

Gandhian Tools for Socio-Economic Development in India



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Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi was an India-born world mentor. He was a freedom fighter as well as a social reformer. He was a man of action and intuition. He attributed India's political slavery to social degeneration. To him social reconstruction was indispensable for winning Swaraj in the true sense of term. He had struggled hard to win the freedom by non-violent means. He had aimed to end exploitation and set up a new social order on the principles of truth and non-violence. He envisaged a society which would provide for the essential needs to the common people. In his view India's greatest curse was poverty and hunger. To combat these two evils, Gandhi evolved a programme by which the minimum needs of the society could be made available. This programme is called constructive programme. Constructive work played a vital role in the Gandhian strategy. It was primarily organised around promotion of Khadi, Spinning and Village industries, National education and Hindu-Muslim unity, struggle against Untouchability and social uplift of Harijans and boycott of foreign Cloth and Liquor. Constructive programmes aimed at peace, justice and communal harmony making Indians confident, self-reliant and benevolent.

Key words: Swaraj, truth, non-violence, freedom, constructive programme

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India has given birth to a million of brave hearts and sacred minds who have relentlessly laid down their efforts and sacrificed their needs for the call of the country. Mahatma Gandhi's name remains at the top of this glorious pyramid. Mahatma Gandhi, the pioneer of non-violence was born on 2nd October 1869. His prominent role in India's freedom struggle fetched him the title of 'Bapu' (Father of the Nation). The birthday of this Indian spiritual and political leader is celebrated as "International Day of Non-Violence" throughout the world. Gandhi struggled and dreamt of an India free not only from the yoke of British colonial rule but also free from the evils of poverty, illiteracy, backwardness, untouchability with all the citizens enjoying equally the fruits of freedom, inner peace and prosperity. Gandhi's philosophy bears the influence of a number of sources, and ahimsa forms the basic foundation of Gandhian thought. Apart from *Bhagavad-Gita*, *Ishopanisad* and Bible he was highly influenced by Tolstoy's 'The Kingdom of God is Within Us', Ruskin's 'Unto This Last', Thoreau's 'On the Duty of Civil Disobedience' and Plato's dialogues of Socrates.¹

Gandhiji was a prominent and ideological figure in pre-independent India. He had struggled hard to win the freedom by non-violent means. He had aimed to end exploitation and set up a new social order on principles of truth and non-violence. He was a pioneer of Satyagraha. 'Non-violence is the first article of my faith. It is also the last article of my creed'.² Gandhi was a great social scientist often experiencing certain principles. He located the truth of Indian ideas through study of Tolstoy and Ruskin. He can be acclaimed as a politician, prophet, a humanist, a social scientist, a democrat and above all an economist. The Gandhian ideology, whose main focus is on welfare and dignity of the individual, provides us a broad framework into the new philosophy of economic development that we need today.

The Gandhian political philosophy was a fusion of individualism, idealism and socialism. The keywords of his economic and political programme were self sufficiency, non-competition, equitable distribution and decentralized production. The Gandhian concept of equality is manifested in his principles of trusteeship, opposition of untouchability and equality of man and woman. Gandhiji incarnated India's traditional ideal of a saint, but on the other hand, he belonged to the most modern type of mass leader. Through his doctrine of non-violence and Satyagraha, he revolutionized the entire Indian approach for the solution of all social and political problems. The unique contribution of Gandhiji lies not in the fact that he discovered new truth but that he applied old and eternal truths for the solution of modern problems. He had immense faith in human nature and its capacity to perform even the most formidable task. Gandhiji's conception of Swaraj was 'full economic freedom for the toiling millions'.

For Gandhi, Swaraj meant the freedom of the lowliest. He said, 'Swaraj means freedom for the meanest of our countrymen'.³ Swaraj means the sum total of Swaraj (self-rule) of individuals. "It is Swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves. It is, therefore, in the palms of our hands. But such Swaraj has to be experienced by each one for himself. One drowning man will never save another".⁴ As far back as 1931 he wrote that the "Swaraj of his dream was the poor man's Swaraj" and emphasized that freedom was meaningless unless the basic necessities of life were guaranteed to the masses. This socio-economic revolution was possible only by organizing the workers, both in the industrial and agricultural sectors for nonviolent action against social and economic injustice.

Constructive work is the essence of Gandhian ideology. It was practiced in hundreds of *Ashrams* which came up all over the country, almost in the villages. The social and political workers got practical training in *Khadi* and Yarn production in such Ashrams along with lower castes and tribal people. It played a crucial role during the passive phase in filling the political space left vacant by the withdrawal of mass movements; while mass movements were sporadic, constructive work was to be carried on all the time. It provided an alternative of continuous and effective work. It had also the advantage of involving a large number of people. Parliamentary and intellectual work could be done by relatively few, constructive work could involve millions.⁵ Gandhiji put all his emphasis on the agrarian rather than industrial development. He thereby wanted to achieve the social and economic regeneration at the grass root level. Thus Gandhiji's constructive programme was that the poor must get food and clothes. The best way for that was to cultivate crops, grow food and to make his own cloths. His constructive programme is geared towards village reconstruction.

India's long-term economic prospects depend mainly on agricultural sector, which contributes a quarter of gross domestic product, and provides livelihood to two-thirds of the population. Nearly 70 per cent of the Indians were engaged in agriculture. The agriculturist in India was without work for at least three months in a year. The landless labourers whose number was ever on the increase would find work only in the sowing and reaping seasons. This unemployment and underemployment was the cause of Indian poverty. To combat this problem Gandhiji suggested revival of *Swadeshi* movement as it would resolve the problem of consumption and production and consequently production would increase the quantum of employment. Gandhiji followed the programme of the revival of cottage and a village industry for this purpose the All India Village Industries Board was formed.⁶ Constructive workers were sturdy secularists and their work for Hindu-Muslim unity helped to unite the people. The uplift of *Harijans* and *Advasis* by constructive workers made them self-reliant and enabled some of them to join the freedom struggle and it proved effective for their own social-economic development. The Gandhian concept of bread-labour is another potent way of constructive development. Writing in *Harijan* (Oct.1937) Gandhi says "If all labored for their bread and no more, then there would be enough food and enough leisure for all. Intelligent bread-labour is any day highest form of social service"⁷

Gandhi was a visionary and apostle of Non-violence. The first step in the path of non-violence is shedding all hatred in any shape or form and abstaining from hurting any living being in thought, word and deed. Gandhi wanted to create a society of mutual respect and co-existence. Therefore the constructive programme was devised to reform our national character. The first item of this reform was the removal of untouchability. Untouchability in our country, as the race and colour problems in the west rests upon the idea of the superiority of one section of people over another on account of their birth.

Gandhi used to spend some time with the Harijans by living himself with them. This kind of personal identification of the Mahatma made the Harijans realize their sense of importance in society. He taught them cleanliness, hygiene and advised them to raise their economic and social standards by hard work and honest means. Gandhiji set up an organization, the 'Harijan Sevak Sangh' which was to work for the removal of all their disabilities.⁸ As a result of efforts made by Gandhiji untouchability has been abolished by law after independence.

Mahatma Gandhi considered woman as a companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities. Woman is an incarnate of Ahimsa-infinite love. He had an instinctive understanding of women and their problems and had a deep and abiding sympathy for them. He placed before the nation a far reaching agenda for the regeneration of Indian women, who were suffering from various oppressive, dehumanizing and exploitative social practices like child marriage, Sati Pratha, ban on widow remarriage, Purdah, devadasi system etc. Gandhiji was against all inequalities to women. He severely criticized pernicious system of child marriage. He was against *Purdah* system. He was a great critic of dowry system and also against heavy expenditure in connection with marriages. Gandhi assigned to women a distinct and crucial mission in the nationalist quest, which was perhaps the most creative and significant aspect of his vision. He invited women of India to participate in the Satyagraha movement as they possess infinite patience, power, perseverance and determination. Gandhi's revolutionary views, consequently laid foundations of a new tradition which enabled the Indian Women to come out in thousands from their sheltered homes to contribute in the nationalist movement. They did full justice to the trust placed in them and their capabilities by Gandhi. Interestingly after independence women did not sit quietly at home but they, following Gandhi's philosophy, responded enthusiastically to the new challenges and issues being faced by the country. In other words women emancipation is indispensable for the growth of a nation.

In the opinion of Gandhiji village economy cannot be complete without essential village industries, such as hard-grinding, hard pounding, soap-making, paper-making, matchmaking, tanning, oil pressing etc. *Khadi* to Gandhiji is the symbol of unity of Indian humanity of its economic freedom and equality. Moreover, *Khadi* mentality means decentralization of production and distribution of the necessities of life among the vast population of India, which was predominantly rural. From the nineteen twenties until his death in 1948, Gandhiji gradually shifted the emphasis of his work from non-violent resistance to constructive schemes for the welfare of all. The constructive programme focused upon constructive ways of rebuilding a demoralized society. It sought to re-orient a servile nation habituated to sectional loyalties and social apathy towards a fearless community of mutual service and sacrifice in which every individual identified with others, especially the poor.

The constructive programme was suggested by Gandhiji in his book entitled 'Constructive Programme: Its meaning and place. It consists of several apparently unconnected independent activities. But they are connected within the context of creating evolution of new social order. Within the Indian context, this meant –

- Nurturing communal unity
- Abolishing untouchability
- Fostering adult education
- Systematic improvement of village

- Upliftment of the peasants
- Development of non-violent labour unions.
- Promotion of cottage and small scale industries.
- Eradication of social evils.
- Prohibition of Alcohol
- Promotion of *Khadi*
- Promotion of Basic Education
- Upliftment of Women
- Promotion of Education in Health and Hygiene
- Propagation of *Rashtrabasha*
- Provincial Language
- Upliftment of *Kisans* and Labour
- Upliftment of *Adivasis* and students
- Treatment of leper⁹

Gandhi dreamt of an India where every category of people—the rich and the poor, the Brahmins and the Shudras live life together. There should be no discrimination in any sphere. Everyone in India should feel it as their own country. Gandhiji devised his constructive programme meaningfully and set up a number of constructive work organizations in order to knit together in common a bond of fellowship among the millions and weave the pattern of non-violent conduct into their lives. According to Joan Bondurant, the constructive programme is a positive aspect of *Satyagraha* in action, and is the concomitant of resistance action”.¹⁰ Gandhiji described constructive programmes as the permanent part of the non-violent effort. From this effort is created the capacity to offer nonviolent resistance called non-cooperation and civil disobedience. This work would raise the status of people and bring home to them the power of non-violent social change for the ending of exploitation.¹¹

Gandhi was not a political thinker but a “Karmayogi, a man of actions”.¹² His views are global, inclusive, spiritual and holistic. Gandhian ideology covers all aspects of life. Gandhi emphasized on harmony between Hindus and Muslims, upper castes and untouchables, man and woman and rural urban divide. This spirit of harmony is even extended to the relation between man and nature as well. The Gandhian ideology mainly focuses on welfare and dignity of the individual. Gandhiji strongly believed that the economic system should be so organized that every individual has an opportunity of getting gainful employment, so that he can buy his own bread and essential means of living. Gandhiji supported rural-centric development with agriculture and small scale industries getting pride of place as this is the only way the unemployment problem can be solved in a labour abundant country like India. He believed in the decentralized development model as this helps the fruits of development reach everyone and promotes equality and social harmony. Here lies the root of Panchayatiraj in India. Gandhiji was opposed to conspicuous consumption and luxurious living. He wanted people to have minimum needs and lead a simple life. ‘Simple living and high thinking’ should be the motto of Indians for a peaceful society. The first basic principle of Gandhian economic thought is a special emphasis on ‘Plain Living’ which helps in cutting down our wants and being self-reliant. ‘Civilization in the real sense of the term consists not in multiplication, but deliberate and voluntary, reduction of wants which promotes real happiness and contentment and increases the capacity for service’.¹³

The constructive programmes if carried out in the right direction, Gandhiji believed would result in the ideal Sarvodaya Samaj. Gandhi called Sarvodaya, the good of all, as his goal, the good of all without any distinction between high and low, rich and poor, strong and weak, even the good and bad. Sarvodaya literally means uplift of all. The view, that village industries and crafts are an important part of rural life and be vigorously protected to ensure sustenance to a self-reliant village, is essentially an outcome of Gandhian thought. Constructive work as planned by Gandhiji is something that everyone can participate in. If all kinds of people actively participate in the constructive programme, then it will provide a common experience and be a symbol of democratic common endeavour, it will bridge the gap between the classes and the masses.¹⁴ Gandhi was a messenger of truth, simplicity and ideal living. Therefore Gandhian ideology is relevant in all ages. It is necessary to revive the policy and plans as per thought of Gandhi to ensure sustainable development in India.

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