



Gandhian perspective on social movement: an analysis

Anand kumar singh

Assistant professor- political Science

K. N. G. P. G. College

Gyanpur (Bhadohi)

ABSTRACT

Man, after all, is the child of the time and prisoner of his experiences. The contemporary stream of thought casts a great impact on the thought process of man. Examination of the contributions of Mahatma Gandhi seems necessary in view of the political and materialistic transformation of the modern world and the prevalence of ethical bankruptcy of the general masses due to growing materialism, progress of education and undue stress on physical well-being. Advance of Science and its sinister daughter technology has brought humanity and human values to stand nearer to the brink of total destruction. Concentration of power in the hands of a small minority whether in the field of Economics or politics leads to increase so many problems, as problems beget further problems. Forces are released that make each war the preamble to another and more devastating wars. The only consequence of war today is to enhance the impulse of revenge and retribution. The processes of change made the world much different from what it was in the early decades of the twentieth century. The explanation for this tragic paradox lies in the contradiction between the ends and means that characterizes the present age. “The wars of Liberation are becoming wars of annihilation”. In this connection, Gandhiji showed us one of the ways of breaking this vicious circle for resolving the mounting tensions.

Keywords – Democracy , ideal, political view, state, classless society .

There is no system of government more popular and prevalent, and yet more controversial than democracy. It is a form of government based upon the fundamental assumption of equality of all individuals and of their equal rights to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. Literally, in the memorable phrase of Abraham Lincoln, democracy is government of the people, by the people and for the people. According to Mahatma Gandhi: “In its totality, democracy implies that any democratic structure entrusted with the task of development and administration is expected to be not only democratically constituted according to the principle of election but should also reflect people’s free will and function according to the element of democracy both in their constitution and in their day-to-day functioning.”

Hence, the idea behind democracy is that it involves a large number of people in the decision-making process. Its political authority is based on the will of the individuals who by a process of co-operation make decisions that are binding on the whole community.

The essential feature of any democratic decision is that it is taken through discussion and persuasion. In Gandhi's words, "There is no human institution but has its dangers. The greater the institution the greater the chances of abuse. Democracy is a great institution and therefore it is liable to be greatly abused.

The remedy, therefore, is not avoidance of democracy but reduction of possibility of abuse to a minimum." The very spirit of democracy is easily wrecked here by mob rule, where 51 per cent of the people may take away the rights of the other 49 per cent. Again, the so-called majority view may really be that of only a chosen few who are able to secure the compliance of the majority. Democracy guided by majority rule hardly tolerates any opposition.

The intimate link between free speech and democracy is denied. Such an attitude of the majority gives birth to anger and violence and severe criticism.

British statesman and novelist Benjamin Disraeli once said, "No government can be long secure without a formidable opposition." It is so because the opposition provides us with choices, good or bad, and as a result it gives us the power to weigh the success or failures of governments

The constant tug-of-war between the majority and the opposition keeps the government on its toes. As to policy decisions, Gandhi said, that when we "patiently try to convert our opponents then, and only then, consensus might be eventually achieved". In place of a violent display of opinion, Gandhi espoused "sweet persuasion".

According to Gandhi: "Anger proves our intolerance", adding that the "capacity to bear one another's criticisms a very important quality of public life." Corroborating Gandhi, Bertrand Russell said: "If an opinion contrary to your own makes you angry, that is a sign that you are subconsciously aware of having no good reason for thinking as you do.' The most compelling reason to be violent is because we cannot win an argument by using reason.

The definition of democracy as 'government by discussion' implies that individual values can and do change in the process of decision-making. Democracy is intimately connected with public discussion and interactive reasoning. Traditions of public discussion exist across the world, not just in the West. As to India Prof. Amartya Sen said: "In the history of public reasoning in India, considerable credit must be given to the early Indian Buddhists, who had great commitment to discussion as a means of social progress."

In his autobiography, Long Walk to Freedom, Nelson Mandela noted that as a young boy he learned about the importance of democracy from the practice of the local African meetings that were held in the regent's house in Mqhekezweni: "Everyone who wanted to speak did so. It was democracy in its purest form. There may have been a hierarchy of importance among the speakers, but everyone was heard, chief and subject, warrior and medicine man, shopkeeper and farmer, landowner and laborer...The foundation of self-government was that all men were free to voice their opinions and equal in their value as citizens."

The notion of democracy has evolved over time considerably and, generally, the two current types of democracy are direct and representative. In a direct democracy, the people directly deliberate and decide on legislature. In a representative democracy, people elect representatives to deliberate and decide on legislation, such as in Parliamentary or Presidential Democracy. India is a parliamentary democratic republic. For Gandhi, an institution like the State or the system like the present form of democracy cannot be a final ideal. These institutions are based on political power.

On political power, Gandhi wrote: “To me political power is not an end but one of the means of enabling people to better their condition in every department of life. Political power means capacity to regulate national life through national representatives. If national life becomes so perfect as to become self-regulated, no representation becomes necessary. There is then a state of enlightened anarchy. In such a State everyone is his own master. He rules himself in such a manner that he is never hindrance to his neighbour. In the ideal state, therefore, there is no political power because there is no State. But the ideal is never fully realized in life. Hence the classical statement of Thoreau that that government is best which governs the least.”

Gandhi also pays special attention to the British Parliament which he regarded as the mother of Parliaments. In Hind Swaraj he observed: “The Mother of Parliament is like a sterile woman and a prostitute.” So, for democracy both the State and the Parliament are undesirable.

Gandhi’s anarchist views had been developing during his South African period. He was deeply influenced by a study of Tolstoy’s *The Kingdom of God is Within You* in 1893. In 1904 Ruskin’s *Unto This Last* made a profound impression on him. In Hind Swaraj (1909) he maintains that true freedom would be possible only when modern civilization is destroyed, and a new society is created. Even after his return to India in 1915, Gandhi consistently expressed his dislike for all forms of government on several occasions.

Following classical anarchistic arguments Gandhi wrote against the State in 1934: “The State represents violence in a concentrated and organized form. The individual has a soul, but as the State is a soulless machine, the State can never be weaned from violence to which it owes its very existence... I look upon an increase of the power of the State with the greatest fear, because although while apparently doing good by minimising exploitation, it does the greatest harm to mankind by destroying exploitation, which lies at the root of all progress... what I disapprove of is an organisation based on force, which a State is. Voluntary organisation there must be.” But Gandhi was not indifferent, like some anarchists, to the machinery of the State so long as it was a necessity. His practical nature led him towards a full democratic control of the State; under no circumstances was he prepared to put up with totalitarianism, i.e. suppression of opposition by means of violence, even if it was in the immediate interest of the masses

Gandhi is universally known as the most renowned theorist and practitioner of truth, love, tolerance, freedom and peace. He was concerned with the downtrodden and he had intended to alter the evil, social and economic systems of the people. The anarchists and early socialists had regarded decentralisation as axiomatic. While centralisation can’t be sustained and defended without adequate force, Gandhi regarded decentralisation as an essential corollary to non-violence. Gandhi insisted that such decentralisation would be possible only in a predominately non-industrial society with the self-sufficient village as the primary unit of social organisation. This idea was implicit in the writings of Tolstoy and the later Kropotkin.

The individual will be architect of his government. He and his village can defy the might of a world. In this structure of innumerable villages, there will be ever-widening, never ascending circles. By the Gandhian conception of democratic decentralisation, the higher units of the government get their strength and power from the lower units.

As a result, a Sarvodaya society has to be the basic unit of democratic decentralisation. Sarvodaya is a term meaning 'Universal Uplift' or 'Progress all All'. The term was first coined by Gandhi and later Gandhians like Vinoba Bhave embraced the term as a name for the social movement in post-Independence India which strove to ensure that self-determination and equality reached all strata of India society. In such societies everyone will enjoy equal opportunity to produce and earn sufficiently through honest work for decent and dignified living. Those who earn more will use the bulk of their greater earnings for the good of society. In such a society, all wealth, including land, will be assumed as common property to be utilized for the welfare of all. Every adult enjoys opportunity to participate in the decision-making process, and a decision is reached through 'sweet persuasion'. There is no party system and society will be free from the evil of the tyranny of the majority.

The Gandhian conception of democratic decentralisation is very important and relevant to the present. Comparatively the concept of democracy is the best for governance. To make us alert Gandhi said: "Democracy is an impossible thing until the power is shared by all, but let not democracy degenerate into mobocracy."

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