

Socio-Political Philosophy of M. K. Gandhi: An Analysis

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Abstract

M. K. Gandhi was a prominent figure in the realm of peace and humanism. He played a noteworthy role in the movement of peace and freedom. He bestowed a lot of ideas relating to socio-political dimension. Gandhi's ideas are basically philosophical in nature as he was inspired by various great philosophers of the world. Gandhi generated ideas to create a positive change in society. We acquire new ideas by studying his thought. No doubt, he was a social engineer who tried to build a new human society where everyone can live peacefully. In case of social change Gandhi always tried to establish a welfare state by means of non-violence and truth. His ultimate dream was *sarvodaya*, means welfare to all. According to him, we cannot gain anything by violent means. Because violence brings destruction; but non-violence does not. Non-violence and truth help us to purify our soul. M.K. Gandhi always tried to bring a social change by peaceful means, which contributes a lot in understanding the power of truthfulness, love and affection. Keeping these views in mind this paper is an attempt to understand the socio-political philosophy of M. K. Gandhi and its relevance.

Key Words: M. K. Gandhi, socio-political philosophy, non-violence, truth, *satyagraha*, and *sarvodaya*

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1. Introduction:

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) has been regarded as one of the greatest man of our times who continues to provoke the interest of scholars as well as common man. Gandhi led the most gigantic nationalist struggle of twentieth century in India. He emphasized the need for a moral basis in mass politics. Gandhi involved Indians in non-violent struggles against British imperialism, untouchability and communal discord and thus conceptualized the necessity and the practicability of the applications of morale to mass politics. Gandhi's political strategies brought about radical changes in the Indian National Congress that expanded its sphere of influences to common masses. Gandhi also organized the people around local issues viz., mass movements in Champaran, Kheda and Ahmedabad. Describing the role of Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru opined, "Gandhiji knew India far better than we did, and a man who could command such tremendous devotion and loyalty must have something in him that corresponded to the needs and aspirations of the masses" (Nehru 1941; 254-55). Gandhi remains the undisputed leader who appeared to have swayed masses with charisma and magical power. In addition to this, Gandhi himself wrote extensively in *Indian Opinion*, *Young India*, *Harijan* etc. on the issues of contemporary relevance and his articulation is clear and simple. In this regard Gandhi was influenced by many persons – lay as well as enlightened one ranging from house-maid Rambha to eminent thinker and writer Tolstoy which was admitted by himself in his autobiography *The Story of My experiments with Truth*. Though Gandhi was quite critical to sophisticated and lustful aspects of modern western civilization yet he admitted, "I have nothing to be ashamed of if my views on *ahimsa* are the result of my Western education" (Gandhi: 1976; 109).

2. Methodology of the Study:

The present scenario of disarray in world affairs creates a need for revising of Gandhian philosophy for new generations. Gandhi is not an academic philosopher. At the most he was interested in human affairs in all respects. Gandhi is well aware of both Indian philosophy and western thought. He was deeply influenced by Tolstoy, Ruskin, Emerson and Thoreau. Gandhi's social and political philosophy is multidimensional in character. Though the essence of it is derived from India's civilization, its actual evolution was shaped by his experiences in South Africa and elsewhere. His social and political ideas were the outcome of his engagement with

issues of India's peculiar socio-economic circumstances. The whole Gandhian philosophy stands on the bedrock of 'truth', which, to him, was not a mere philosophical conviction, but a practical factor. According to Gandhi, unless means are honest the end cannot be justified. He believed that if the moral tone is not the guiding spirit in the realm of politics then the skeleton that is left in it will be useless; without moral sense of values, politics has no basis. To Gandhi, religion should play an important role in politics; and, thus, Gandhi spiritualized the mass politics in India. He was a revolutionary in the sense that he aimed at changing certain social and political structures but the means he adopted were not the usual violent methods associated with revolutions. He offered a package of alternatives to humanity. He insisted on nonviolence to violence; persuasion and reconciliation to end hostilities; trusteeship to end economic injustice; improvement of the lot of the depressed sections by abolishing factors that perpetrate social iniquities; ending man's tyranny on nature by respecting nature as the protector of human race; and limiting one's wants. Gandhi launched movements simultaneously not only against the British rule; but also against the atrocious social structures, customs, norms and values. Hence, Gandhian philosophy is regarded neither purely political nor absolutely social, but a complex mixture of the two (Chakrabarty & Pandey: 2009; 43).

Keeping the above views in mind, this paper is an attempt to understand the socio-political philosophy of M. K. Gandhi. It endeavours to analyse some of the basic concepts of Gandhian philosophy such as *ahimsa*, *satyagraha* and *sarvodaya* and its realities and relevance in the present context. Both descriptive and analytical methods are used in analyzing the data collected from writings and views of Gandhi from different sources, reference books, magazines and journals.

3. Gandhi on Ahimsa:

Gandhi's entire philosophical conviction rests on *ahimsa*. *Ahimsa* literally means non-injury and hence non-killing which is translated as non-violence. Non-violence is love without attachment. It is strength without ill-feeling and inaction. It is tolerance without fear and peace without being cowardly. It is a way of life, devoid of all extremes of passions like anger, enmity, pleasure and pain. *Ahimsa* is never static but ever changing, embracing all aspects of human life (George 1973: 6; Kumar 2010: 45). Gandhi is the pioneer in applying *ahimsa* for the solution of day to day problems. He made it a mission of life to see that the moral means gets its proper place and

all the relations and activities are carried on the basis of this universal doctrine. Gandhi redefined the meaning of non-violence. For him, *ahimsa* meant “both passive and active love, refraining from causing harm and destruction to living beings as well as positively promoting their well-being”(Parekh 1999: 130; Chakrabraty & Pandey: 44). This suggests that by non-violence, Gandhi did not mean merely ‘non-injury’ to others that was a mere negative or passive connotation; instead, it had also a positive meaning of love and charity. Gandhi argued:

...in its negative forms, (*ahimsa*) means not injuring any living being whether by body or mind. I may not, therefore, hurt the person of any wrong-doer or bear any ill-will to him and so cause him mental suffering. In its positive form, *ahimsa* means the largest love, the greatest charity. If I am a follower of *ahimsa*, I must love my enemy or a stranger to me as I would my wrong-doing father or son. This active *ahimsa* necessarily included truth and fearlessness (Gandhi: 1916; Iyer 1973: 179-80; Chakrabraty & Pandey: 44).

Thus, Gandhi defined *ahimsa* in two contrasting ways: on the one hand, in its narrow sense, it simply means avoidance of acts of harming others; while in its positive sense, it denoted promoting their well-being, based on ‘infinite love’. So, to characterize *ahimsa* as merely ‘non-injury’ to others was not appropriate in the sense Gandhi understood the term and articulated its sense. In its positive connotation *ahimsa* is, as Jawaharlal Nehru puts, “a positive and dynamic methods of action” and “a powerful weapon of compulsion exercised in the most civilized and least objectionable manner” (Nehru 1941: 540)”. To Gandhi, *ahimsa* was based on highest moral values, epitomized in ‘the unselfish self’. He further asserted that non-violence is not a defense of the weak but a weapon of the strong. Gandhi firmly believed that non-violence protects the self respect and prevents from immoral acts. For him truth was the goal and non-violence was the means. In Gandhi’s experiment of *satyagraha*, *ahimsa* enables him to provide a new conceptions of anti-colonial politics by completely avoiding ill-feelings towards those in opposition, but he was very cautious as he puts “*ahimsa* with me is a creed, the breath of life. It is (however) never as a creed that I place it before India or, for that matter, before any on...” (Gandhi, quoted in Pantham 1987: 302-03). Thus, Gandhi had placed *ahimsa* before the congress as a political weapon to be employed for the solution of practical problems.

Nevertheless, the idea of non-violence is not the original contribution of Gandhi. He borrowed it particularly from Buddha and many Hindu traditions have justified the use of non-violence. Further this doctrine appears to be unrealistic and unconvincing as it is regarded as too much spiritual to solve the problems of modern international diplomacy and politics.

4. Gandhi on Satyagraha:

Like the doctrine of non-violence, the theory of *satyagraha* has got very comprehensive connotations. Literally it means holding on the truth. It denotes the method of securing rights by self suffering; it is opposed to resistance by arms. Hence, it is not merely a passive resistance but intense activity by the people. For Gandhi, *Satyagraha* was the powerful weapon of the non-violent struggle. It is a kind of moral pressure for the sake of truth. Gandhi's philosophy of *satyagraha* is a natural outcome of the supreme concept of truth. Its practice requires self-discipline and readiness to bear all kinds of sufferings. Gandhi used this weapon in his South African experiment and the agitation against the Rowlatt Act. He also called it love-force. Gandhi advocated a few conditions for the success of *satyagraha* – (i) the *satyagrahi* should not have any hatred in his heart against the opponent; (ii) the issue must be true and substantial; and (iii) the *styagrahi* must be prepared to suffer till the end of his cause (*Harijan*, 31-03-1946: 64; quoted in Kumar: 78). The *satyagrahi* must stand for the just cause without the use of violence. If violence is exercised the just cause is defeated. He should exclude the use of violence in any shape or form whether in thought, speech or deed. *Satyagraha* cannot be resorted for personal gain but only for the good of others. The method of *satyagraha* may be classified into four categories – purification; forms of non-cooperation; methods of civil disobedience; and the constructive programme.

To Gandhi, *satyagraha* means organized resistance and civil disobedience of 'unjust laws' or 'unjust government'. An individual has the moral right to disobey and oppose a political authority which has ceased to be moral. A *satyagrahi* is normally a law abiding citizen. It is only when a law or a state is so patently unjust and stands against 'truth', and then an individual acquires the right to resist the law of the state. Thus, the *satyagraha* was the doctrine of the strong and brave and a *satyagrahi* is a torch bearer of truth which gave him strength and courage to face any danger that may come in his way. Gandhi adopted it as a technique during his involvement in the Indian National Movement that was non-violent in nature. In this regard Gandhi argued, 'we do not desire to make armed assaults on the administrators, nor to unseat them from power, but only to get rid of injustice' (Gandhi 1971: 523; Pandey & Chakrabraty: 46). The technique of *satyagraha* is rational, spiritual and metaphysical. However, it is very

difficult and even impossible to realize it in practice. More importantly it is against the human temperament and behaviour and may not be relevant in all situations.

5. Gandhi on Sarvodaya:

Another noteworthy tenet was *sarvodaya* on which Gandhi attached great importance. In essence *sarvodaya* means the uplift of all and welfare of all. It is a social concept for it lays emphasis on society and its development. Gandhi used the word *sarvodaya* for the first time in his autobiography and gave Gujarati translation of *sarvodaya* to John Ruskin's 'Unto This Last'. Gandhi used the term as the ideal of his own political philosophy. The *sarvodaya* includes the values of freedom, equality, justice and fraternity and opposes the state machinery. Gandhi stated that state is an instrument of coercion and exploitation and based on force and organized violence; while *sarvodaya* seeks to replace the politics of power by the politics of cooperation. It ensures good life to all in every sphere of life – social, economic, political and culture. *Sarvodaya* shuns violence as it breeds counter violence. There is also a difference between *sarvodaya* and socialism though both have faith in social equality. The former rests on truth and non-violence and aims at establishing a regime ensuring liberty, equality and justice through love and non-violence. Gandhi lays stress on the values of individual and social life that socialism strives to achieve and make the basis of a new civilization.

To Ruskin, there is no difference of honour and human dignity for the wages of labourers, a middle class man and a man from the higher rank; and Gandhi also expressed the same view. According to Gandhi, *sarvodaya* implies (i) that the good of the individual is contained in the good of all; (ii) that a labourer's work has the same values as the barber's in as much as all have the same right of earning their livelihood for their work; and (iii) that a life of a labour, i.e., the life of the tiller of the soil and handicraftsman, is the life worth living (Gandhi 1976: 124). Gandhi resolved to apply these principles into practice. Sarvodaya stands as a solution to the social, political and economic problem. It is a humanistic and idealistic concept connected with the development of the society in which man is a part and parcel. It seeks to redeem and reform the individual and society (Kumar: 63). Sarvodaya makes man to be conscious of his responsibilities and helps to establish an order in the society. It is consistent with non-violence which asserts 'live in order to help others live'. On the basis of this conviction Gandhi aimed at establishing an ideal society where men of different castes could meet and live

as brothers. However, the concept of *sarvodaya* seemed to be unrealistic and utopian, which assumes the human being to be an epitome of virtues. Further, the *sarvodaya* view regarding the state as ‘an instrument of coercion’ is being criticized; because a democratic state can serve as an instrument to promote material well-being of the people.

6. Conclusion:

Undoubtedly, Gandhi’s social and political philosophy was a revolutionary one which is relevant and valid till today. Gandhi’s social and political doctrine was not only directed against the state, it had also social and economic thrusts relevant to and drawn on human nature. In contrast to constitutional and extremist methods of political mobilization, Gandhi’s philosophy was a highly original and creative conceptualization of social change and political action. He not only creatively defined the nature of the struggle for freedom, but also provided a well-designed structure for political mobilization. His philosophy was extremely humane and creative in dealing with disagreements and conflicts involving the ruler and the ruled, and also among the socio-economically under privileged classes. What is most distinct in Gandhi’s conceptualization was the importance of rational discussion and persuasion. There is no denying of the fact that Gandhi was deep-rooted in his cultural and religious traditions. The phenomenal success Gandhi registered in the far away South Africa, fighting for human rights and civil liberties and later the adoption of the Gandhian techniques, if not fully, by Nelson Mandela and the subsequent revelations made by the former South African President Mr. De Klerk that he was also influenced by Gandhi in adopting the path of reconciliation and forgiveness, certainly show that Gandhi had not spent many years in South Africa in vain. In the American continent, Martin Luther King’s heroic fight for civil liberties on the Gandhian lines and his own admission that it was from Gandhi that he learnt his operational tactics also is not an isolated instance of the relevance of the Gandhian tactics. Thus, Gandhi was essentially a man of action and committed himself to the great task of the transformation of the Indian society in accordance with the social vision he had. The ideas he developed were conditioned by his experience, insight, education and the teachings received from great scholars like Leo Tolstoy and John Ruskin. When the modern man is confronted with problems like environmental pollution, dehumanization and alienation; and there is no escape from hatred, violence and war the nations need to apply Gandhian philosophy. Though the techniques applied by Gandhi cannot be executed totally in content and

spirit in the present context; yet Gandhi's dedication to truth, non-violence and justice, his courage and conviction, his moral fibre to face difficulties, his concern for downtrodden and his enormous confidence in humanities make his social and political philosophy relevant till today.

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