

RELEVANCE OF GANDHIAN PHILOSOPHY OF SWARAJ IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN DEMOCRACY

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Abstract

Most Indian population could not get benefits of the economic development brought by the economic liberalisation, and one of the reasons is the flawed administrative system of Indian democracy. Even, the implementation of 73rd and 74th Amendments and Panchayati Raj System could not bring the desired benefits to the rural people as all provision of these Amendments were not implemented and socio-political factors. In this research article , the Gandhian philosophy of Gram Swaraj and its importance in contemporary Indian democracy has been briefly discussed. Gandhiji introduced Gram Swaraj as a concept of his ideal of stateless democracy and wanted real democracy to work in India. It is a practical embodiment of truth and non-violence in the realms of politics, economics and sociology and offers an effective remedy for many of the political ills of contemporary political systems. The concept of Gram Swaraj is not political; it touches all aspects of life: cultural, social, economic and ecological. It provides an ideal non-violent social order in which self-reliant, self-sufficient and self-governing villages function independently in vital matters leading to holistic village development.

Keywords: Gram Swaraj, Stateless democracy, self-reliant, self-governing

Introduction

Life of man and society is affected very badly by the destructive armaments and warfare, extreme centralization, consumerism, and moral degeneration. Materialism has engulfed the modern man and he has become ready to sell his freedom also, just for the sake of few more material comforts. It has resulted in the steep fall in the moral standards of man. Consequently, there is a loss of integrity, true bliss, and authenticity in his life.

The Gandhian concept of swaraj is completely based on the Indian tradition. Gandhian concept of Swaraj is much more comprehensive than the Western concept of freedom. 'Swaraj' is the goal of human life. Man can never be happy if he is governed by others. The purpose of the present research is to find out a solution to the problem of moral degeneration of man's life so that he may progress spiritually and attain the absolute freedom, which is the highest goal of human life, according to Indian tradition.

RESERCH PROBLEM

Importance of Swaraj in all aspects of personal life and society, the methods of attainment of swaraj ,and the problems relating to attainment of swaraj .

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the research undertaken in this work is to examine various conceptual frame works intimately connected to the Gandhian concept of Swaraj. The concept of swaraj has attracted attention in Indian political thought. The concept of democracy is not new to India. It took deep roots though in a different form in the Vedic Period. Swaraj had been the goal of Gandhi's life. We shall try to find out what was the motivating force behind this great man's thought and actions.

Secondly, the purpose of the present research is to allow the mind to respond critically as well as evaluatively to the conceptual position which has been put forth by Mahatma Gandhi about the problem of Swaraj. The intention here is to comprehend various meanings of the concept of Swaraj and to visualize the divergent relationships emerging in the context of social reality.

The third purpose is to examine the issue from the point of view of the contemporary world situation with the objective of solving the 21st century's problems of the most destructive forms of violence in the life of the individual and in the life of world society. Life of man and society is affected very badly by the destructive armaments and warfare, extreme centralization, consumerism, and moral degeneration. Materialism has engulfed the modern man and he has become ready to sell his freedom also, just for the sake of few more material comforts. It has resulted in the steep fall in the moral standards of man. Consequently, there is a loss of integrity, true bliss, and authenticity in his life.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research in this work has been done having relied mainly on “Doctrinal Method” of research. The methodology adopted for the present research is doctrinal, analytical and descriptive. The researcher mostly relies on the primary & secondary sources like articles, books, opinion of research scholars and experts in the respective field. Internet provided major contributions of most relevant and latest information on the web which has helped the researcher to explore the subjects through various dimensions.

SWARAJ

As a child, Mohandas had a very devotional and sensitive mind and was influenced by the plays which he read e.g. 'Sharavana Pitri Bhakti' and he saw 'Harish Chandra'. Regarding these two plays he writes in his autobiography, "still both Harish Chandra and Shravana' are a living reality for me, and I am sure I should be moved as before if I were to read those plays again today."¹ Sharavana Pitri Bhakti motivated him for service of parents and 'Harish Chandra' inspired him to be truthful at any cost. The influence of his family and environment was great and had a deep impact on his mind. He was influenced by his family circle in his childhood. Mahatma says about his father "My father was a lover of his clan, truthful, brave and generous my father never had any ambition to accumulate riches and left us very little property." And this Gandhian philosophy of Swaraj and Sarvodya owes its origin to his upbringing and values

Mahatma Gandhi used the term swaraj referring apparently to the removal of the British rule from India and the installation of a national government instead. Externally we do not find much of a difference between the meanings of the word swaraj expressed by Dada Bhai Naoroji, Lok Manaya Tilak, and Gandhi. But it may be noted that Gandhi used the term swaraj in a much broader sense.

Dada Bhai Naoroji proclaimed the goal of swaraj as political autonomy. He said, we want only justice. Instead of further dividing or detailing our rights as British citizens, the whole

¹ M.K.Gandhi, The Story of My Experiments with Truth (Ahmedabad: Navjivan 1969) p.4

matter may be summed up in one word "Self-Government or swaraj like the United Kingdom or Colonies²."

The Sanskrit word *sva* means "own, one's own, my own or self³." *Svaraj* as used in the early vedic texts signified self-ruling, self-ruler, one's own rule "king". The Rig-veda and Atharvaveda used it in this sense of "self-ruler"⁴ and This kingship could be either divine or terrestrial, applying to Indra, "king" of the gods or occasionally in a technical sense, to earthly kings of Western India. *Svaraj* in the early Vedas then had a political meaning and denoted "autocrat" in the sense that a king has sovereignty over his own dominion.

Mohandas Karam Chand Gandhi was not a systematic philosopher in the field of metaphysics or political science but his contribution lies in stressing some of the fundamental ideas for the regeneration of man and reconstruction of society and politics. His life itself is a living proof of his thought and philosophy. Gandhi embodied in himself the wisdom and inspiration of sages of different ages. We can divide the sources of influence into three main heads, i.e., family, Indian tradition, and the Western sources.

Gandhi had used the word *swaraj* in the traditional sense of the word. It is not just political freedom or freedom from the British rule but in a positive sense *swaraj* means the rule of self. However, self-rule demands knowledge of the individual self. Only the knowledge of self could help in the attainment of spiritual freedom, i.e. freedom from the illusions of separateness and freedom to realise the universal self.

Gandhi's *Swaraj* is being reconsidered against the modernist theories of nation-building. Most often claims of *Swaraj* to nation-building are belittled and underplayed by the champions of 'nation as state'. Most of the contemporary thinkers do not accept the notion of nation as mere an idea rooted in some mythical or pre-historical fable. Stuart Hall, in fact, begins his "The Idea of the Modern State" with an emphatic counter-proposition that "The state is a historical phenomenon: it is a product of human association of men and women living together an organized way; not of Nature".

According to Gandhi an individual who is not spiritually free has no right to claim political freedom. Even if he attains it, he will lose it soon enough, Gandhi believed that before demanding political freedom from the Britishers, Indians are required to do some

² Dada Bhai Naoroji, *Speeches and Writings* (Madras i: Natesan, 1910), p. 76

³ Sir Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1899), p. 1275.

⁴ A.A. Mac Donell and A.B. Keith, *Vedic Index of names and subjects, II* (London: John Murray, 1912), p. 494

introspection and find out the cause of their subjugation. The cause of our slavery lies in our own weaknesses. He writes in Hind swaraj- "The English have not taken India; we have given it to them. They are not in India because of their strength but because we keep them ... They came to our country originally for the purpose of trade. Recall the Company Bahadur. Who made it Bahadur? They had not the slightest intention at that time of establishing a kingdom. Who assisted the director of the company? Who was tempted by the sight of their silver? History shows that we have done it all. To get rich all at once, we welcomed the company officers with open arms. We helped them. If I am in the habit of drinking bhang and his seller sells it to me, can I blame him or myself? A true servant of India will have to go to the root of the matter. If you pretend to be a doctor of an Indian disease, you will have to find its true cause."⁵

He writes further in Hind swaraj regarding the cause of our slavery. That it was our princes who sought the help of the Britishers while fighting among themselves. The Hindu-Muslim enmity gave the Company circumstances to control over India. Thus, he concludes, "Hence it is truer to say that we gave India to the English than that India was lost. "The English entered India for the purposes of trade. They remain in it for the same purpose and we help them to do so.

Gandhian Philosophy of Gram Swaraj

Gandhi made it very clear in the first few chapters of Hind swaraj that nobody can enslave a man who is above the weakness for silver and bodily pleasures. If man rises above his weakness for the material objects, nobody can enslave him. He is a liberated man. Man is a slave of his own passions first and then the world enslaves him by exploiting his weakness. Nobody can enslave a liberated man. So, the freedom of the self from the shackles of passions and body's a precondition for political freedom. Political freedom from the yoke of the British will not make Indians free and liberated from their own weaknesses. In these conditions when the Indians are going away from their own tradition and following blindly the Western civilization, nobody can save them. Even if the Britishers leave India and the Indian succeed in forming their self-government politically, it shall not be better than the British rule in any way. It shall be English rule without the English. It is not swaraj, according to Mahatma Gandhi. It may be political freedom. Gandhi has in fact criticized the Western civilization which makes man body-oriented or body centred. It makes man money minded,

⁵ M.K.Gandhi, Selected works of Mahatma Gandhi (Ahmedabad : Navjivan, 1968) Vol. IV, p.125

materialistic and a profit seeker at the cost of moral values, spirituality, and religion. He said it is this desire for wealth and profit only which has blinded the English and they see no human values, morality, and religion. If India must save itself, it must get out of the Western civilization and embrace the Indian tradition. Western civilization will not change the fate of the millions of poor people living in India.

He says the swaraj of my dream is a poor man's swaraj. The necessities of life should be enjoyed by the people as well as by princes and rich men. But that doesn't mean they should have palaces like them. For him, they are not necessary for happiness. You or I will get lost in them. But you should have all the normal conveniences of life that a rich person has. But he says I have not the slightest doubt that swaraj is not Pooran swaraj until you are guaranteed these benefits under it.

In this connection he says, "Swaraj of my/our own dream recognizes no racial or religious distinction. Nor is it to be a monopoly of the written persons or even of rich men's money. Swaraj is to be for all, including the former, but emphatically including the maimed, the blind, starving and toiling millions."

He says that swaraj is the rule of all people, it is the rule of justice. Whether under this rule the ministers were Hindus, Muslman's, or Sikhs, and whether the legislatures were occupied exclusively by Hindus or Muslman's, or by any other community. They would have to act fairly.

Gandhi does not indent to replace Britishers with the Indians, rather he wants to replace the Western civilization by the Indian civilization for attaining the true swaraj. Self-discipline or the rule over self is the first condition of self-rule or swaraj, according to Gandhi. Let us concentrate on this first condition, that is, self-rule or self-government or self-control. Swaraj is not the equivalent of the English word freedom. Gandhi says that the word should mean more than political freedom. He said it is difficult to find a single word which provides the meaning of swaraj in English. The meaning of the word 'swaraj given by Dada Bhai Naoroji and Tilak was limited to only political freedom but according to Gandhi political freedom alone is an incomplete meaning of the word swaraj. He has tried to make a distinction between freedom and swaraj like this, "The root meaning of swaraj is self-rule, swaraj may, therefore, be rendered as disciplined rule from within 'Independence' has no such limitation.

Independence can mean the authority to do what you want, swaraj is positive, independence is negative.”⁶

Gandhi has used the term swaraj in a comprehensive and broader way. He has tried to find out the true meaning of swaraj, i.e., a combination of political and spiritual freedom. In the Indian tradition we find that both political and spiritual freedom are inherently connected. We may call both the concepts as external freedom and internal freedom respectively Bhagavad Gita, Gandhi's primary text of Hinduism, saw the liberated individual as one who acts without craving, possessiveness and finds peace in the awareness of the infinite spirit thereby freed from delusions.

The Chandogya Upanisad defines freedom in a spiritual sense: "Self-governing autonomy and unlimited freedom in all world, were the traits of swaraj in the sage. As in the Gita, this liberation evolved from a higher consciousness, an awareness of the unity of all being, the identity of oneself with the universal self or Atman."

In the verse of Bhagavad Gita, we find that both the meanings of swaraj, i.e. inner swaraj and outer swaraj, internal swaraj or External swaraj individual swaraj or collective swaraj merge into each other. Here we find the roots of Gandhian Concept of swaraj, having the twin meaning into swaraj, i.e. spiritual freedom and political freedom merging into each other. Bhagavad Gita brought Gandhi into politics of doing service and not the politics of gaining power for self-indulgence.

Gandhi realized that the love of man was the first step towards the love of God. The divine knowledge of Bhagavad Gita made it clear that man is required to realise the inherent unity of all beings despite the visible diversity. All is in God and God is in all is the core message of Bhagavad Gita. When man realizes that every animate and in animate creature is a part of God, the problem of 'Otherness' disappears. One start seeing God everywhere even in one's opponent. This lesson of complete humanism had been experienced by Gandhi from Bhagavad Gita. Accordingly spiritual identity with everything filled Gandhi's heart with love.

At the individual level, Swaraj is associated with the capacity for self-evaluation, continuity and self-confidence. Swaraj is self-government—the constant striving for independence from government control. Swaraj means full economic freedom for the working millions. Gandhiji said, "Power resides in people, everyone has their own rules." He rules so that he is never a

⁶ M.K. Gandhi, Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (New Delhi: Ministry of Information & Broadcasting) Vol. 45,p.263-6

hindrance to his neighbors. Grama Swaraj aims at every village, it must be self-sufficient and able to manage its own affairs, perish trying to defend itself in defeat. Grama will be a free and voluntary game of mutual forces. In this structure composed of countless villages, an oceanic circle will grow, the center of which will be individual. Gandhiji wanted a classless, stateless democracy, which the Indian government rejected. He wanted the Congress Party to be transformed into a constructive labor organization. He suggested the name "lok sewa and lok sangh". He envisioned the ideal state of Ramarajya, the moral authority of the people. Gandhiji did not view a particular government but the entire structure of the state with hostility. Gandhiji was a saint and a moral revolutionary.

He was a moral realist with an occasional touch. Gandhiji did not regard economic problems as isolated departments of human activity. He considered the village to be the center of economic organization. India's manpower was characterized by an accelerated rate of population growth in the country's economic resources. He strengthened cottage and small industries and khadi. For him, Swaraj is part of the truth which is God. He believed that Indians were entitled to freedom because of the immense suffering they had undergone for it. The Grama Swaraj of Gandhiji's conception was to defend the interests of the downtrodden and starving millions. "Liberty begins at the base. The public must be a work in which each city must act naturally supported and equipped to solve its own problems. It will be ready and equipped to die in the effort to protect itself from any attack from without. This does not prohibit reliance on and willing assistance from neighbors or From the world.

Gujarat Vidyapith was founded by Mahatma Gandhi in 1920 to achieve a self-governing society that has a central section of villages that have been exploited by the capitalist, consumerist colonial Western ideology. In India, rural areas were economically exploited during the British colonial era. After independence, huge expenditure was made on rural development but village empowerment, village self-reliance and the objectives of village Swaraj are only within the framework of political development planning⁷.

The thrust area of Gujarat Vidyapith is a rural society. We plan to achieve our goal of exploring Gandhiji's base village 'Gram Swaraj' which has some unique features as well as Mahatma Gandhiji's Ideal Village which he called Gram Swaraj, a study of 'Gram Swaraj base Rural Heritage' under Oriental Studies and Heritage. Management Resource Center

⁷ Council of Europe (2003), European Rural Heritage Observation Guide CEMAT, Council of Europe. Dhan Foundation (2009), Annual Report, Madurai.

(OSHMRC), Gujarat Vidyapith, aims to explore the roots of village base social, cultural, economic, community, religious institutions, understanding and adding real value to the rural life of the people revolves.

The village as a whole of flora and fauna, man and his integrated activities, which forms a system and creates the identity of village nature and the genesis of human knowledge. This basic knowledge has been ignored by mainstream knowledge systems, while a higher number of people live in rural areas and use conventional knowledge in their daily lives. We emphasize conventional knowledge bases of living systems that are more sustainable for humans and nature, that are more related to decentralization, fair distribution. Our plan to explore the inner beauty of the village which is related to rural harmony and peace, empowerment of people, availability of options, economic sustainability, cooperation, individual demands and self-reliance which is established as Gandhi's 'Gram Swaraj' as a legacy⁸.

Relevance of Gram Swaraj in Indian Democracy

Gram Swaraj as conceived by Gandhiji is a true and virile democracy which offers an effective remedy for many political ills of the present political systems. For Gandhi, political power was not an end in itself, but one of the means to enable people to improve their conditions in every area of life. Therefore, in his famous "Last Will and Testament", he noted that though India had achieved political independence, "it still has to achieve social, moral and economic independence in respect of seven hundred thousand villages as opposed to cities and towns". He exemplified the image and program of Gram Swaraj or Panchayat Raj, which would be a non-violent, self-sufficient, economic unit with full political power. According to Gandhiji, Gram Swaraj is human-centered, unlike Western economics, which is wealth-centered. The first is the life economy; the latter is the economy of death. A Gram Swaraj economy will provide full employment to each of its citizens based on voluntary cooperation and work to achieve self-sufficiency in the basic requirements of food, clothing and other necessities of life⁹.

⁸ Gandhi, M.K. (1962). Village Swaraj. Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, p. 239

⁹ <https://mkgandhi-sarvodaya.org/articles/politics1.htm>

Rooted in self-satisfaction, multiplicity of desires, and the separation of ethics from economics, modern economic systems are vast mechanized, centralized, complicated organizations. They are disfigured by unemployment, underemployment, pauperism, exploitation, a mad race to conquer markets and conquer countries for raw materials. Competition, conflict, and class warfare disrupt the social fabric. They involve the enslavement of the individual, treating man only as a hand feeding the machine, reducing him to a mere accessory of the machine. It loses its fine sensibility due to soul-killing repetitive work. Society is divided into the privileged and the underprivileged, the rich and the poor. Never before has there been such economic inequality as we see today, where the multi-millionaire lives aimlessly in the lap of luxury and the hard-working laborer barely has enough to keep his skin and bones together.

Gandhiji proposed Gram Swaraj as an infallible panacea for the ills not only of India but of the entire world. In a letter to Pandit Nehru dated 5.10.45, Gandhiji wrote: "I am convinced that if India is to achieve real freedom and through India the world, then sooner or later the fact that people will have to live in villages and not in cities must be recognized, in huts, not in palaces, they will never be able to live in peace with each other in cities and palaces. I think that without truth and non-violence there can be nothing but destruction for humanity. We can realize truth and non-violence only in the simplicity of village life."

Conclusion

The preservation and enhancement of village independence will provide a solution to most of India's socio-economic and political ills, and village independence can only be preserved if the Gandhian concept of Gram Swaraj is followed. Gram Swaraj is not something that can be achieved in a short time. It is not just about changing the physical appearance of the village; it involves a total transformation of the outlook of the people there. The concept of Gram Swaraj is not political; it affects all aspects of life: cultural, social, economic and ecological. It provides an ideal non-violent social order in which self-reliant, self-sufficient and self-governing villages function independently in vital matters leading to holistic village development.

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