

Gandhi's vision of Self-Governance: A way toward Sarvodaya

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Abstract:

After independence, the Constituent Assembly didn't adopt the Gandhian model and favoured a more centralized governance model, as they believed, was essential for stability, unity and economic progress at that time. But, it was the inner urge towards local government and grass-root democracy to ensure all round development that devotes the government to device the decentralization process through the Panchayati Raj framework. Gandhi was actually the driving force behind the establishment of the Panchayati Raj system because he was adamant that independence must start at the local level; as a result, Panchayats is nothing more than a stand-in for 'Swaraj'. The paper contends that wherever Panchayats have served as an institution of governance, they have contributed to changes in rural life, the economy, and the politics. The actual promise of Panchayats rests on their commitment to the fundamental tasks of government and the responsibility entrusted to them for regional development and social justice.

Introduction

The rich culture of India is a result of the vast and vibrant historical background. Civilization and beginning of the settlements were not limited to just some parts, but the whole of India. It was not just influences from the cultures of other countries, but also gets influenced by the settlements of other countries like China, Europe, and Central Asia from time to time. It laid the foundation of a civilization that is flourishing till today. Ethics in this illustrious Indian culture have its roots in its religious and philosophical thought. Since the beginning of time, several religious traditions have thrived here. There is a strong ethical component on the basis of each Indian religious and philosophical tradition. Every religious tradition holds that upholding moral principles is crucial for leading a happy and blissful life and that no one can reach the 'ultimate aim' (*Moksha*) of existence if they do not walk the road of righteousness.

India's diverse multiple identity can be understood from close proximity on culture, religion, caste, and creed, that is why after coming back from South Africa, Mahatma Gandhi had wished to comprehend the whole country from close assessment in order to formulate an idea which suited best to the real India. Gandhi claimed that it would be impossible to free India from the British without dismantling a centralised and oppressive system of administration, thus he was already considering a new social structure for independent India even during freedom struggle. Despite his trust in democracy, he did not feel at ease with the western style of democratic administration based on the majority rule since it is inadequately concerned with the needs of the people. For instance, the capitalist democracy favours the privileged few, whereas the social democracy supports the majority, but has more restrictions on its ability to act. Gandhi, therefore, endorsed democracy which upholds the idea of *Sarvodaya*, could serves the needs of the common people. It includes taking care of the environment, wildlife, forests, rivers, and land. Gandhi believed that all life is sacred, therefore it should be respected, along with other things required for its survival. But only *Suraj* through *Swaraj* can bring about the change (*Sarvodaya*). Gandhi views *Swaraj* as a means of bringing about social change through encouraging citizens engagement and the devolution of authority to local bodies. Thus, the *Swaraj* encompasses all facets of local administration, including political, social, economic, moral, ethical, ecological, and spiritual dimensions. Gandhi stressed on the village as a unit of local government (*Gram Swaraj*). The village government takes care and regulates the local land and other natural resources through village community uses. Thus, the local community checks misuse of land and guard the interest of the weaker. Such grassroots empowerment reinforces the spiritual energies of the people for self-development as they are intricate in day to day decisions about the community and the environment.

In today's conflict ridden world, the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi advocate a new way through which we move toward more secure and peaceful world. The teaching forward by Gandhi is one which now forms an important part of Indian conscience. The fundamental goal of Gandhi is to achieve *Sarvodaya* (peace for all). He emphasized on the human heart and viewed if the heart of human beings would at peace, it would lead to peaceful action. Gandhi used these concepts on one hand, as a means to achieve *Swaraj* (self-rule), on the other hand, as weapons to fight against the prevailing social-ills in the society, for instance, untouchability, *Sati*-practice, animal sacrifice, child marriage etc.

Essence of Gandhi's teaching

Mahatma Gandhi believed that all aspects of life, whether private or public, including religion, spirituality, morality, and ethics, are a part of the pursuit of self-realization. In the opening of his autobiography, he stated:; “What I want to achieve... what I have been striving and pining to achieve for 30 years is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain *Moksha*” (Anand, 1995).

The foundation of Gandhi's broad social and political theory must be understood in order to comprehend the Gandhian approach to self-governance. Gandhi had an overarching philosophy of life and society that was relevant to both domestic and global issues. Along with his views, he also lived by this concept. His approach to *Swaraj* was based on his views of man, society, and the state, which envisioned the state and its citizens coexisting in mutual aid and collaboration free from exploitation or tyranny. An idea, “as the microcosm, so the microcosm”, informs all his thought and action, which implies that ‘the pure means will lead to pure end’ i.e. purity of both means as well as the end. Gandhi was convinced that if we take care of our means, the end will take care of itself. The authority found on fear and coercion cannot inspire love and respect among people. Thus, as Gandhi believed, means and end may be compared to the *Karma* (action) and its *Phala* (consequences) as the famous teaching of *Bhagwat Gita*. Man can control his action, but not over its consequences. Thus, he suggests the governance system which ensures mass engagement and participation can only actively contribute in self-governance.

Gandhi's experience in South Africa had a significant impact on India, and he was lauded as a *Mahatma* as he developed the Indian National Congress into a large-scale movement that ultimately effort for the country's independence. Gandhi's familiarity with the operations of the state machinery in both South Africa and India fuelled his mistrust of a centralised, monolithic government. In addition, his close relationship with the congress and its leaders confirmed his concerns about the corrupting effect of political power, his scepticism regarding the effectiveness of party systems of power politics, and his study of the British parliamentary systems convinced him of the complete ineffectiveness of representative democracy based on the Westminster model in enforcing the law. He, thus, believed that a method needed to be developed to accomplish the twin goals of empowering the people and the state. He created the two-pronged approach of state resistance and social action rebuilding out of volunteering and participative social action in response. (Mathai, 1999).

Gandhi's view on Democracy

Mahatma Gandhi never wanted India to follow the path of capitalist, socialist or communist democratic model as he believes these models are electable-centred, party-dominated, power-aimed, centralized complicated mechanisms. The individuals are considered not more than a voter casting their votes on the specified period without having any say in policy decision of the government (Vyas, 1962). Gandhi was very concerned about the contemporary state because it was disconnected from the people, bureaucrats, homogeneity-obsessed, and infused with a spirit of violence.

He believed that all current systems of governance were fundamentally incapable of addressing the structural flaws in the contemporary state since they all took the modern state for granted and represented various ways to organise it (Parkash, 2013). The liberal market economy and widespread consumer culture in the West are based on materialism and huge consumerism, and they are governed by global corporate rules and practises. This society, according to Gandhi, is unethical and just a 'nine days wonder'. Approximately a century ago, Gandhi predicted and questioned the limitations and inherent fallacies of Western civilisation, which has only recently begun to acknowledge them (Gangal, 2012).

Therefore, Gandhi lays stress on the democracy which would be an art of mastering the entire physical, economic and spiritual resources in the service of the common good of all (*Sarvodaya*). For him, the real democracy involves *Swaraj*, symbolizes authority based on people's power free from domination and coercion. Thus, *Swaraj* includes the everyday exercise of popular power and continuously affirms sense of being in control of one's fate, not only freedom but also power. It is not just concerned with the periodic accountability of government and merely the enjoying of civil and political rights (Parkash, 2013).

Gandhi believed that the true democracy will be governed by the villagers themselves. In *Swaraj*, each person will design his own government since the village is the decentralised, smallest political entity with the most authority. A Panchayat of five people will rule the village; they will be chosen yearly by local adults who meet the basic requirements. Without a punitive system, it will have complete power and jurisdiction over the legislative, judicial, and executive branches.. In this system of governance, due to the fullest freedom and growth of the individual, the populace will exhibit self-control, initiative, and a well developed sense of civic duty (Vyas, 1962).

However, Gandhi doubted that his ideal dream would be attainable at that time as he believed that India was not ripe enough for its realization (Gandhi, 1910). Consequently, Gandhi had settled in the existing parliamentary, democratic and economic system in India until the right time comes when an ideal society based on the pervasive and universal permeation of the rule of truth and non-violence.

What Mahatma means to *Swaraj*?

The freedom movement led by Gandhi wasn't limited to putting an end to British rule, but it was just a part of his greater and ambitious goal of achieving *Poorna Swaraj* or complete freedom. *Swaraj*, which literally translates to 'self-rule', was given the meaning of an integrated revolution that touches on every aspect of life. At the personal level, the capacity for objective self-evaluation, self-purification, and upholding *Swadeshi*, or self-reliance, are crucial components of *Swaraj* (Gandhi, 1928). Politically, *Swaraj* refers to the ongoing attempt to be free from governmental authority, whether it comes from a foreign or a domestic government. For him, excellent administration does not serve as a substitute for self-government. It is, in essence, a form of popular sovereignty founded only on morality. For the millions of labouring people, *Swaraj* signifies complete economic independence. For Gandhi, all large scale industries, if needed at all, must be nationalized for the benefit of the wider population. He stressed that for him, *Swaraj* is more than just freedom from all limitations; it is also self-rule, self-restraint, and may be compared to *Moksha* or salvation. For him, *Swaraj* of the people signified the totality of self-rule of individuals (Gandhi, 1920). And in the Gandhian discourse, *Swaraj* refers to extensive organisational skills and forays into the countryside purely for the benefit of the common people. Alternatively said, it refers to general education, or national education, it refers to enlisting people's conscientiousness, mobilising them, and giving them the tools and motivation they need to resist authority. As he said, "real *Swaraj* will come, not by the acquisition of authority, but by the acquisition of the capacity by all to resist authority when it is abused. It is to be attained by educating the masses to a sense of their capacity to regulate and control authority" (Mathai, 1999).

For Gandhi 'state is best which governs the least'. Gandhian *Swaraj* would have a government that grants people the most freedom possible, would be the part of the Gandhian ideal democracy. As a result, at the individual, social, and governmental level, the polity changed from one to the other, moving from a lower to a higher type of democracy.

- ***Individual Level: Self-Realisation***

Gandhi believed that each person is the builder of his own government and that both he and his government are subject to the code of non-violence. He can overcome a world might with the help of his community (Gandhi, 1942). The person would have total freedom to mould his or her future anyway they saw fit. In a setting of only positive behaviours, the spirit of non-violence would permeate his thoughts and deeds. According to Gandhi, in such a situation, a ‘perfect democracy’ based on individual freedom might be established (Parkash, 2013).

According to Gandhi, women are the mother of the human-race, the creator of society, and the head of the household. She develops in the context of the family and household specific social impulses and feelings that serve as a barometer for the advancement of society. Women have always been a part of the *Ahimsa Mantra*, which is the source of love, selflessness, emotional stability, and tranquilly. Because every man is equal in God's eyes, as the Gita argues, Gandhi championed the idea of equality. Consequently, every individual should have equal access to the legal and political systems. According to Gandhi, political freedom is wholly insufficient and utopian without racial and social equality, which is a prerequisite for freedom. Therefore, Gandhiji was also a great champion of the individual's right to equality (Gehlawat, 2011).

- ***Societal Level: Self-Governance***

Gandhiji's conception of the village is the development of an autonomous village as a separate administrative entity under *Swaraj*, which is the real-world embodiment of non-violence in the fields of politics, economics, and sociology. In his view, the ideal society is a stateless democracy, in which there is no political authority due to the lack of a state. This would result in a situation of enlightened anarchy, in which social life is so flawless that it can be governed by itself.

The ‘withering away of the state’ is the last stage, according to Marxist thought. The concentration of all authority within the Russian communist state, however, has prevented the regime from disintegrating. Gandhi described *Gram Swarajas* requiring ‘scattering of the state’ rather than ‘withering away’ because he understood the viability of the concept of stateless democracy.

Gram Swaraj is the ideal as it is realised on a practical level. *Gram Swaraj* is a human-centred, decentralised, simple, and non-exploitative village economy that fosters cooperation, creates jobs, and strives to achieve self-sufficiency in its fundamental needs.

Further, Gandhiji's plan is modified pattern of growth with sustainable utilization of renewable and non-renewable resources which help in minimizing degradation of the environment. When one considers the Gandhian economic philosophy's emphasis on the last man, it becomes further obvious how environmentally beneficial it is. The most serious polluter in his plan is poverty, according to him (Suchak, 2002). The *Swaraj* village will be set up to be self-sufficient and independent via agriculture and handicrafts, education of the villagers, and taking all necessary precautions to keep them healthy and free from illness.

Gandhi's view of the ideal social order embodied his core principle of non-violence, according to which he assessed the reliability of social institutions, human motives, and social processes. As such, it was a major critique of western civilization. Gandhiji's ideal village would thus have its own government; the Panchayat would be independent in all areas of governance. A Panchayat of five adults, both male and female, who are yearly chosen by the village's adult residents meet the minimal requirements for office will rule the hamlet. These will be fully empowered to do business throughout their year in office. In essence, the Panchayat was a crucial component in decentralising legislative, executive, and judicial authority in every village republic (Parkash, 2013).

Public opinion will take precedence within the Panchayat (village Swaraj) structure, justice will be swift and uncompensated, and conflicts will be resolved via cooperation and non-violence. Naturally, neither the police nor the army would be needed in such a situation. Gandhi must have actually observed the true democracy in his ideal Panchayat. Gandhi was adamant that India was capable of leading the world in the establishment of true democracy because it had a long history of being a nation of variety in unity and unity in diversity, and it had been an exceptional and outstanding example of non-violence.

- ***State Level: State Governance***

Gandhi desired for the government of an independent India to not resemble a pyramid with the base supporting the top. Both the hard-working labourer and the wealthy capitalist would receive equal treatment in the Panchayats, demonstrating a sense of unity, mutual independence, and peaceful cooperation. It was necessary to end the racial tensions that were migrating from urban regions to rural ones. The self-sufficient communities would be in-charge of running their own affairs. They wouldn't rely on support from the federal government. They should ethically mature to the point that they are capable of failing in a self-defense endeavour. (Parkash, 2013).

Gandhi sought to bring about human pleasure together with complete moral and intellectual development, which he feels can only be accomplished through a decentralised system since centralization is incompatible with a non-violent social structure.

In actuality, his opposition to centralization was based on a fundamental tenet, according to which it cannot be upheld without sufficient force because it results in the concentration of power in the hands of a select few, depriving the populace of its supreme authority in matters pertaining to decision-making about societal issues. Additionally, under an overly centralised organisation, man loses his sense of humanity, becomes an impersonal state machine, and becomes depersonalised. He advocated for a complete decentralisation of political authority and economic production because of this. He went to the source in an effort to offer politics a new direction. Gandhi claimed that India would not be possible without its villages. He finds it absurd to imagine a developed India with its underdeveloped village. As a result, he promoted a richer village lifestyle. He advocated for the communities to become self-sufficient and independent. He asserted that democracy must start at the grassroots level in order for communities to advance and to be successful. (Parkash, 2013).

Gandhi's view on Democratic Governance in India

Gandhi termed the state a soulless entity, a soulless machine that fulfilled individuality, which was the basis of all development, and described it as the most organised and concentrated kind of aggression. Thus, He supported a democratic system in which independence must start at the bottom, enabling the general populace to take part in creating and carrying out their own policies free from rigid and harsh oversight from above. As a result, any village may develop into a republic with the structure of the Panchayat and be capable of handling its own affairs and even defending itself against the larger community. He, therefore, desired the development of a decentralised power structure in India that was founded on the successful rehabilitation of independent and self-sufficient villages. In the end, it would be up to the individual to lead a modest lifestyle and put a stop to endless consuming and resource exploitation (Suchak, 2002).

Gandhi thought that a democracy built on the idea of little government involvement in people's social lives would be beneficial to everybody. He praised royalty and oligarchs while criticising parliament. He backed parliamentary *Swaraj* as an urgent objective and focal point in the fight for *Swaraj* because of this.

Gandhi recommended a parliamentary system of governance based on universal suffrage in India, despite the fact that he was fiercely critical of the British Parliament's methods of operation in his book *Hind-Swaraj*. His idea of *Swaraj* encouraged a form of popularly elected administration. The majority of the adult population was supposed to confirm this popular consent. He wrote: “by *Swaraj*, I mean the government of India by the consent of the people as ascertained by the vote of the largest number of the adult population, male or female, native born or domiciled, who have contributed by manual labour to the state and who have taken the trouble of having their names registered as voters” (Gandhi, 1925).

Conclusion:

This is, however, clear from the above discussion that the *Swaraj* for Gandhiji was an instrument to bring social change and to realize a society of his dream in which no one will be oppressed and no one will be oppressor. His conception of *Swaraj*, in fact, is a wide-ranging and all-inclusive of individual as well as human life in a holistic manner, promoting positive freedom of human conscience free from oppression, ensure ‘good of all’ (*Sarvodaya*) and thus, can be equated with the salvation (*Moksha*). In terms of governance system, the *GramSwaraj* system endorsed by Gandhi is perceived as comprehensive, perfect and suited best for the governance in India. But as Gandhi himself believed that India at that time was not ripe enough to adopt *Swaraj*, thus, the Constituent Assembly didn’t adopt the Gandhian model of *Swaraj* after independence, and recommended a more centralized governance model, as they believed, was essential for stability, unity and economic progress at that time. But, it was the inner urge towards local government and grass-root democracy to ensure all round development that devotes the government to device the decentralization process through the *Panchayati Raj* framework through the adoption of 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment bill.

This, in fact, also inspire global peace as it promote to work from the bottom-up as it uphold peace at an individual or local level (independence at bottom), rather existing plan as carried out by most international role players focusing on top-bottom approach. Gandhi himself favoured that every individual at local level must have to attain *Swaraj* (independence) first, politically, economically, socially and morally, before realizing the village *Swaraj*. Self-realized people can only hold and sustain full power in a justified manner. It can be understood by Gandhian concept, ‘As is the individual so is the universe’. That is why he emphasizes on true education for the village peoples based on the

harmonious development of three H's: Head, Heart and Hand. It is aimed to ensure all-round development of the individual's body, mind and spirit through handicraft and vocational training, would convert people to be a great asset in the construction of *GramSwaraj*.

Character development, moral fortitude, cultural variety, and equality among people are the primary pillars of every society. They also enable access to education and employment for all, social security, just development, and decentralisation of authority. Gandhiji's steadfast view that freedom must start at the local level prompted the creation of the Panchayati Raj system, which is nothing more than a replacement for Swaraj. In reality, the study contends that Panchayats have contributed to changes in rural culture, economics, and polity wherever they have served as institutions of government. Panchayats' ability to deliver on their commitment to the primary tasks of governance and responsibility placed in their hands for regional development and social justice.

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