

Gandhian Socio-Economic Principles and the Covid-19 Era: A Study through Indian Perspectives

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Abstract

Gandhi was a socioeconomic reformer, religious thinker, prophet, and global figure. He believed in establishing unity and egalitarian values in all spheres of life. Gandhian principles are based on the foundation of truth and nonviolence. He wanted the laws of the economy to aim at material progress, social harmony, and moral advancement. To satisfy human wants, he believed that nature had produced enough, so he wanted the people to focus more on their spiritual growth. Gandhian views on the economy were based on the Indian context. Hence, the paper describes Gandhian opinions on the Indian economy by contrasting them to the present context of the Covid-19 era. The paper is done with the help of secondary data. The secondary data were collected from books, articles, journals, etc. The study's main objective was to highlight Gandhian philosophy on the sustainable economy by relating it to the modernization era.

Keywords: Gandhian principles; economy; liberalization; Covid-19

Introduction

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the father of India and an anti-imperialist, always envisioned establishing a welfare state for the nation. He was known to his many followers as "Mahatma." Gandhian ideas were deeply rooted in his principle of truth and nonviolence. He began activism as an Indian immigrant in South Africa in the early 1900s. In the years following World War I, he became the leading figure in India's liberation struggle to gain independence from Great Britain. Since the beginning of the 20th century, Gandhi's theories of Satyagraha and Swaraj have been integral to his liberation struggle and public discourse. Gandhi was an ardent economist. His economic thoughts were clearly visible in his contribution to the "Hind Swaraj" (1908). The concept of Swaraj was based on the governance of an ideal state and regulated by elementary technology and a subsistence economy. He believed that self-sufficient villages were superior to industrialized and capitalist civilizations.

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Gandhian ideas on the economy were based on the belief that colonial culture had destroyed the base of the economy- a self-sufficient village. So, he wanted humanity's return to the traditional peasant world for a blissful existence.

According to Gandhi, an ideal state should be politically and economically decentralized. He believed that direct democracy exists at the grass root level, so he laid more emphasis on village governance. 'Gandhi visualized revitalizing the old village Panchayat system as well as the development of rural village economy through optimal utilization of resources available at the local level' (Sharma, 2008). Gandhi believed that an economy constituted by networks of village republics spread all across India would generate national prosperity rather than a centralized economy. To Gandhi, what makes a modern State powerful is its highly centralized nature which negates the very concept of democracy. He believed that large-scale industrialism is at the base of the centralization of political power in a few individuals. Moreover, in a capitalist model, power comes to be concentrated in the hands of individual capitalists, and under socialism, it is arrogated by managers, technocrats, and bureaucrats. The supporters of Gandhian thought believed that 'decentralization means of production and distribution would prevent the growth of a centralized mode of ownership, control of the means of production as the resulting capital formation' (Sharma, 2008).

Gandhi was a critique of modern civilization. He forwarded his understanding of western civilization and criticisms of modern bourgeois society. In the *Hind Swaraj*, he condemned Western civilization's evil and harmfulness. He attacked the particular form of western civilization that emerged with the Enlightenment and the Industrial revolution. In his weekly journal "Young India" (1931), Gandhi wrote, "Industrialism is I am afraid, going to be a curse for mankind" (Nachane, 2016). He mainly focused on the model of development in which every village produced all its necessities and a certain percentage in addition to the requirement of cities.

But on the other hand, he was not opposed to technology and recognized that a moderate amount of industrialization might be necessary for a nation's survival. He set up two criteria for the appropriateness of technology – 'first that it should not be labour displacing and second, that it should increase the general well being' (Nachane, 2016). Despite all, Gandhi's central vision was to restore the past glory of Indian civilization and to form an ideal state as the foundation of future humanity. However, modern India has traveled far in a direction quite the opposite of the one M.K. Gandhi advocated for the nation. However, the legislative and administrative processes of the country continue to form based on Gandhian economic thoughts. Therefore, the paper briefly discusses the relevance of Gandhian philosophies in the contemporary era of development.

With the progressive nature of a globalized world, India has also evolved into a wave of globalization, where the political leaders decided to go through the path of industrialization and modernization. Most recently, the impacts of Covid-19 in India disrupted economic activity and caused a loss of human lives. So, the paper will primarily focus on how the transformation of the Indian State and the growing demands for modernization has set back threats for the nation and the contradictions with the Gandhian vision of the welfare state in the working of the contemporary liberalized economy in India.

Gandhi on Swaraj and Sovereignty

Gandhi's concept of Swaraj was developed based on his understanding of the Indian roots and his early experiences in London. His discussion with Savarkar and a few others

prompted him to put forward his vision of Swaraj for India. Gandhi's vision of Swaraj was self-rule or self-government, which was ideal for the individual and the nation. He viewed Swaraj as a 'life of simplicity, opposed to the pursuit of wealth and power, where the individual could have control over things that were necessary for sustenance of life; the issue involved was the principle of renunciation' (Veeravalli, 2011). According to Gandhi, Swaraj was not only envisioned for the political freedom of the nation from British rule but was more substantive for individual freedom to regulate their lives without harming one another. Furthermore, he believed that in swaraj, every member of society would have complete and continual reciprocity and participation. He elaborated:

"Swaraj and Ramrajya are one and the same thing... We call a State Ramrajya when both the ruler and his subjects are straightforward, when both are pure in heart, when both are inclined towards self-sacrifice, when both exercise restraint and self-control while enjoying worldly pleasures, and, when the relationship between the two is as good as that between father and son. It is because we have forgotten this that we talk of democracy or the government of the people. Although this is the age of democracy, I do not know what the word connotes; however, I would say that democracy exists where the people's voice is heard, where love of the people holds a place of prime importance. In my Ramrajya, however, public opinion cannot be measured by counting of heads or raising of hands. I would not regard this as a measure of public opinion... The rishis and munis after doing penance came to the conclusion that public opinion is the opinion of people who practice penance and who have the good of the people at heart."

With the help of elaborations and explanations, Gandhi tried to take his country closer to the concept of Swaraj (Mukherjee, 2009). Moreover, he believed that in modern political thought, Swaraj would serve as a fundamental and systematic critique of an alternative to the theory of Sovereignty. He was of the view that Swaraj was meant to gain independence from British rule to a question about the very understanding and definition of Sovereignty by the nation's people. Concerning Swaraj and Sovereignty, Gandhi addressed not merely the question "who has the authority to rule?" but "who has the supreme authority to rule?" Therefore, Gandhi presented a 'different theory of sovereignty with fundamentally different presuppositions about the relation between civil society and the state' (Veeravalli, 2011). Gandhi always stood for a stateless society, believing that State implies force and violence. Whether on utilitarian grounds or moral grounds, the faith of liberalism on individual grounds demands that human personality be free from coercion. In the liberal tradition, the theory of Sovereignty has its basis in the social contract, which is emphasized in the civil society (Jean Jacques Rousseau) or the State (Thomas Hobbes).

Gandhi's understanding of Swaraj reflects the theory of Sovereignty. His Swaraj was meant to address several issues, including those about political economy. Apart from the nation's independence from British rule, Gandhi was aware of the various issues concerning civilization, modernity, Hindu-Muslim relations, and the problems related to the untouchables. So, he sought "Purna Swaraj" or self-rule. Gandhi had a progressive idea for a state. He believed in the 'possibility in the development of human personality to a higher level of moral experience, and, consequently, of the emergence of a different political pattern.' The moral order of an individual is a prior necessity in a state, as it enables the lesser use of force by the State. Gandhi wanted the subordination of political and social considerations to moral considerations. If the individuals can realize their moral nature through the path of 'ahimsa, satya and niskama karma' and if it 'works with a will, man and his environment in this life and the future will be changed to secure "Sarvodaya," the highest good for all.' With the help of

Sarvodaya, Gandhi tried to develop his ideas on decentralization and attempted to build a plan for social and political reconstruction based on 'metaphysical idealism' (Mishra, 2005).

In the modern nation-state, particularly in case of emergency or security threat, the State suspends the laws. It curtails the freedom of the individual and society by using political and juridical deadlocks. Immediately after the nation's independence (1947), there were efforts to incorporate some of the Gandhian principles within the policy framework. Later on, while framing the planning policy of the nation, realizing the potential need for mass mobilization, the policymakers attempted to apply some of the Gandhian visions. Besides, over the seventy years after independence, it has been realized that Gandhian ideas on life and civilization have not been constructed in their 'true' or proper course. With the wave of Globalization in India, the views on Swaraj, which Gandhi had envisioned, lacked adequate incorporation. So far as cultural identity is concerned, 'the finding of a sovereign Indian selfhood against western hegemony— there is now the question of the numerous selves that India denies political expression to and encloses, often violently, within itself' (Vajpeyi, 2017).

Gandhi's Philosophy and Modern Indian Economy

Gandhi made India stand for every individual. He said, 'to rule India was to rule the self; to master the self was to master India.' During his entire lifetime, Gandhi claimed the traditional temperament of Indian people, whom he envisioned to develop spiritually rather than materially. Gandhi was opposed to technological developments and the use of machines by people in India and wanted the village economy to produce for the village's sustenance and trade the surpluses with neighboring towns. However, Gandhi was not entirely opposed to modernization and urbanization; he would have accepted it on some relying principles. To him, 'its use was acceptable only when machines led to the fulfillment of basic human needs.' It means industries that were run to generate productive employment for the poor rather than representing human greed were acceptable to him. 'Western civilization with its complacency and what was seen as sophisticated material lives he found highly inconsistent with the development of human qualities necessary for high thinking' (Vajpayee, 2017). Gandhi said, "we need to optimize economy by bringing in a technology that is suitable to the people to the comfort of every individual and adopt an economic system that will be comfortably distribute the production possibility equitably and distribute among everyone" (Gireesan and Manasi, 2020).

In a liberal economy, everyone has the right to earn unlimited. However, as a supporter of justice and equality, Gandhi opines that adopting such an economy would promote the inequitable distribution of opportunities. He termed such an economy as 'evil' in all aspects, which was embracing the life of every Indian. He believed Satyagraha, based on truth and 'ahimsa,' could rid society of all social, political, and economic evils. Gandhi's ideas on a self-sufficient village for developing poor and marginalized sections gained a broad spectrum after the post-independence era. His thoughts on the decentralized economy have relevance even in the modern-day economy. In the contemporary era of globalization, the philosophy of Gandhi on a self-sufficient village has primarily influenced policymakers and critics. His philosophy on the village Panchayat system with the optimal utilization of natural resources and local development has served as a counter-model in the modern-day economy (Sharma, 2008). Gandhi was very much inclined toward making India a strong democratic nation. So, he emphasized the decentralization of power from the lowest level.

Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru (the first Prime Minister of India) had different visions regarding the nation's future development. While Gandhi focused on the growth of the

economy from the grass-root level and the preservation of the nation's traditions and cultural identity, Nehru emphasized a modernized economy by eradicating the barriers of the society such as religion, caste, etc. By passing through various debates, Gandhi and Nehru's ideas were enshrined in the Constitution of India. Nehru's principle on modernization broadly promoted 'humanistic-spiritual values which could easily outcross the barriers of religion, caste or ethnicity within India and build bridges of cultural and aesthetic linkages with the world community at large.' In contrast, Gandhi's vision of modernity was based on his ideology of Ahimsa and nonviolence with justice and empowerment that would promote 'values of non-acquisitiveness, non-consumerism-hedonism and spiritually self-regulated way of life' (Singh, 2012). Various studies have found that both Gandhi and Nehru had some common visions concerning the nation's overall development. They wanted to establish a peaceful country by rejecting war and using nuclear technology for warfare. Thus, it can be said that Gandhi and Nehru both had their visions strictly committed to equality, peace, and nonviolence.

Gandhi labeled modern civilization as "Satanic," which means 'materialism, over-indulgence, and voluptuousness as the overt manifestations of this civilization.' Modern civilization's lifestyle would only mean individual success, bodily comforts, and obsession. To Gandhi, such an economy has a corrupting influence over society and the State (Rohmetra, 2011). In the present Indian context, the economic policies related to industrialization and modernization have somewhat diverged from the Gandhian economic vision. The present-day society is based on the politics of power and not on the politics of people (Mishra, 2005). Gandhi aimed to set up a welfare state. However, immediately after the independence of the nation, Prime Minister Nehru adopted a socialist model of development. Moreover, with the taking up of a liberalized economy in the 1990s the welfare state model of Gandhi was submerged and underwent various changes. Here, the State was kept away from any interventions in the market economy, which resulted in the growth of several types of social inequalities. Although the Gandhian principles had lost their consensus in the processes of urbanization and industrialization, in the case of village industries, the policymakers of India have primarily included Gandhian ideas on the welfare state. It has helped protect the rights and dignity of labour in rural areas.

Gandhian Principles and the Covid-19 era

Gandhi's vision focused on communal unity in society. He was concerned with removing inequalities and untouchability among the various groups of society. One of the most crucial contributions of Gandhism was the concept of the "talismán." Talisman is one of the most potent commentaries on empathy by Gandhi. He expressed the use of talismans when society faces any situation of doubt. Talisman emphasizes how one must consider the impact of any decision on the poorest or the most vulnerable section. Gandhi forwarded this concept as a guiding principle for regulating Government policies. Talisman has very much relevance in the present Covid-19 era.

Gandhi looked at every aspect of society. As such the catastrophic disruption caused due to the Covid-19 situation was usually meant to be a revision of the Gandhian principles. The outbreak of Covid-19 in Wuhan, China, in late 2019 has changed everything. The economic and social disruption caused by the pandemic is devastating; where millions of people are falling into death and extreme poverty, which presents an unprecedented challenge to public health, food systems, and other sectors. It has been estimated that nearly 3.3 billion global workforces risk losing their livelihoods.

In a diverse country like India, informal economy workers are particularly vulnerable because most lack social protection and quality health care and have lost access to productive assets. To combat the pandemic, the State has imposed "lockdown", because of which many workers lost their means to earn and cannot feed their families. For most, no income means no food, or, at best, less food and less nutrition intake. The imposition of the lockdown in the country has also led to the internal migration of many people. The magnitude of internal migration is about two-and-a-half times that of international migration. Therefore loss of employment and social distancing during this phase presented a chaotic and painful process of mass return for internal migrants in India and in many countries of Latin America (International Labour Organization, Food, and Agriculture Organization, International Fund for Agricultural Development and World Health Organization, 2020).

The Covid-19 period has taught people about their interdependency on each other. This period has also compelled society to adopt specific rules and regulations to protect their lives. It had created a sense of fear in the minds of people. Prof (Dr.) Balram Bhargava, Director General of Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), said that 'following Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of healthy lifestyle -- "Less is more" and "Health is wealth", especially in the times of crisis will be a prominent way to foster ease of living during the Covid-19 pandemic.' He added, "in today's unprecedented time, there is no better person who could lead us out of this" (Kanishka, 2020).

In the postmodern world, the processes of Globalisation have made free trade and built up interconnection between people worldwide. On the contrary, it has also made people more vulnerable. However, COVID-19 provides humanity with a timely opportunity to sit and reflect and, through introspection, turn out toward others. The pandemic has shattered the entire economy, including the urban and rural. The Gandhian principles of Swadeshi, Swachhata, Swaraj, and Sarvodaya can be valuable for reconstructing the Post-Covid-19 world order. This phase has drastically transformed the entire economy, forcing it to pause, take stock, and reboot. Spreading at an alarming rate by infecting millions of people, this pandemic has brought economic activities to a near standstill. As such, the countries had imposed strict restrictions on the movement of people where the financial damage is already evident and represents the most significant economic shock the world has ever experienced in decades. The June 2020 [Global Economic Prospects](#) describes both the immediate and near-term outlook for the impact of the pandemic and the long-term damage it has dealt to prospects for growth (The World Bank, 2020).

In the global pandemic, the call for solidaristic action and economic struggle for change to wipe out poverty and recognize universal human dignity is significant with the Gandhian approach. The nations have been witnessing socioeconomic implications regarding a severe downturn and global recession that has drastically changed the lives of many families. Concerning Gandhian principles, there exists an opportunity for a non-violent life to thrive. It will be helpful in the re-growth of the village economy because people were migrating to their villages and began their home industry and craft. Sometimes, they revert to local community barter instead of brutal monetary exchange.

In many cases, the rural economies in the country have been offering goods and services, including food and energy, to households, hospitals, and health centers during confinement periods. Rural areas have also served as a temporary but safer location for urban dwellers in some countries. This speaks to the value of setting the Gandhian idea of "Swadeshi" in the present-day context and beyond. The State, private sector, and civil society appear to work together in what might be termed a "whole of society" response that prioritizes those most

in need. Within a scheme that aspires to provide care for the wellbeing of all, conceived as "Sarvodaya," this again is sensible, and regarding "Satyagraha," or the power of non-violent truth or soul force, the current crisis also holds many possibilities for transformational change from fleeting violence to sustainable peace (Tschudin 2020).

Conclusion

Gandhi's devotion to individual rights made him a fighter for the democratic freedom of the nation. Liberals believed in the Gandhian non-violent character of the State as the ultimate model for the economy. To Gandhi, full employment by the government is a basic need of the country as it will help eradicate unemployment and poverty. He believed that the employment of all sections of society is not possible with industrialization and mechanization as they produce labor-saving industries. As such, he stood for establishing a self-sufficient economy where he prioritized developing village industries.

The liberal economic model adopted by the country in the 1990s led to the emergence of differences in access to capital and infrastructure resources. The higher investments in machinery and equipment enhanced the potential for profit-making from the rural sector, where only large landowners benefited from technological advances. The craze for mechanization in the modern-day economy has made individuals work only for their selfish interests. Gandhi stood for the establishment of a welfare state, but in recent times, the liberal economic model has minimized the role of the State. In his talisman ideology, Gandhi suggested an economy where vulnerable sections would benefit. However, it has completely changed in the present context. The individuals are inclined toward selfish motives and not for the development and welfare of society. Although Gandhi's economic thoughts did not substantially contribute to developing an economic model in post-independence India, they influenced some government actions and aspects of the nation's financial planning.

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