

ETHICAL VALUES OF SOCIAL WORK PROFESSION AND GANDHISM

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1. INTRODUCTION:

The ethical values of social work profession have long been given scant attention ethical foundation and ethical research is as important knowledge and theory in social work practice Ethical Theory building will strengthen the moral fibre of the profession and it will contribute to the current knowledge relating to social work practice. There is need for greater attention to value and ethics in the present context of technological and scientific advancements and the consequent decadence and degradation of the values of life. Gandhian values and the values of social work profession have much in common and these are similarities in Gandhian thought and professional ethics in social work practice.

Gandhian ethical system is inimical to western materialistic values and utilitarianism. He emphasizes social justice and well-being of all(Sarvodaya), giving priority to the disadvantaged sections and the poorest of the poor(Antyodaya). Gandhi meant by Sarvodaya, the raise or awakening of all. Gandhi is more relevant today than even before. The ethical values which he cherished are universal in the sense that they are in conformity with the universal norms and particularly more relevant to the values and ethics of social work practice. Some people believe that he is two hundred years ahead of his time. No doubt he has launched his movement for the

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reconstruction of the society and for bettering human conditions far ahead of times and sowed the seeds of his thought for human betterment for the modern world which is facing challenges to human survival. We have to choose between Atom and Ahimsa, between non-violence and non-existence between Sarvodaya and Sarvanasha(total annihilation). In view of the fact that humanity is facing serious threat to its key existence, there is growing awareness all over the world that Gandhi's work and teachings and his ideas have greater relevance. To quote Dr.Nelson Mandela, "Gandhi holds the key to human progress".

Gandhi made significant contribution to the world by his revolutionary ideas and concepts such as satyagraha(truthful force), Sarvodaya(welfare of all), Shantisena(peace brigade). He has also developed other key concepts such as trust, non-violence(Ahimsa), ends and means, non-possession, trusteeship, vows, lifestyle, constructive work, basic education, sweedeshi and gram swaraj. All these ideas and concepts have been gaining currency with the passage of time. Vinoba believed that sarvodaya is based on the three fold programmes would revolutionize the life of man and build a new world in which there is equality, non-discrimination, non-exploitation, poverty alleviation and ultimately leading to non-violence and peaceful co-existence.

The constructive programmes developed by Gandhi resulted in enlightened activities and reforms. Following Mahatma Gandhi, Vinobha under his stewardship launched Bhoodan (land gift), Grandan(village gift) in 1951. The movement assumed new dimension under the leadership of Jayaprakash Narayan with his declaration of Jeevandan(life gift) which means dedication of one's whole life and energy to the cause of the movement .

2. GANDHIAN VALUES AND SOCIAL WORK:

Gandhi was not a social worker in the strict sense of the term. But Gandhian social work is basically concerned with the reconstruction of society based on truth and non-violence and welfare of all the last and the lowliest, the poorest of the poor(Antyodaya). The lowliest, the poorest of the poor(Antyodaya). The vulnerable sections of the society are the worst sufferers in the catastrophic situations such as fires, epidemics, famine, wars, not to speak about the welfare needs of the disadvantaged sections and the problems relating to social injustice, economic

exploitation, social discrimination, inequality and the related problems which are the outcome of the discrepancies in the social system. The basic objective of Gandhian social work was to fix out the basic causes and conditions out of which, the above problems would arise. The method of social action would deal with such problems to rectify the discrepancies in the social system keeping in view the truth, social injustice and non-violence. It is also necessary to bring about fundamental changes in the institutional framework and the values of the society. Social action aims at collective effort and involvement of the people directing collective energies towards combating social problems. The dignity and self respect of the individual is in jeopardy, the laws would be amended to safeguard the interests of the weaker sections and poverty groups. Ammu M. Mazumdar says: “Int eh couser of many of his activities of a social welfare nature, Gandhi had developed certain principles, practices and procedures which harmonize remarkably with the principles and techniques of pre-professional social work as it has developed in the western world settlement houses, social group work, social case work, community welfare organization, social legislation, social action.”

Though his concern was very little with the actual techniques of social work, he showed social work spirit in his activities in the field of politics, social reform and social welfare.

Dr. Frances M. Yasas has made a comparative study of the compatibility of social work values with Gandhian values. S.K. Khinduka referring to this study, says: ‘She (Frances Yasas) finds that Gandhi’s work is something of a reaffirmation of the basic tenet of social work philosophy that ‘man is an object of infinite worth’. Dr. Yasas does not lose sight of the few dissimilarities that exist between Gandhian values and social work values, but ... she shows the essential compatibility, and hence, the similarity between the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi and the values underlying social work.’”

Social work is more than a method. As Witmer calls it, it is a ‘social institution. The present day India is largely influenced by a series of social thinkers and philosophers of the past who have shaped the destiny of India. Gandhi was one among those who exerted his influence on the ideas and philosophy of Indians over a period of thirty years. He introduced basic changes in

the modes of thinking and living of the people. Hence, it becomes necessary to examine the contribution of Gandhi to the theory, practice and values of social work. In this context Frances M. Yaras says: "Indian students could learn the basic values of professional social work more easily, if they could see them as different ways of saying some of the things that have been taught by their own philosophers, saints, social thinkers, and social reformers, especially a person of the stature of Mahatma Gandhi."

The 18 item constructive programme which Gandhi propounded, comprise (1) communal unity, (2) removal of untouchability, (3) prohibition, (4) Khadi, (5) village industries, (6) village sanitation, (7) new or basic education, (8) adult education, (9) women, (10) education health and hygiene, (11) provisional languages, (12) national language, (13) economic equality, (14) kisans, (15) labour, (16) adivasis, (17) lepers and (18) students. This programme provides a picture of the Gandhian concept of social order. Gandhiji attempted to establish certain moral and spiritual values like truth, non-violence, non-discrimination, social justice and self reliance through constructive programme. The professional social workers also aim at such a society which is free from conflict, poverty, discrimination, inequality, exploitation, and disparities of income, wealth, and opportunities.

Gandhi wanted to bring about a social order in which, there is greatest good of all, the last and the lowliest. The society which he contemplated is free from moral degeneration, social injustice and economic exploitation. Though he has not spelt out a social order of his conception, he had a definite concept of casteless and stateless society based on truth, non-violence, equality and moral and spiritual values. The constructive programme which he enunciated is intended for eliminating violence, domination, and inequality.

Jayaprakash Narayan wrote about Gandhi: "He wanted to change the system and existing social order in India so as to bring about a social revolution. The word 'Revolution' in this context only means that society has to change from the roots and its foundation not merely outwardly but by fundamental change. "Gandhi developed certain social techniques for achieving his goal. Gandhian techniques are based on ethical absolutism. His approach is justified, because it is moral and human. The means must be such as to justify the end. He said: "This method may appear to be long but I am convinced that it is the shortest."

Gandhi took up the cause of Harijans for their betterment and upliftment. Wherever injustice was done to them, he was fighting for their cause. His concepts of “aparigraha”, “daridranarayana”, “trusteeship” decentralization, dignity of labour, bread labour, Antyodaya and Sarvodaya are some of the areas for social work practice. Gandhi believed that the accumulation of wealth should be based upon the principles of trusteeship and it is to be done by non-violent means for the sake of the poor. Gandhi tried to introduce greater equalitarian values. The Harijans were at the lowest rung of society. Hence the upliftment of Harijans meant radical change in the existing social structure.

Gandhi laid emphasis on character formation. The caste norms control the individual from cradle to the grave. The child internalizes the age-old values of the caste and the family in the socialization process. If we want the child to acquire egalitarian values, they come into conflict with the values internalized by the child. Consequently the child would suffer the problems of maladjustment. Gandhi’s stress on character formation and basic education represent his concern for taking care of the child from the beginning. Gandhi’s efforts for emancipation of women would help to alter the age-old values of inequalities, because they are the agents of transmission of the culture to the children. Thus Gandhi wanted to transform, the cultural, social and personality systems to bring about systemic change to establish a social order in which there is justice, social and economic.

The development of technology results in new norms and values, by breaking down cultural barriers; there are greater chances of cultural diffusion consequent on the development of communications. Gandhi was opposed to industrialization and urbanization. He wanted a society free from all types of oppression and exploitation.

He concerned the use of violence. He advocated that “violence which has its properties like anger, selfishness, lust etc., cannot take us to the goal.” He stressed the nobility of the means for the social reconstruction. He stressed the need of Ahimsa for both East and West. But he realized that perfect Ahimsa is not possible in this world.

Gandhian methods stressed people’s initiative, in the transformation of society. So he wanted that man should reach the height of consciousness and moral strength. Gandhian methods are not merely reason; through self suffering, he tried to rouse the consciousness of people. Social transformation cannot be brought through military power. Gandhi tried to rouse the

consciousness of the people through constructive programme and bring about social changes. Gandhi felt that the development of technology should not create “huge army of unemployed.”

Gandhi ethical system focused on the greatest good for the greatest number in society. He meant by social justice as fairness to the individual, and priority to disadvantaged people. Rewels(1973) and Gewirth(1978) followed Gandhian principles. Rahels modifies the equality principle with a “difference principle” saying that the least-advantaged individuals in society should be better off. Similarly Gerwirth advocates distributive justice which means distributing freedom and well-being for each person. Gandhi, (1992), Rewels and Gerwirth referred to distributive justice from a poorest –of – the poor philosophy, and justice to the most vulnerable first(Antyodaya).

Gandhi has not favoured industrial capitalism on the plea that it promotes economic materialism of the West. He argued for swaraj self-rule from spiritual point of view. The use of ethical and spiritual values in social work practice is reflected in Gandhian thought and constructive programme which he endeavoured to implement throughout his life for elimination of the evils in the society and his bottom-up approach to development of Dalits and weaker sections in the society.

Professional social work developed interest in spirituality and its application in needs assessment and practice intervention. Canada (1997) pointed out the following areas of intervention for the application spirituality in social practice: 1) The worker links personal and professional growth in working dialogue with the client about morality, the worker’s appreciation of religious and non-religious expressions of spirituality in the resolutions of life crises, using spiritual resources relevant to the client. Spiritual values can help an individual to understand ultimate reality and universal justice (Sermabekian, 1994). Spirituality influences client beliefs regarding change (Karnik & Suri, 1995). Gandhi undertook the constructive work in spiritual perspective.

Social work profession devised code of professional ethics. Ethics refer to the values, norms and moral judgements that guide professional behaviour of social workers. The social work ethical system included such moral principles as non-judgement, acceptance, confidentiality, individualization, and respect for colleagues. The social work code of ethics aims to discipline professionals for extreme misconduct. In the initial stages, the code did not inspire

the profession to a higher level of ethical practice. The revised code of ethics (NASW, 1999) aims at promoting issues of social justice and human development.

The lacunae of the development of ethical system in social work are the reflection of the level of moral development in contemporary culture (Reamer, 1995; Rhodes, 1986). Western culture derived the values of human worth and the mutual obligations of the individual and society from a religious tradition (Constable, 1983). As social work is secular knowledge-based profession, it has dissociated itself from religious values. It has to depend on few moral resources for answering complex ethical questions. Gandhian values and ideology would contribute a great deal for strengthen he spiritual and moral fibre of social work profession.

Gandhi's ethical system developed out of his lifelong "experiment with truth" (Gandhi, 1993). Many revolutionary developments have occurred since Gandhi's death. Among those are the advancements in technology and the spread of capitalism. But most of the evils of industrial age have not disappeared from today's world (Waltz & Canda, 1988). The Global economic developments led to violence and terrorism. Environmental degradation is also a by-product of economic development quest. From this point of view, Gandhian thought and values appear to be appropriate to social work.

Gandhian principles are based on a set of philosophical beliefs – cooperation over competition, interdependence over rugged individualism, compassion for others over pursuit of self-interest, and social justice over individual's greed and achievements. The quaint-essence of gandhian ethics is well-being of all(Sarvodaya), justice for all(Satyagraha). Gandhian concept of social development is based on the foundation of truthfulness, love of all, harmonious relations and service to others.

3. GANDHIAN THOUGHT TO ENRICH SOCIAL WORK'S ETHICAL STANDARDS:

The concept of gandhian thought which enrich social work's ethical standards are; unity of all things or the principle of the harmonic nature of the universe i.e the good of collectivity, ahimsa which means non-injury or the principle of non-violence, truthfulness and love for all; sarvodaya, the self-development through service and sacrifice to others including those in great

mind; satyagraha the principle of a non-violent social change for combating injustice; swadeshi, the principle self-reliance, self-sufficiency; and material simplicity and the corollary principles of non-attachment, non-stealing and trusteeship.

4. UNIT OF ALL THINGS:

Gandhi believed that all life as creation was interdependent and it is characterized by harmonic quality. He holds that the spiritual power of non-violence is a tool for social change. If one does not respond to violence, it is self-destructive, not self-sacrificing. But one should show passive resistance to violence. Gandhi felt that even a person's life was subject to resistance against violence. There are doubts whether it is possible to train social workers in this type of social action.

Gandhi was criticized as conservative reactionary resisting forces of change and progress. Gandhi's attack on as questionable. Those who considered progress in terms of "modernization and materialization" regarded gandhian thought as antiquated the scholars who believe in material advancement of society through technology perceive gandhian thought as reactionary. Some find gandhian ideas of material simplicity to be inappropriate to the well-being of a capitalist society. It is doubtful whether the practitioners can advocate material simplicity, in a custom that equates status and personal happiness with material acquisition.

Western ethics has inherited the tradition of utilitarianism and its emphasis on reason. The western philosophers such as Locke, Hume and Kant viewed knowledge as the basis of morality and ethical standards. Through reason only one can distinguish right from wrong. The profession of social work expresses uncertainty about the idea of universal ethical principles. Values have become neutral or relative; the non-judgemental attitude of the practitioner accepts unquestionably the ethical life styles of the client and serves the client irrespective of his values and life style. This impartial approach is derived from 'value free' social science, equates moral ethics with moralism (Siporin, 1975). In the context of modern values of materialism and technological advancement, most professions focus on theory and knowledge building in conformity with contemporary on theory and knowledge building in conformity with contemporary culture and the values of the positivist enlightenment tradition.

Gandhiji's practice was also similar to social work by his concerns for racial, gender and class justice,; the empowerment of people; the alleviation of poverty and human development. Gandhi's commitment to service and justice make him a role model for the profession. Gandhi's ethical system has attracted the interests of many great writers and theorists from Thomas Merton (1965) to Erik Erikson(1969). Gandhian thought offers a rich repository of knowledge for study and exploration of by the social work practitioners and theorist. His insights dealt more with ethical concepts than so-called scientific statements. Gandhi's methods offer a philosophy and set of ethical principles that help define the ends and means of practice. Even in the contemporary age, Gandhi's ideas sum appropriate as guide posts in addressing the problems of the 21st century.

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