

RETHINKING OF GANDHIAN CONCEPTION OF DEMOCRACY: AN ANALYSIS

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Abstract:

The problem of defining 'democracy' is complicated in the sense that it is difficult to know what is the 'real' democracy and what is the 'ideal democracy'. Literally, democracy means "the power of the people". The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines it "as Government by the people, direct or representative". Generally, it has been accepted that democracy is the rule of law or the rule of the majority in the world of to-day. In the political sphere, it is the idea of participation by the whole community in the political process. It bases political authority on the will of individuals who by a process of co-operation make decisions that are binding on all. This is the modern Parliamentary Democratic form of Government. In the presenting paper Gandhi and his conception of Democracy are focusing to analyze his own view. This paper tries to carry the value of democracy which was enlightened by Gandhiji.

Keywords: Gandhiji, Democracy, Constitution, Decentralisation.

INTRODUCTION

Mahatma Gandhi has been called the champion of democracy. But he differs in some respects from western political thinkers on the concept of real democracy. His ideas on democracy bear the stamp of his strong belief in non-violence, truth, equality, self-sacrifice and individual freedom. He wanted that "Democracy must in essence, mean the art and science of mobilizing the entire physical, economic and spiritual resources of all the various

sections of the people in the service of the common good of all." Accordingly, he considered democracy from the view point of larger principle of social life. He criticized the governments which, in their institutional framework and political form, were democratic but from the philosophical stand-point or the end-point of view, were negation of the same.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- Focusing on importance of non-

violence of Gandhian democratic thought.

- Delivering the concept of political decentralization in Gandhian view.
- Understanding the fundamental principle of Democracy in Gandhian approach.
- Comparative analysis of western political thinkers and Gandhiji, Regarding the concept of 'Real Democracy' and 'Ideal Democracy'.

The mentioned objectives are tracing out the entire research paper. On the basis of below mentioned trying to discuss Gandhian Democratic Thoughts.

NON-VIOLENCE AND TRUTH

Gandhi was of the opinion that non-violence was the basic requirement of democracy. He remarked that violence and democracy were incompatible. To him, it was only on the basis of unadulterated ahimsa, or non-violence that genuine democracy could be built up. He commented, "I hold that democracy cannot be evolved by forcible methods. The spirit of democracy cannot be imposed from without. It has to come from within". He pointed out that it was not possible to establish the constitutional or democratic government without the recognition of non-violence on a national basis. Gandhi also believed that true democracy or the Swaraj of the masses could never come through untruthful and violent methods.

EQUALITY

The next basic principle of Gandhi's

concept of democracy was his insistence on equality. He advocated that every citizen should be provided opportunities and there should be no discrimination between a man and a man on the ground of caste, colour, sex and religion. Economic equality was also one of the major goals of his attainment of parliamentary democracy. To him, economic equality was the master-key to non-violent democracy or independence. It meant abolishing the eternal conflict between capital and labour. He remarked that the bulk of the nation's wealth was concentrated in the hands of a few rich persons on the one hand and there were semi-starved naked millions on the other. He also emphasized that in a democracy every individual must have the fullest liberty to use his talents consistently with equal use by his neighbours. Gandhi also pleaded for both maximum economic and political decentralization and the means of production and distribution. He expressed his view that democracy was an impossible thing until the power was shared by all. Even a poor man could have his share in self-government.

MAJORITY OF RULE

The next principle of parliamentary democracy or any representative government today is believed to be the decision by majority. It is sometimes held that Gandhi depreciated the rule by majority. For example, Gandhi believed that in matter of conscience the 'Law of Majority' had no place. However, in any case, he would not allow majority to crush

the minority or suppress opinion even of a solitary individual. He wanted the rule of majority only to the extent it could be regarded as an expression of the collective social will. He was not prepared to put up with coercion on the part of the majority. Instead, he wanted the minority to be brought round by gentle persuasion and argument. He also emphasized that if rights of minorities were to be respected, the majority must tolerate and respect their opinion and action. Similarly, he wanted majority to be very considerate towards the opinion of minority.

In short, to Gandhi, the minority in democracy should have as much right as majority and the weakest in the society should have the same opportunities and claims as the strongest or most developed men and women. He rejected the suppression and exploitation of the minority by the majority on the ground that there was no guarantee that the majority was always right.

PARTY SYSTEM

The next important principle of parliamentary democracy is the party system since it is virtually impossible without it to organize a large number of voters, which the universal adult franchise and direct election involves. At time, Gandhi can be cited as having denounced the political parties and party spirit prevailing in the modern democratic mechanism. And, his statement given before his death indicates, when he advised the Congress party to dissolve

itself and convert into a 'Lok Seva Sangh'. But, in fact, this is not a just approach in this connection. What probably he wanted was that Congressmen who had made sacrifices for the attainment of independence must not entangle themselves in the form of power politics but should be available for the building up of a new society in India. He did not envisage that political party would not exist under the parliamentary system which the Congress had accepted even before the dawn of Independence. However, it does not mean that he approved of all the evils that prevail in the modern party system. Certainly, he never liked a party to keep political power, as to him, political power was not an end but one of the means of enabling people to better their condition in every department of life. Furthermore, to him, service to the people was the sole aim of all collective actions. So any group or party according to him could serve the people even without aiming at capturing the political power or government. His conviction was that many could serve the country better by remaining outside the government.

Again, he would not like individual freedom to be curbed by the political parties. However, he was not against discipline. He wanted an individual to accept a decision since it emerges after free and full discussion. Even then the individual has the choice of leaving the party in case the decision is against his conscience. Certainly, he would not like the minority to sabotage the majority

decision in the name of conscience. Nor did he like the members of the party to work at cross-purposes. As every collective action demands organization and he was not against organization, but as a votary of non-violence he was not in favour of organization based on force and untruth.

It must also be noted here that Gandhi was not in favour of the existence of political parties at all levels of political and social actions, since collective actions, to him, were possible in a smaller area without a rigid party system. At this stage, he deplored the appearance of parties and factions in villages. He believed that when power politics entered our villages with less thought of the welfare of the villages and more of using them for increasing the parties' own power, it could become a hindrance to the progress and development of the villages rather than a help. Therefore, he advised the people to make maximum use of local help and remain away from power politics.

SECULAR DEMOCRACY

Gandhi also pleaded for a secular democracy. To him, religion was a personal matter of the citizens in democracy. He emphasized, that they must have mutual trust, co-operation and religious tolerance, as basically the aim of all religions is the same, though their ways are different. Therefore he said there should be no place for communal distrust and hatred in democratic social order. One must respect the religion of another and

the state should not discriminate between individuals on the ground of different religions. Thus, he was of the opinion that the state must undoubtedly be secular in its character. Everyone living in it should be entitled to profess his religion without let or hindrance, so long as the citizen obeyed the common law of the land.

MILITARY AND POLICE

Initially, Gandhi also suggested that in democracy, the people should not depend on military and police force or its assistance. He commented, "It will be a poor democracy that depends for its existence on military assistance". And he advised that in democracy, the individual must be his own ruler and should work in such a manner that he would never be a hindrance in the way of his neighbours, and in this way should avoid military and police force. But it does not mean that he rejected the military and police help completely in a situation where it was needed, but at the same time, he desired that it must be a body for reforms rather than coercion. Regarding the police force, he admitted that no doubt, he could and did envisage a democracy where the police would not be necessary, but he himself doubted in its success. Therefore, he advised the police people to be the servants and not the masters of the people. At the same time, Gandhi asked the people to obey the laws and to be disciplined to establish well-ordered democracy.

INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM

Next, Gandhi assigned prime

importance to individual as in his scheme of things individual freedom had the highest place. He was convinced that democracy could not be built on a denial of individual freedom, and individual freedom was possible only in a nonviolent democratic order. He further added, “the democracies must respect the liberty of individual non-violent conscience”. He also remarked that Swaraj or democracy of the people meant the sum total of the self-rule of individuals, and “if the individual ceases to count, what is left of society? Individual freedom alone can make a man voluntarily surrender himself completely to the service of society.” Willing submission to social restraint for the sake of the well-being of the whole society enriches both the individual and the society of which one is a member.” Thus, he admitted that in democracy the individual is to be governed by and limited by the social will which is the state and which is governed by and for democracy.

Accordingly, it can be stated that according to Gandhi in democracy, the people are allowed to draw the government’s attention to mistakes, if any. They can also remove the Government if they wish to do so, but at the same time they should not obstruct it by agitating against it, since the government too derives the strength from the individuals.

PUBLIC OPINION

Regarding the public opinion in democracy, Gandhi emphasized that it must be without prejudice, ignorance,

superstitions, otherwise it would be self-destroyed and must be in chaos. He further added that since democracy was a great institution and as there was no human institution without its dangers and the greater the institution the greater the chances of abuse, therefore, it could have the chances to be greatly abused. With the result, the remedy, to him, was not avoidance of democracy, but reduction of possibility of abusing it to a minimum by honest and healthy public opinion, since it alone could keep a society pure and healthy.

But, it must be noted that Gandhi did not favour violent and aggressive public opinion, as he pointed out that public opinion could become intolerable when it became violent and aggressive. He also explained that legislation in advance of public opinion, was often worse than useless and non-co-operation was the quickest method of creating public opinion. He clarified that civil-disobedience was the purest type of constitutional agitation, but, he reminded that it must be sincere, respectful, restrained, never defiant, and must be based upon some well-understood principles and must not be capricious and above all, must have no ill- will or hatred behind it.

RIGHTS AND DUTIES

Regarding the rights and duties of citizens in democracy, Gandhi stressed that the citizens must be ready when needed, for the better performance of their

duties. He insisted that we must not crush the rights of our neighbours since without the respect of our neighbour's rights the evolution of democracy was not possible. Accordingly, one must be prepared to hear the reasonable voice of one's opponent and must always keep an open mind and be ever ready to find that what he had believed to be truth, was after all, untruth. This openness of mind could have strengthened the truth in us and remove the dross from it.

POLITICAL DECENTRALIZATION

Gandhi also advised the Indians not to copy the Western model. He remarked that one nation situated in one condition was not necessarily good enough for another differently situated. Accordingly, he suggested evolving a decentralized people's democracy on nonviolent lines at the lower levels. He advocated that in democracy the independence must begin at the bottom. It means that at lower levels people must be independent in making their policies and implementing them without any rigid and strict control from the above. Thus, every village, to him, could be a republic having the institution of panchayat with full powers. He clarified that it did not exclude dependence on and willing help and co-operation from the neighbours or from the world too. It would be free and voluntary play of mutual forces. Thus, he was in favour of decentralized people's democracy or establishing Panchayati Raj in the villages.

OPPOSED TO CAPITALIST DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM

As a result, he was not satisfied with the working of the capitalistic democratic system of the western countries and opposed it. Consequently, he placed before mankind the idea of spiritual and religious democracy. In his booklet, "Hind Swaraj" Gandhi raised his voice and blamed that the modern civilization. He also commented that modern civilization was the root cause of human exploitation and vicious atmosphere and degradation of morality and religion, and it represented the forces of evils and darkness. He wanted a democratic system in which equal opportunities were available for both the strong and the weak. He is clear that in no way he was denouncing the democracy as an ideal, what he opposed was the mechanism that was prevailing in Britain at that time. He was against the exploitation carried on by the western countries, which were claiming to be democratic.

Represented as close an approximation to the ultimate social ideal as defined in 'Hind Swaraj', as was practicable in his opinion, in the given social situation.

Thus, fundamentally, in 'Hind Swaraj' Gandhi rejected the parliamentary democracy based on industrial civilization and force, which, he regarded necessarily detrimental to both individual and collective Freedom.

In 1921, Gandhi had gone through an evaluation in this connection and

remarked that though he kept his adherence to the basic principle expressed in 'Hind Swaraj', yet he confessed that in the contemporary situation he was not aiming at the Swaraj, as described therein for India though, was still trying for the self-rule pictured therein. Here, he admitted that his corporate activity was undoubtedly devoted to the attainment of parliamentary swaraj in accordance with the wishes of the people.

SIGNIFICANCE OF LEGISLATURES

In 1937 Gandhi also climbed down from his initially vigorous opposition to the parliaments when he made a typical observation on the significance of legislatures. He remarked, "The legislatures are to-day we, the representatives of the people. We have to carry out our truth and Non-violence there... The legislatures of to-day are different from the old. We do not want to destroy them; we want to destroy the system which they are created to work." Truth and non-violence, to Gandhi were no cloistered virtues but applicable as much in the forum and the legislatures in the market place.

CONCLUSION

Thus, democracy, as conceived by Mahatma Gandhi, is incompatible with the force and violence and centralization. It cannot be imposed from without but has to grow from within. The spirit of democracy is far more important and essential than its mechanism or external framework. It can be realized in a society

whose members are self-controlled and pure at their heart and who have been able to subdue the irrigational elements by the help of the spiritual or moral elements present in man. Moreover economic and political democracies are inseparable and that economic democracy can reach the millions in the rural area through mass efforts, that is, by the people themselves.

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