole business of politics had been running to a wrong path on a hoax.

As we knew Gandhi was a God-oriented man. But to him Truth is God and as in other spheres of life, politics should also be a search after truth and this search must be understood by Gandhi, is for raising general conscience of the people. Every individual must be free from pangs of hunger must prevent exploitation and oppression. He would then be in a position to work for his own development through the performances of duties. A universal morality would emerge which would create an atmosphere for healthy political life. We should accept self-transformation as a continuous process. Gandhi was emphatic in saying that politics bereft of religion is a death trap which kills the soul. By spiritualization of politics, Gandhi meant something larger than our day to day life but not excluding world of day to day experiences. A community of persons on the process of self-realization be able to resist the corrupting influences of existing interests.

According to Gandhi this is not just a philosophical dream far from realities of political life. Many great philosophers right from Plato could not reconcile the dichotomy between reality and ideal. From Gandhian point of view, we should into distrust the capability of commoner to rise above passion and self-interest and we can evolve a modus operandi by which a new kind of politics might emerge as Gandhi envisioned.

Gandhian Equality for political democracies

Equality is not only a cardinal principle of Gandhian thought but it is one of the most aspired concepts of most other writers on social and political thought. But if we analyze the concept we would be faced with the differences on the outlook of these writers. We are accustomed to use the term to mean equality of characteristics and also equality of treatment. Leaving aside the former, the criteria of equality have been used in so many senses as (a) impartiality (b) equal share to all (c) equal share to equals (d) proportional equality (e) unequal shares corresponding to relevant differences. Gandhi was a champion of the individual rights in the society. The most important starting point for his is the political and civil rights from the British imperialism. He believed in universal human equality. He condemned imperialism and foreign exploitation. The idea of satyagraha is based on the notion of individual's inalienable right to resist a coercive social and

political system. Against the claims of state omnipotence, Gandhi puts up the right of the internality of judgement. He was a political individualist, that is, equality in terms of rights and freedom. His South African experiences seem to have bitterness as far as individual rights are concerned. The experience of South Africa taught him lessons to demand for legal and political rights. He demanded social recognition of the inalienable moral worth of man as a spiritual being. For Gandhi, political rights of an individual are linked up with his moral stature and dignity. Swaraj, for Gandhi, is a highest form of individual right. It is an inalienable right of every Indian. Gandhi believed in rights and obligations as complementary to each other. So he claimed that moral and inalienable rights of man prevents all forms of coercion and strengthens individuals against untruth, injustice and wrong in any form. He was a sympathizer of special rights to the downtrodden and the oppressed ones. For him, rights are essential for the realization of good, provided moral obligations are fulfilled.

The idea of fundamental human rights, although imported from the west, got a new meaning in Indian political cannon. Gandhi calls it satyagraha. In Hind Swaraj, Gandhi defined satyagraha simply as a "method of securing rights by personal suffering: it is the reverse of resistance by arms."⁴⁶ The western tradition of rights believes in the use, of violence as a means to secure the rights of the individuals. However, Gandhian way of securing rights in India can be alternatively new that suggests that it can be done by 'personal suffering.' This is a technique of satyagraha what Parekh has called 'suffering love.' Joan Bondurant has argued that self-suffering can never be acceptable as a way of securing rights to western minds. Gandhi transformed the western cannon of civil disobedience to the Indian cannon of satyagraha. In his initiative for introducing the 'Fundamental Rights and Economic Changes' with Nehru to the India Congress was phenomenal.

Conclusion

Gandhi is no doubt a theorist of modern Indian political cannon. His conceptual contributions include ideas such as swaraj, satyagraha, sarvodaya, swadeshi, ahimsa, nationalism, constitutionalism and dharma or selfless service. The development and reinvention of the concept of purushartha resembles the conciliation of different elements of human development.

An essentialist and cultural relativist vision of political theory offers an alternative to Anglo-American understanding of social and political realities. Gandhism in a way blends his thought by innovating the essentialist and cultural character of Indian society.

The greatest contribution, as Parel has suggested of Gandhi, to humanity is that he made a bridge between spiritual and secular which in a way something very unique of his style. Apart from all other innovations in political life like truth and non-violence, swaraj, satyagraha and religion and politics.

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