

SOCIAL SWARAJ: A GANDHIAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of Gandhi on the political scene of India gave a new turn in the generation of political awakening amidst millions of masses in our country. The concept of Swaraj enunciated by him was a ray of hope for people who offered their service to him as a spontaneous gesture. So far so many of them had to leave their hearths and homes and suffered in jails for several years. Their property, land and other belongings were either confiscated or auctioned. They lose all these vicissitudes without any kind of anger or rancor on their faces. Gandhi's political career in the long drawn struggle was a romantic saga tinged with endless responsibility to the numerous problems of the country.

Swaraj in one year was Gandhi's promise to the nation. He was sure that if his countrymen disciplined, united and non-violent and launch a movement against the British Raj, India would attain Swaraj in a year. Consequently, he put forward a massive programme to be carried out by his satyagrahis at different levels. But he realized that several weaknesses had crept in to the Congress organization and the satyagrahis did not carry out his programme in a disciplined way. This greatly pricked his conscience but did not deter him from the path of great struggle which he has initiated with the help and cooperation of millions of his countrymen.

The term Swaraj appeared in Gandhi's writing for the first time on November 3, 1906, while Gandhiji was writing about Shyamji Krishna Verma, an Indian patriot, scholar, administrator and humanist who has abandoned his lucrative profession in India, gone over to England, donned the life of an ascetic and had accepted an educative mission to convert Indian students to the doctrine of Swaraj. Speaking about him and Swaraj writes "His message his service to this country. The various leaders and writers have used the term Swaraj in different ways. But Gandhiji used the term Swaraj with a definite meaning and significance. By Swaraj I mean the government of India by the consent of the people as ascertained by the largest number of the adult population, male or female, native born or domiciled, who have contributed by manual labour to the service of the State and who have taken the trouble of having their names registered as voters. I hope to demonstrate that real Swaraj will come not by the acquisition of authority by a few but by the acquisition of the capacity by all to resist authority when abused. In other words, Swaraj is to be attained by educating the masses to a sense of their capacity to regulate and control authority¹. He used the term Swaraj for both the individual and the nation. By personal Swaraj it is meant rule over one's self. The first condition which he laid down for personal Swaraj was control over lust. Man cannot rule over himself without conquering the lust within him. Rule over all without rule over oneself is deceptive and disappointing. The great mission in life cannot be fulfilled without the rule over the self².

Rule over oneself implies that there should be minimum rule of the Government and the Society, but it means that the individual will rule over himself in such a way that he will not come in the

way of others. He will be guided by self restraint. He shall develop his personality in such a way that his activities will not be hindrance to other and on the other hand he shall serve to the best of his abilities. Gandhiji desired an ideal state in which all the individual would achieve maximum degree of self rule and self-restraint which would be guided by certain ideals and principles.

Gandhiji used the term national Swaraj in wider sense. According to him, national Swaraj means national self-rule and self-restraint in political, social and economic fields. His concept of Swaraj has multidimensional aspects:

The social content of Swaraj means the removal of social suppression of one community by another. It also implies that the various social groups and communities will follow the ideal of peaceful co-existence. There will be no evil passions in the hearts of the Hindu and the Muslims. There should be real Hindu-Muslim unity based on mutual love and affection. Another social evil like untouchability will be completely, abolished and social equality will be ensured. And women who represent half of the society will be equal to the men. There shall be no domination of women by men. She will be respected as mother and sister in the society. Social Swaraj will not be complete without due place and honorable role for the women in the society. Social Swaraj should be based on human dignity, equality and social justice.

According to Gandhian Swaraj in India cannot be achieved without social unity between the Hindu and Muslim as they are the two major communities in the country. He wanted both the communities to focus on the areas of oneness rather than on their differences. He repeatedly said that there is only one God and different religions are only different means to realize the same God called by different names. Hence, humanity is one and God resides in every person irrespective of his religion. He wanted the leaders of each community to respect each other, their customs and traditions and not to hurt the sentiments of each other. If the leaders are united, the ordinary masses of these two communities are also united. Division among these leaders will lead to a division between the masses of these communities³. The objective of Hindu-Muslim unity is to consolidate corporate strength for better purpose in India. Social stability cannot be achieved without the social unity between these two large communities. The Hindu-Muslim unity is like a daily growing plant which require special care and attention by the two communities. The Hindu and the Muslim must develop a charitable disposition towards each other and must cultivate the spirit of compromise and accommodation.

Gandhi claimed to be a Hindu not because he was born to Hindu parents because it was consistent with his spiritual and moral growth, its freedom from dogma as it gives the votary the largest scope for self-expression and enable him to “to admire and assimilate whatever may be good in the other faiths⁴. He was proud to call himself, a Sanatani Hindu for his belief in the Vedas, Upanishads, the Purans, Hindu scriptures, avatars, rebirths, varnashrama dharma, protection of cow and disbelief in idol worship. To him nothing elated him so much as the music of the Gita or the Ramanaya of Tulsidas. But Hinduism, in his view, has one distinct feature as it has been ever evolving. It has no scripture like the Koran of the Bible and its several scriptures are also evolving and suffering additions⁵. Gandhiji said that “my religion is Hinduism which, for me, is the religion of humanity and includes the best of all the religions known to me.”⁶

But Gandhiji was non-dogmatic, catholic and secular in thought, ward and deed. He respected all religion and all religious leaders. The essential unity of all religions was an article of faith with him. He studied the Bible, the Quran, Judaism and Zoroastrianism. So Gandhiji as a secularist. Gandhiji emphasized in a vast country like India inhabited by people following a variety of

religions, speaking various language and observing different cultures, customs and traditions, communal harmony is absolutely necessary for national Integration, peace and prosperity. After Hindu-Muslim unity Gandhi was much conscious about untouchability. Gandhiji criticized untouchability and caste system of Indian society. "untouchability as it is practiced in Hinduism today is, in my opinion, a sin against God and man, therefore, like a poison slowly eating in to the very vitals of Hinduism. In my opinion, it has no sanction whatsoever in the Hindu shastras taken as a whole. Untouchability of a healthy kind is undoubtedly to be found in the shastras and it is universally in all religions. It is the rule of sanitation that will exist infinitely. But untouchability as we are observing today in Indian is a hideous thing and wears various forms in various provinces, even in districts, It is degraded both the untouchables and touchable. It has stunted the growth of nearly 40 million human beings. They are denied even the ordinary amenities of life. The sooner, therefore, it is ended, the better for Hinduism, the better for India and perhaps better for mankind in general ⁷.

Gandhi Stressed that untouchability is a blot on humanity which must be removed. When all men are equal there is no question of degrading a set of individuals and untouchables. "In battling against untouchability and in dedicating my-self to that battle I have no less an ambition than to see a complete regeneration of humanity"⁸. Gandhi criticized caste system of Indian society but he supported the Varna Vyaavastha. According to Gandhi Varna Vyavastha is not necessarily is a system of social stratification. In This system the son was to adopt the occupation of the fathers profession by a son, is in consonance with the heredity calling. Gandhi's ideal Varna Vyavastha is different from caste system. Firstly, in the sense that with different castes a social out look of higher on lower prestige is associated, while men of the four Gandhian Varnas must enjoy equal social honour. Secondly, Secondly, while for the time being if the Varna system is established, according to Gandhi, men belonging to them may get unequal remuneration for their work but in the future when Ram Raj of Gandhi's ideal society, comes into existence, for all men all the four Varnas, there should be provision of equal remuneration whatever might be their vocation.⁹

The present caste system is the very negative of Varnashram. Varna is Said to be based on one's profession, caste is based on birth. Varna is only fourfold while castes are four thousand. Hence there is no system of Varna, it has reached complete anarchy. What lies is its distortion, which has done immense harm to the Indian society, spiritually as well as materially. Hence, Gandhi who was so much enamored by the beauty of Varnashram, had to give up the idea and advocate, "inter dining and inter caste marriages" in Hindu society to liquidate the system of caste.

Gandhi tried to fight out untouchability and casteism on four fronts: social, moral, political, economic and educational. On social plane Gandhi started a crusade against untouchability and caste system by attacking the very system, much against the Will of Hindu orthodoxy and conservatism. He tried not to abuse but to invoke the good sense of the people that it is no part of Hinduism. He said clearly that "untouchability is not only a part and parcel of Hinduism, but plague which is the bounded duty of every Hindu to combat." He openly said in the face of the then opposition of an orthodox Hindu society dominated by Brahmin superiority that "restriction on inter-caste dining and inter-caste marriage is no part of Hindu religion. It is a social custom which crept into Hinduism when perhaps it was in its decline at best like a temporary defence measure against conversion of Hindu society. To him "to removal of untouchability means love for and service of, the whole world and it thus merges into ahimsa. According to Gandhi "the caste Hindus owed a sacred duty to the so-called untouchables. He must become a Bangi in name and action"¹⁰. He laid emphasis upon human equality.

On the political level, Gandhi was the first to grasp the gravity of the problem of untouchability and its significance from the point of view of the national movement. Gandhi had fought against social discrimination and apartheid in South Africa with moral and spiritual force. But he had understood that any moral talk would be hypocrisy in India, if we continue to practice untouchability in social life. So in his view, both the social and political questions were but the two aspects of one and the same problem to sides of the same coin. Gandhiji, therefore, introduced the removal of untouchability an important programme of freedom movement.

Besides, social, moral and political levels Gandhi also tried to raise the economic and educational status of the Harijans, For the upliftment of Harijans, Gandhiji wanted a non-political association, Harijan Sevak Sangh. He had blessed such association after his fast in 1932. It should be national organization with its branches in state capitals, district headquarters and taluk places. All these national, provincial, district and taluk boards of the Harijan Sevak Sangh are expected to be self supporting and self reliant and should actively seek the support of the savarns and change their heart ¹¹. If the heart of Savarnas is changed, it becomes easy to remove the malignant practice of untouchability. Gandhiji divided the functions of the Harijan Sevak Sangh broadly into two categories. Firstly, the Sangh should raise the religious, social and economic status of the Harijans by undertaking a number of reforms and projects. Secondly, it should create an awakening among the Harijans masses so that they may come to know that they are entitled to the same rights which are enjoyed by other section of the society. They are to be encouraged to undertake measures for self-improvement.

Gandhiji believed that the same soul resides in both men and womwn. When they have the same soul, both are equal and one con not claim any superiority over the other. The two live the same life, have the same feelings. Each is a complement of the other. The one cannot live without the other's active help ¹²

Though men and women have equal in status and have equal opportunities to develop their abilities, they are not identical. They are complementary to develop their abilities and one helps the other, They are an inseparable pair and one cannot live without the other. Gandhiji said that if the status of one of them is affected, the other will not function properly and it spells ruin for both. In the Constructive Programme, Gandhiji envisaged a great part to be played by women especially i.e. communal unity, production of intoxicants, removal of untouchability, village sanitation, health and hygiene, women's emancipation, new education (Nai Talim), Khadi and village Industries and Krishi and Go-Seva ¹³

Gandhiji was of the opinion that women can play an active role in a non- vaiolent political movement. He appreciated the role played by them in the non-violent struggle for independence of India. They must also participate in all the nation building activities. He was not in faviou of reservation of seats for women in administration an political parties. According to him merti should be athe only test. Women or any other group should disdain patronage, they should seek justice but not favours. ¹⁴

Gandhi did not merely harp the rights of women. But it does not mean that he was less of an advocate of the rights of women. He knew that for every right to be exercised there has to be a corresponding duty or responsibility cast upon somebody to respect the right and allow it to be exercised. Similarly, he thought that women would be better able to tend for themselves if they become self-reliant and self-confident. If women understand their duties and if they stand firm on their freedom, they would compel respect from men ¹⁵. Gandhi claimed, when women realize

their capacities and strength latent in them, they will be able to resent the glaring inequalities to which they are subjected. He stated, no doubt, the religious and cultural customs and the lust of man is responsible for the pitiable condition of women themselves. Gandhi said it was not physical weakness of women which kept them crippled for ages but it was psychological fear and helplessness culturally implied upon women by the society. In an ideal swaraj women will be free from exploitation and domination of men. She will be respected as mother and sister in society. She will have a unique and highly respectable role to play in the society. Social Swaraj will not be complete without due place and honorable role for the women in the society.

Thus Gandhiji defined Swaraj in terms of individual and the national. According to him, Swaraj of a people means the sum total of Swaraj (self-rule) of the individuals. Such Swaraj can come into existence when the citizens discharge their duties in proper manner. Swaraj means Raj of the whole country. When one's country is not dominated by the government of another country it is Swaraj. It is Swaraj when there is Swaraj in each and every village. And Ram Raj when people become wise and there is no need to exercise any authority or anybody.

Gandhi recommended two moral weapons for reconstructing the Swaraj State. These two weapons which are based on truth and non-violence are Satyagraha and constructive programme. Satyagraha which has certain techniques like non-cooperation, civil disobedience, hartal, no tax campaign etc. is to be used to convert the existing society into the ideal society (Swaraj State) through slow process of dismantling. Although the fight against the civil practices and institutions, New constructive programme like village industries, khadi, Hindu-Muslim unity, Removal of Untouchability and other constructive programmes are to be taken up to build the swaraj state.

Now the question arises whether the new and modern India has any relevance of Gandhian philosophy especially when India is moving towards the new and uncharted territory of progress where the chains and bondages of caste system and practices of untouchability is loosening its clutches. Without a shadow of doubt all these above said things are true but the present picture of real India is dismal and bleak more so in the isolated and rural parts of India. The relevance of Gandhi's concept of social swaraj is very much alive.

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