

## PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF MAHATMA GANDHI'S SOCIAL AND POLITICAL THOUGHT: AN APPRAISAL

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### ABSTRACT

Mahatma Gandhi popularly known as “BAPUJI” is the soul of India. He dedicated his whole life for the upliftment of the poor, downtrodden and the backward classes of the society. He wanted the independence of India but believed that it should be achieved through the path of Satyagraha. He also believed that the Indians should involve themselves in non-violent struggles against British imperialism, untouchability and communal discord. He realized that the root cause of India's misery lay in the evils like untouchability and communal disharmony. He believed in the purity of means to achieve a particular end or goal. According to him if the means was pure the end would certainly be pure and good. Gandhi also emphasized on Swadeshi or Khadi goods and Charkha. He wanted the state to be a non-violent state and he also wanted decentralization of authority, giving more power to the Panchayats. His social and political philosophy is a major component of Modern Indian Political Thought.

**Keywords:** *Satyagraha, Swadeshi, Khadi, Charkha, Untouchability, Panchayats*

**Introduction:** Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1868-1948), popularly known as Mahatma continues to provoke interest even after more than half a century after his assassination. It is true that Richard Attenborough's film on Gandhi immensely popularized Gandhi all over the world, though Gandhi remains an important topic of research and discussion among those interested in exploring alternative ideological traditions. The task is made easier simply because Gandhi's own writings on various themes are plenty and less ambiguous. His articulation is not only clear and simple but also meaningful in similar contexts in which he led the most gigantic nationalist struggle of the twentieth century. Gandhi wrote extensively in *Indian Opinion*, *Young India* and *Harijan*, the leading newspapers of the era, where he commented on issues of contemporary relevance. These texts frequently addressed matters of everyday importance to Indians in early and middle parts of twentieth century that may not appear to be relevant now if seen superficially. Writing for the ordinary folks, he usually employed metaphors and engaged in homilies to teach Indians about their abilities and also their strong traditions. This is one of the ways in which he involved Indians in non-violent struggles against British imperialism, untouchability and communal discord. At the outset it may be noted that Gandhi was not a systematic thinker but only an inspired teacher who poured out his deepest feelings and sincere realizations. It is true that Gandhi never tried to present new principles in a systematic manner, but he preached certain basic principles which were quite consistent. In the following sections I shall briefly examine some of the important ideas of Gandhi's thought.

**1) Gandhi on Religion and Politics:** Gandhi saw a very close relationship between religion and politics. He condemned politics which was bereft of religion on the ground that it makes man corrupt, selfish, unreliable, materialistic and opportunistic. A politics separated from religion was politics of force and fraud. It may be noted that Gandhi identified religion and morality and was opposed to the exploitation of religion for political interests. For him there was no politics without religion. Politics was subordinate to religion. Politics without religion was a death trap because it would kill the soul of man. In short, Gandhi saw a close relationship between religion and politics. However, Gandhi never preached or believed in theocratic dogmatism. He certainly did not believe in making any religion a state religion and considered religion as a purely personal matter. Attempt on the part of Gandhi to combine religion and politics simply means that he was in favour of spiritualizing politics (Bondurant 1958: 52).

**2) Gandhi on Non-Violence (Ahimsa):** Another notable feature of Gandhi's political thought was his advocacy of non-violence or Ahimsa. It may be observed that the concept of Ahimsa was not an original contribution of Gandhi and had been known and practised all over India since ancient times. Gandhi merely lifted it from the individual plane and applied it to various walks of life, viz., domestic, institutional, economic and political. His concept of Ahimsa (non-

violence) was quite extensive and did not merely imply avoidance of violence. It also meant avoidance of injury through, words or deed. Thus, he considered a harsh speech or thinking of bad of others also as violence. On the other hand if a life was destroyed for the sake of those whose life was taken, Gandhi would not consider it Ahimsa. Gandhi is said to have got a calf in his ashram poisoned because its unbearable agony and suffering was beyond cure. Gandhi gave another example where life could be taken without Ahimsa. He said if a man's child was attacked with rabies and there was helpful remedy to relieve the agony, it would be the man's duty to take the life of his child (violence). However, he insisted that such a step should be taken only when the disease was incurable, the case was beyond all help or service and the patient was not in a position to express his wish. Thus Gandhi's concept of non-violence was a positive concept which was based on goodwill towards all. It even included love for the evil doer, and even included conscious suffering on the part of the person who practices it. It implied absence of malice towards the opponent and hate of the evil without hating the evil doer (Bondurant 1958: 58).

**3) Satyagraha:** Gandhi's concept of *Satyagraha* is intimately related to his concept of non-violence, and constitutes an important part of his thought. *Satyagraha* literally means 'holding fast to truth'. Gandhi evolved the principle of *Satyagraha* even before its name was coined. Initially Gandhi described it as 'passive resistance'. However, all the time he was conscious of the inadequacy of the term. It may be noted that the concept of *Satyagraha* differs from passive resistance, in so far as the latter was supposed to be a weapon of the weak and was characterized by hatred. It could also manifest itself in violence. Under the passive resistance the violence is abjured on account of weakness and a passive resistor to embarrass the opponent into submission. If there is a suitable opportunity the passive resistor would not mind adoption of violent methods. In short passive resistance was a weapon of the weak, based on the principle of expediency. On the other hand *Satyagraha* is based on soul force and stands for vindication of truth not by the infliction of suffering on the opponent but on one's own self. No doubt that there are certain common methods like non-cooperation, boycott, strikes, etc., in *Satyagraha* and passive resistance, but their spirit differs under the two. In passive resistance these methods are used to coerce the opponent into submission. On the other hand, in *Satyagraha* these instruments are used to exert spiritual influence through self-suffering. Another notable feature of Gandhi's *Satyagraha* was that it could be resorted to by the individual as well as by the community and could be applied to all walks of life (Chandra *et. al* 1998: 16).

**4) Gandhi's Scheme of Education:** Gandhi was strongly opposed to the English system of education and favoured its replacement by an indigenous scheme. His opposition to the western system of education was on account of a variety of reasons. First, it was based on foreign culture and completely excluded the indigenous culture. Second, it ignored the culture of heart and hand and confined itself only to the head. Third, it was imparted through foreign medium. He argued that the time which a child spends in mastering the vagaries of English language could be better utilized for imparting essential knowledge about the basic facts of civil life. Gandhi insisted on replacement of the existing system of education by Basic Education and presented his own scheme. His plan was to impart primary education through village handicrafts like spinning and weaving which were considered as the spearhead of a silent social revolution fought with the most far reaching consequences. It would provide a healthy and moral relationship between city and village, and thus, would help in eradicating some of the worst evils of social insecurity and poisoned relationship between the classes. It would check the progressive decay of our village and lay the foundation of a just social order in which there would be no natural division between the haves and the have nots and everybody would be assured a living wage and the right of freedom. Gandhi's scheme of education laid emphasis on the all round development of the child and laid emphasis on the development of his body, mind and spirit. It attached more importance to moral development rather than literary training. Gandhi asserted that moral education could not be imparted through books but through the living touch of the teacher (Mehta 1992: 52).

Gandhi's basic scheme of education covered the period from 7 to 14 years of age, and laid emphasis on physical drill, drawing, handicrafts etc. Gandhi held that true intelligence could not be developed through the reading of books but through artisan's work learnt in scientific manner. It may be noted that in Gandhi's scheme of education handicrafts were not to be taught side by side with liberal education, but the whole scheme of education was based on handicrafts and industry (Mehta 1992: 53).

**5) Gandhi on State:** Gandhi was opposed to the present state because it was based on force and centralization of authority, which led to the negation of individual freedom. Gandhi attached great importance to the individual and pleaded for decentralization of authority. Though Gandhi was against the existing state and wanted to replace it by an ideal state, he refrained from painting the picture of an ideal state. In the first place, he envisaged an ideal state which would be predominantly non-violent. Gandhi admitted that in actual practise use of force was inevitable in politics on

account of imperfections of human beings. He therefore advocated a predominantly non-violent society. He did not favour imposition of non-violence from above and insisted on voluntary non-violence. He said that this could be achieved through moral evolution of the individual. According to him non-violence, was not a negative doctrine but a positive force, implying love in the largest sense – love even for the evil-doer. Explaining the concept of non-violence in its dynamic sense meant conscious suffering. It did not mean weak submission to the evil doer, but it meant putting one's wholesome against the will of the tyrant (Parel ed. 2000: 98).

**6) Gandhi's views on Police and Military:** Gandhi held that though under ideal condition there was no room for police and military which were embodiment of force, but in actual practice both these are needed. However, he favoured complete transformation of their character. The police of his concept was to consist of believers in non-violence, who treated themselves as servants of people rather than their masters. The police possess some kind of arms but they would be rarely used. They would try to deal with disturbances with the help and co-operation of the people. The force would be used only in dealing with criminals and anti-socials (Mukherjee ed. 1993: 157).

Similarly, Gandhi favoured retention of military force which would be non-violent in character. This force was to be active both during the time of peace as well as disturbances. The military forces would constantly engage in constructive activities and keep in touch with every individual, providing very limited chances for clashes amongst various communities. Despite this if there were instances of mob frenzy, they would risk their lives in sufficient numbers to put an end to the riots. Similarly, if the country was attacked by some foreign power they would either yield possession and non-cooperate with the aggressor; or offer non-violent resistance and offer themselves as fodder for the aggressor's canons. The sight of a large number of people ready to die rather than surrender will melt the aggressor and his soldiers. Gandhi asserted that there would be greater loss in men if forcible resistance was offered. However, Gandhi admitted that this sort of ideal could only be achieved through the moral evolution of the individuals and could not be imposed from above, as that would be against the very spirit of non-violence. Till people had attained such moral standards, Gandhi favoured the retention of the military and the police force (Tarchek 2000: 127).

**7) Decentralization of Authority:** Gandhi was a strong critic of the centralized system because it curbed individual initiative and stood in the way of self-realization. He, therefore, pleaded for decentralization of authority both in political as well as economic sphere. In the political sphere, he favoured curtailment of authority of the state and grant of more autonomy to the village community. According to Gandhi society based on non-violence can only consist of groups settled in villages in which voluntary co-operation is the condition of dignified and peaceful existence. In other words, he insisted on the creation of self-sufficing autonomous village communities. As regards decentralization in the economic field he favoured replacement of the large scale industry by cottage industry. He asserted that through cottage industries alone the spiritual values could properly be understood and appreciated. In short, Gandhi favoured decentralization in the political and economic spheres. According to him decentralization of political and economic power provides for the working of democracy based upon individual freedom and initiative and for the individual being allowed to participate in the governance of his country. It would also regulate automatically both the production and distribution of the commodities necessary to human life; and both the production and the consumption of these would be in the same locality rather than having production concentrated in particular areas only. This necessitated regulations for the distribution of products and wealth. Decentralisation would also bring about the regulation of the use of machinery (Mehta 1992: 85).

**8) More Emphasis on Duties Rather than Rights:** Gandhi's ideal society was different from the present state in so far as in this society more emphasis was laid on the performance of duties rather than insistence on rights, as is the case with the present state. The only right which the citizens in the ideal state would possess would be the right to perform their duties properly. The citizens would perform their duties either willingly or through persuasion, and there would be no scope for the use of force for the enforcement of duties (Parel ed.2000: 78).

**9) Faith in Spiritual Democracy:** Another feature of the ideal state contemplated by Gandhi was spiritual democracy. It would be governed by the voluntary efforts of the individual and would be conducted in accordance with ethical ideals. He favoured spiritual democracy because it provided the model for the state to improve itself. It shall be based on the willing cooperation of the citizens rather than force. He asserted that even the most despotic government could not stand except for the consent of the governed, the consent was often forcibly procured by the despot. As soon as the subject ceases to fear the despotic force, the power of the despot is gone. Gandhi held that the submission to immoral laws tantamount to evil. He, therefore, said that a citizen should refuse to cooperate with the laws of the state which were immoral or not good for the state. It may be noted that Gandhi's concept of

democracy was quite different than the general concept of democracy. According to him the nearest approach to the purest anarchy would be democracy based on non-violence – in such a state everyone would become his own ruler. He would rule himself in such a manner that he would never become a hindrance to his neighbour. In the ideal state, therefore, there would be no political power because there would be no state (Mehta 1992: 67).

**10) Varna System:** Gandhi's ideal state was to be based on the ancient Varna system, which demanded that a man shall follow the profession of his ancestors for earning his livelihood. Gandhi attributed the existing economic and spiritual degeneration as well as the growing poverty and unemployment to the abandonment of the Varna system. The main reason for the economic and spiritual degeneration was because the Varna system had not been followed correctly. This was the main reason behind poverty and unemployment and this was the main reason that there was untouchability in our society and due to this many people had abandoned Hinduism. Gandhi's Varna system was not hierarchical and the idea of superiority or inferiority was wholly repugnant to his concept of Varna system. To him Varna cannot be a set of rights or privileges but performance of certain duties or obligations. It was based on the principle of equality between different occupations and laid emphasis on observance of one's obligations. According to Gandhi, a child born of Brahmin parents would be called a Brahmin, but if he fails to reveal the attributes of a Brahmin after attaining his maturity then he would not be called a Brahmin. On the other hand a child who is not born of Brahmin parents but reveals the attributes of a Brahmin after attaining maturity would be called a Brahmin though he was originally not Brahmin by birth. Gandhi considered the Varna system beneficial for the individual as well as for the community by placing at their disposal the accumulated knowledge of the previous generations (Iyer 1973: 38).

**11) Administration of Justice:** Gandhi was not happy with the existing judicial administration and favoured its transformation. He was highly critical of the role of the judges and lawyers in the prevailing judicial system and asserted that they encouraged quarrels rather than repressing them. He also criticized them for expensiveness. He favoured decentralization of the judicial administration and insisted on the transfer of judicial work to the village Panchayats. He said that administration of justice should be made cheaper. Parties to civil suits must be compelled in majority cases to refer their disputes to arbitration, decision of Panchayats to be final except in cases of corruption or obvious misapplication of law. Multiplicity of intermediate courts should be avoided. Case law should be abolished, and the general procedure should be simplified. Gandhi also insisted that the judges and lawyers should perform their judicial duties without any payment (Tarchek 2000: 110).

**12) Gandhi on Crime, Punishment and Jails:** Gandhi held that even in his predominantly non-violent state there would be some sort of anti-social elements and some sort of crime. He, therefore, felt the necessity of retaining punishments. However, he believed in preventive and deterrent punishments. Therefore he was in favour of confining the thieves and robbers so that they could not commit the crime again. According to Gandhi crime was a disease like any other malady and was the product of the prevalent social system. As the prevailing conditions were responsible for the wrong-doer's action the punishment should be aimed at the reformation of the criminal. Gandhi was firmly opposed to capital punishment. Gandhi also favoured retention of the prisons and insisted on transforming them into reformatories where education and training could be provided to the criminals. He wanted the jails to be self-sufficient and Khadi products were to be manufactured by the prisoners. Prisoners should not be looked down upon. Warders should cease to be terrors of the prisoners, but the jail officials should be like friends and instructors. He wanted the state to buy all the Khadi products produced by the prisoners at the cost price. He insisted that the outlook of the jail staff should be that of physicians and nurses in the hospital. They should try to help the prisoners regain their mental health and not harass them in any way. In short, Gandhi stood for the reform of the criminals and wanted to make the jails financially self-supporting (Mukherjee ed. 1993: 102).

**13) Gandhi and Swadeshi:** *Swadeshi* literally means love for one's own country. However Gandhi applied the concept to various spheres, viz., religious, economic and political. In the religious sphere *Swadeshi* meant to Gandhi following one's hereditary religion. He attached more importance to moral conduct than performance of worship and other rituals. In economic sphere *Swadeshi* meant for Gandhi the use of only those goods which were produced by one's immediate neighbours and serve those industries by making them efficient and complete where they were wanting. In other words Gandhi made a plea for home industries, especially those which had the potentiality of growth. *Swadeshi* in the economic sphere also meant boycott of foreign goods. In the political sphere *Swadeshi* meant adoption of traditional Indian institutions in preference to western political institutions. Thus Gandhi pleaded for the establishment of village panchayats, *Ganarjya* etc. In short Gandhi pleaded for *Swadeshi* in religious, economic, political and other spheres with a view to promote a spirit of self-confidence, courage and self-reliance among the people of the country (Parel ed. 1997: 55).

**14) Gandhi's Views on Property and Trusteeship:** Gandhi emphasized the ideal of a simple life and insisted that a person should possess only what was absolutely essential for his day-to-day life and attainment of self-realization. He was against unnecessary accumulation of wealth or goods. He conceded right to private property to the extent it was necessary for one's moral, mental and physical well-being. Gandhi believed that everyone should have a balanced diet, a decent house to live in, adequate facilities of educating one's children and adequate medical relief. He felt that when possession of property by one man interferes with possession of property by another; when one set of men are secured in the power of getting and keeping the means of realizing their will, in such a way that others are practically denied the power, then such a property is a theft (Iyer 1973: 76).

Though Gandhi was opposed to the accumulation of wealth in the hands of few rich people, he did not favour the use of force for taking away this surplus wealth from the rich for the benefit of the poor and deserving. He said that the consciousness and sense of justice of the rich should be aroused and they should be made to feel that they have no justification in keeping surplus wealth with them. They should be made to realize that they hold surplus wealth as trustees of the society and should devote the same for the benefit of the community. Once the rich people were made to feel that they were merely trustees of the surplus wealth, it would be easy to establish a class-less society without violence or force. Gandhi said that the rich man would be left in possession of his wealth of which he would use what he reasonably required for his personal needs, for the remainder he would act as a trustee, using it for the benefit of the society. But if the rich do not become guardians of the poor the only solution to the infallible problem was to resort to non-violence, non-cooperation and civil disobedience (Iyer 1973: 77).

**15) Gandhi on Bread Labour:** Intimately connected with his views on trusteeship in his concept of 'bread labour'. Gandhi said that in an ideal society everyone should put in physical labour. If all laboured for their bread and no more, then there would be enough food and enough leisure for all. There would be no cry of over-population, no disease and no such misery as we see around. Men would no doubt do many things either through their bodies or through their minds, but all this would be the labour of love, for common good. There would be no rich, no poor, none high and none low, no touchable and no untouchable. It may be noted that Gandhi favoured physical labour for the intellectuals and asserted that the needs of the body must be supplied by the body. A significant feature of Gandhi's scheme was that it was to be voluntary and there was no room for compulsion (Tarchek 2000: 117).

**16) Gandhi on Nationalism and Internationalism:** Though Gandhi was a great nationalist in the sense that he intensely loved his country but the element of humanism was also present in him and he considered the welfare of the world was no less in the sense that he was a true internationalist. His mission was not merely the mission of Indian humanity, his mission was not merely the freedom of India, thought it undoubtedly engrossed practically the whole of his life and the whole of his time. But through the realization of the freedom of India he wanted to realize and carry on the mission of brotherhood of man (Mukherjee ed. 1993: 117).

Gandhi did not find any contradiction between absolutely independent states and internationalism and asserted that an international league would become possible when all nations big or small, comprising it were fully independent and learnt to live in friendship with each other. Gandhi wanted to see India free and strong so that she might offer herself as willing and pure sacrifice for upliftment of the world. According to Gandhi just as the cult of patriotism taught the individual that he had to die for the family, the family for the village and the village for the district, the district for the province and the province for the country, even so a country has to be free in order that it may die if necessary for the benefit of the world. Therefore, his idea of nationalism was that India may become free, but if need be, the whole country may die so that the human race may live (Mukherjee ed. 1993: 118).

It is quite evident from the above views of Gandhi that he was a true internationalist. He attached great importance to the service of his country but did nothing to injure the interests of other countries. He found no contradiction between nationalism and internationalism and asserted that it was impossible for one to be an internationalist without being a nationalist. According to him nationalism was not an evil, it was the narrowness, selfishness, exclusiveness which was the bane of modern nations which was evil (Mukherjee ed. 1993: 118).

**17) Gandhi and Communism:** Scholars have found close resemblance between Gandhism and Communism and asserted that the former is nothing but Communism minus violence. This view has been expressed because both Gandhism and Communism were opposed to the existing system which was based on the exploitation of the poor by the rich. Both of them held that capital which was not used for welfare of the people was an evil and pleaded for better deal of the weaker sections of the society with a view to ensure social equality (Chandra *et. al* 1998: 106).

The resemblance between Gandhism and Communism is only superficial and sharp differences exist between the two. While Gandhi attached great importance to religion and insisted on spiritualization of politics, Marx considered religion as an opium of the people and insisted on completely discarding it. Again, Gandhi had firm faith in God and described him as the architect of human fate, Marx did not believe in any God and asserted that no heavenly power guided the destiny of man. All the actions of men were motivated by materialistic considerations. In other words, while Gandhi's political philosophy was based on spiritualism, Marxian philosophy was based on materialism. To Gandhi man was an end in itself, while to Marx the individual was only a means to an end. Marx stood for large-scale industrialization while Gandhi favoured decentralization and cottage industries. He favoured large-scale industries only as an interim measure (Parekh 1997: 97).

Gandhi attached more importance to means and argued that if proper means were adopted good ends would automatically be achieved. Marx attached more importance to the ends and stood for its attainment through just or unjust means. Gandhi hated the evil and not the evil doer. Marx hated both the evil and the evil doer and pleaded for the elimination of capital as well as the capitalists. Again Gandhi attached great importance to non-violence. For him Ahimsa (non-violence) was not a method for struggle but a creed. On the other hand, Marx favoured use of violence and argued that unless violence was used the evil institutions of state and capitalism could not be done away with (Parekh 1997: 98).

**Conclusion:** Though, Gandhi did not provide a systematic and well worked out political philosophy in the western sense and merely provided empirical suggestions to deal with the various social, economic and political issues, yet his contribution to Indian political thought cannot be denied. He tried to bend politics and ethics and emphasized the value of truth and non-violence for the solution of national and international problems. In the words of Dr. Radhakrishnan, "Gandhi was the immortal symbol of love and understanding in a world full of hatred and torn by misunderstanding". On the other hand, critics have bitterly condemned Gandhi for his efforts to combine politics and ethics. Gandhi has been criticized for his soaring idealism and utopianism, with regard to the concept of non-violence and trusteeship in the existing context. Doubts have also been expressed about the effectiveness of non-cooperation as a weapon to bring about a change in the heart of the opponent and there is every possibility of such a movement being suppressed with an iron hand by the oppressor. Gandhi's concept of stateless and classless society also seems quite impracticable. Gandhi himself realized this fact and felt contented with a non-violent democratic state believing in socialism and decentralization. Similarly Gandhi's opposition to modern industries and preference for cottage industries was a retrograde step. The establishment of cottage industries to supplement the income of rural areas may be good, but to them as substitutes for modern industries is bound to prove suicidal for the country's economic progress. But in spite of the above shortcomings and criticisms of Gandhi's ideas, it cannot be denied that his ideals are worthy of emulation and can greatly contribute to the saving of the civilization from its complete eclipse.

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