

# “The Gandhian Approach to Historical and Rural Development”

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## Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi as a visionary of India, had a very clear perception of its villages and made an emphatic assertion that "India lives in her seven and half lakhs of villages'. He further believed that India will have to live in villages, not in towns, in huts not in palaces. He held this conviction by saying that "If village perishes, India will perish too. Gandhi, played the leading role in securing for India political independence from the British Raj, through organizing and mobilizing Indian people from all walks of life in a peaceful and non-violent manner. He is therefore rightly called the 'Father of the Nation'. Gandhiji's approach to India's rural development was holistic and people-centred. It was rooted in his conviction in the tenets of truth, non-violence and the goodness of human-beings. Influenced as he was by Tolstoy, Ruskin and the teachings of the Gita, he placed more emphasis on moral and spiritual values than economic motives as a means of overall development. He found that the progress of the country lies in the development of majority of its rural villages, develop rural economy, industry and rural skills.

Through his 18-point Constructive Programme, Gandhiji successfully implemented his rural reconstruction activities in Sevagram Centre near Wardha in 1935. Gandhian Dream of Indian Villages: Gandhiji's ideal village belongs to the pre-British period, when Indian villages were the small republics undisturbed by the periodical visitations of barbarous hordes . This republican character of the villages was destroyed by the British rule. Therefore, in Gandhian plan of rural reconstruction, the ancient republican village without any kind of exploitation served as a model unit<sup>3</sup>. Gandhi aimed at the attainment of Village Swaraj and said in 1942, "My idea of Village Swaraj is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its own vital wants and get inter-dependent for many others in which dependence is a necessity. Gandhiji fully understood the consequence of western type of industrialization in India. He was conscious of the fact that far industrialization would destroy the Indian society by eliminating our decentralized rural industries and further leads to improvement. He said, "my deal village will contain intelligent human beings. They will not live in dirt and darkness as animals. Men and women will be free and able to hold their own against anyone in the world. There will be neither plague nor cholera nor small pox, none will be idle, no one will wallow in luxury. This paper endeavors to bring out the vision of Mahatma Gandhi in attaining Gram Swaraj via Rural Development

*Keywords: Gram Swaraj, Constructive Programme, Rural Development, Sevagram, cottage industries, Rama Rajya, Trusteeship*

## Introduction

In the Indian context rural development may be defined as maximising production in agriculture and allied activities in the rural areas including development of rural industries with emphasis on village and cottage industries. It attaches importance to the generation of maximum possible employment opportunities in rural areas, especially for the weaker sections of the community so as to enable them to improve their standard of living.

Theoretically, Gandhian approach to rural development may be labelled as 'idealist'. It attaches supreme importance to moral values and gives primacy to moral values over material conditions. The Gandhians believe that the source of moral values in general lies in religion and Hindu scriptures like the Upanishads and the Gita, in particular. The concept of 'Rama Rajya' is the basis of Gandhiji's idea of an ideal social order. Gandhi defined Rama Rajya as "sovereignty of the people based on moral authority". He did not view Rama as a king, and people as his subjects. In the Gandhian scheme, 'Rama' stood for God or one's own 'inner voice' Gandhi believed in a democratic social order in which people are supreme. Their supremacy is, however, not absolute. It is subject to moral values.

**Objective:** Primary goal of this paper is to analyse Gandhiji's vision of Rural development as means of

- a. For Economic progress of India
- b. To achieve a sustainable economic model

## Basic principles of Gandhian model of rural reconstruction

The basic principle of village swaraj as outlined by Gandhiji are trusteeship, swadeshi, full employment, bread labour, self-sufficiency, decentralisation, equality, Nai Talim etc. Thus the idea of ideal village of Gandhian dream was a comprehensive one, encompassing the economic, social, political and educational dimensions. Gandhiji gave emphasis on truth and non-violence in every aspect of human life and said, "the swaraj of my opinion will come only when all us are firmly persuaded that our swaraj has got to be won, worked and maintained through truth and ahimsa alone."

**Values Underlying of this Model** The Gandhian Model of rural development is based on the following values and premises : 1. Rural India is found not in its cities, but in its villages. 2. The revival of villages is possible only when the villagers are exploited no more. Exploitation of villagers by city dwellers was 'violence' in Gandhiji's opinion. 3. Simple living and high thinking, implying voluntary reduction of materialistic wants, and pursuit of moral and spiritual principles of life. 4. Dignity of labour : everyone must earn his bread by physical labour , and one who labours must necessarily get his subsistence. 5. Performance to the use of indigenous (swadeshi) products, services and institutions. 6. Balance between the ends and the means : Gandhiji believed that non-violence and truth could not be sustained unless a balance between the ends and the means was maintained.

**Principal Components of the Model** The Principal components of the Gandhian Model are discussed in below in brief Self-sufficient Village Economy Gandhiji's concept of self-sufficiency was not a narrow one, nor was it that

of selfishness or arrogance. He realized the need for villagers to get those things from outside the village, which they could not produce in the village. Gandhiji insisted on the self-sufficiency of Indian villages. Self-sufficiency was advocated by him as a basic principle of life because dependence brings in exploitation which is the essence of violence.

The poor is exploited by the rich, the village by the city and the undeveloped country by the developed ones due to lack of self-sufficiency” He suggested that villages should be self-sufficient i.e. they should produce their own food, clothing and other articles needed for meeting their basic needs. He insisted on the promotion of village or cottage industries and handicrafts because they can provide employment, necessary to meet the basic needs of the villagers and also facilitate village self-sufficiency. Gandhiji said that it was not the British rule but the modern civilization nourished by their rule, which was the real cause of economic distress i.e., poverty and unemployment. He further said, "if the British rule were replaced tomorrow by the Indian rule based on modern methods, India would be no better" . "Against this, he envisaged India's salvation in the revival of its ancient civilization which prescribes for man the path of duty and observance of morality" Gandhiji's self-sufficient and non-violent village society could only be built on the basis of co-operation and not on conflict. According to him as far as possible, every activity in the village will be conducted on co-operative basis. Even in the field of agriculture, Gandhiji recommended co-operative farming which would save labour, capital, tools and provide employment to all adult villagers and increase production also. He said, "we must attempt to prevent further fragmentation of land and encourage people to take to co-operative farming". He noted that when dependence becomes necessary in order to help society to maintain good order it is no longer dependence but it becomes co-operation. Decentralisation Gandhiji believed that human happiness with mental and moral development should be the supreme goal of society, and that this goal should be achieved through decentralization of political and economic powers. Gandhi firmly believes that village republics can be built only through decentralisation of social and political power. In such a system decision-making power will be vested in the Village Panchayat rather than in the State and the national capital. The representatives would be elected by all adults for a fixed period of five years. The elected representatives would constitute a council, called the Panchayat.

The Panchayat exercises legislative, executive and judicial functions. It would look after education, health and sanitation of the village. It would be the Panchayat's responsibility to protect and uplift 'untouchables' and other poor people. Resources for Gandhian Approach to managing village affairs would be raised from the villages. All the conflicts and disputes would be resolved within the village. And as far as possible not a single case is to be referred to courts outside the village. The Panchayat would play its role in propagating the importance of moral and spiritual values among the ruralites for bringing about rural reconstruction. Apart from managing its own affairs the village would also be capable of defending itself against any invasion. A non-violent peace brigade of volunteers would be organised to defend the village. This corps would be different from the usual military formation.

## Ideal Village

The village is the basic unit of the Gandhian ideal social order. Gandhi succinctly pointed out, “If the village perishes India will perish too.... We have to make a choice between India of the villages that is as ancient as herself and India of the cities which are a creation of foreign domination”. Gandhi’s ideal village belongs to the Pre-British period, when Indian villages were supposed to constitute the federation of self-governing autonomous republics.

According to Gandhiji, this federation will be brought about not by coercion or compulsion but by the voluntary offer of every village republic to join such a federation. The work of the central authority will only be to coordinate the work of different village republics and to supervise and manage things of common interest, as education, basic industries, health, currency, banking etc. The central authority will have no power to enforce its decisions on village republics except the moral pressure or power of persuasion. The economic system and transport system introduced by the British have destroyed the “republican” character of the villages. Gandhi, however, admitted that in olden times tyranny and oppression were in fact practised by feudal chiefs. But, “odds were even”. Today the odds are heavy. It is most demoralising.” In this way in the Gandhian scheme of things the ancient ‘republic’, an Indian village without tyranny and exploitation serves as a model unit.

## Decentralisation

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## Self-sufficiency

Such a decentralised polity implies a decentralised economy. It can be attained only through self-sufficiency at the village level. The village should be self-sufficient as far as its basic needs – food, clothing, and other necessities – are concerned. The village has to import certain things which it cannot produce in the village. “We shall have to produce more of what we can, in order thereby to obtain in exchange, what we are unable to produce”.

The village should produce food-crops and cotton in order to meet its requirements. Some lands should also be earmarked for cattle and for a playground for adults and children. If some land is still available, it should be used for growing useful cash crops like tobacco, opium, etc. to enable the village to get in exchange things which it does not produce. Village economy should be planned with a view to providing full employment to all the adults of the village. Each man should be guaranteed employment to enable him to meet his basic needs in the village itself so that he is not forced to migrate to towns. In the ultimate analysis full employment should be linked with equality.

Physical labour occupies a central place in the Gandhian concept of the self-sufficient village. In this respect he was highly influenced by Rus-kin and Tolstoy. According to Gandhi, each man must do physical labour to earn his bread. Physical labour is necessary for moral discipline and for the sound development of the mind. Intellectual labour is only for one's own satisfaction and one should not demand payment for it. The needs of the body must be supplied by the body. Gandhi said, “If all laboured for their bread then there would be enough food and enough leisure for all.” Shriman Narayan rightly observes, “Gandhiji recognised toil to be not a curse but the joyful business of life as it has the power to make man healthier, merrier, fitter and kindlier”.

## Industrialization

Gandhiji maintained that industrialization would help only a few and will lead to concentration of economic power. Industrialization leads to passive or active exploitation of the villages. It encourages competition. Large scale production requires marketing. Marketing means profit-seeking through an exploitative mechanism.

Moreover, industrialization replaces manpower and hence it adds to unemployment. In a country like India, where millions of labourers in the villages do not get work for even six months in a year, industrialization will not only increase unemployment but force labourers to migrate to urban areas. This will ruin villages. In order to avoid such a catastrophe, village and cottage industries should be revived. They provide employment to meet the needs of the villagers and facilitate village self-sufficiency. Gandhians are not against machine per se if it meets two aims: self-sufficiency and full employment. According to Gandhi, there would be no objection to villagers using even the

modern machines and tools that they could make and could afford to use. Only they should not be used as a means of exploitation of others.

### **Trusteeship**

Gandhiji was not against the institution of private property. But he wanted to restrict the right of private property to what was necessary to yield an honourable livelihood. For the excess he prescribed the principle of trusteeship. Gandhiji emphasized the principle of trusteeship in social and economic affairs. He firmly believed that all social property should be held in trust. The capitalists would take care not only of themselves but also of others. Some of their surplus wealth would be used for the rest of the society.

The poor workers, under trusteeship, would consider the capitalists as their benefactors; and would repose faith in their noble intentions. Gandhiji felt that if such a trusteeship were established, the welfare of the workers would increase and the clash between the workers and employers would be avoided. Trusteeship would help considerably “in realising a state of equality on earth.” Gandhiji firmly believed that land should not be owned by any individual. Land belongs to God. Hence, individual ownership of land should be shunned. For that a landowner should be persuaded to become a trustee of his land. He should be convinced that the land he owns does not belong to him. Land belongs to the community and must be used for the welfare of the community. They are merely trustees. By persuasion the heart of landowners should be changed and they should be induced to donate their land voluntarily.

If the land owners do not oblige and continue to exploit the poor workers, the latter should organise non-violent, non-cooperation, civil disobedience struggles against them. Gandhiji rightly held the view that “no person can amass wealth without the cooperation, willing or forced, of the people concerned”. If this knowledge were to penetrate and spread amongst the poor, they would become strong and learn how to free themselves from the crushing inequalities which have pushed them to the verge of starvation. But the oppressed should not take recourse to violent methods. In the Gandhian scheme of things, the principle of cooperation, love and service is most important and violence has no place in it. Violence is against “moral values” and civilized society is inconceivable in the absence of moral values.

Gandhiji’s concept of development is oriented to the uplift of the common man. He preferred village habitats to megalopolises and Swadeshi craft to imported technology for the economic well being of the common man. He stressed the need for cottage industries in place of gigantic industries and advocated for a decentralised economy instead of a centralised one. He realised the need for integrated rural development and believed that education, health and vocation should be properly integrated. He emphasised the need for education and training which he called ‘Naitalim’ (New training) for rural reconstruction. In fine, Gandhian approach to rural development strives

to reconstruct village republics which would be non-violent, self-governed and self-sufficient so far as the basic necessities of ruralites are concerned. Apart from creating a new socio-economic order, it Endeavour's to transform man; otherwise the changes in the socio-economic order will be short-lived.

### **Rural Reconstruction through removal of untouchability**

Untouchability is a social evil and should not be looked upon as a mere political necessity. The socio-economic evils associated with this system must be abolished. According to Gandhiji, there should be perfect social equality among the people in the society. No social superiority should be entertained by any individual or by a section of the society on the ground of birth or knowledge or religion or any other consideration. Gandhiji fought against social superiority in any form and carried on his crusade against the doctrine of racial superiority in South Africa and evil practices of untouchability in India. He has the opinion that no one is born as untouchable and unequal. The practice of untouchability is a sin against God as the Harijans and non-Harijans are the children of the same God. He found untouchability as the worst evil effect of Hinduism and worked for their temple entry for religious equality. In 1932, Gandhiji introduced Harijan Sevak Sangh, a non-political association for their self-improvement. He suggested their economic self-reliance through the adoption of spinning and weaving.

He advocated non-violent methods to be adopted by them for their self-employment and for proper realisation of their rights. Gandhiji was not in favour of representation to the Harijans in all administrative bodies. He recommended representation under two conditions: i) If the Harijans are purposely kept out by the influential castes, they should be given representation; ii) It is the duty of the represented communities to provide representation to those communities which are unrepresented or inadequately represented. Gandhiji wanted the caste Hindus to sacrifice and struggle for the all-round development of the Harijans and wished that they should be assured of a decent standard of living as respectable equal citizens of the country.<sup>33</sup> For this, cleanliness, good habits, thrift, industry and moral courage are to be inculcated among them. 'The awakened Harijans should make serious attempts for self-improvement in all walks of life. In Gandhian concept of swaraj, none should be high or low but all are to be equal citizens and this Swaraj society is free from any social exploitation and domination. Nai Taleem. Gandhiji had no faith in modern education, which emphasized only literacy and acquisition of information. In his opinion, modern education was 'debauchery of the mind'. Hence, he developed a new system of appropriate education and training which he called Nai Taleem. He believed that Nai Taleem would help develop the full potential of children and adults, through full development of their bodies, minds and spirits. He wanted to see Nai Taleem to be self-supporting and practice-oriented.

It is unfortunate that India has not yet geared its education system to the needs of the country, and that is why its human resources remain under-developed and less productive, as compared to other countries which have given the highest priority to education and total literary programmes have received higher priority than in the past, with a view to achieving the national objective of 'Education for All' by the year 2000. Similarly, vocational education at the post-high school (10th class) level is now being considered as an alternative to the present traditional general education. This shows that we have now realized the relevance of Gandhiji's Nai Taleem.

## Conclusion

The Gandhian model of rural reconstruction, like any other development model, has both its proponents and opponents. The proponents argue that under the prevailing sociocultural and economic conditions in India, the Gandhian model is still relevant, and is the only alternative available for bringing about equitable and sustainable rural development. They assert that panchayati raj institutions and cooperatives are still as relevant as when they were in Gandhiji's days, and that the role of appropriate education cannot be overemphasized even in the present Indian context.

The critics argue that Gandhiji's ideals of swadeshi, voluntary curtailment of one's wants, trusteeship, self-sufficient villages, and use of manual labour in preference to machines sound obsolete these days, particularly in the weeks of India's new economic policy characterized by privatization, liberalization, and globalization. As a matter of fact, by adopting an economic growth-oriented development part and by following the Western model of industrialization, both under the influence of Jawaharlal Nehru, India had abandoned the Gandhian model long ago, they assert further. To conclude it could have been said that Gandhiji wanted India to travel east, but India decided to travel west, and it is known that 'the twain never meet'.

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