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## Relevance of Gandhian idea of economic equality

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### Abstract

Gandhi was a man of action. His economic ideas should be taken along with his whole philosophy. According to Gandhi, first of all there should be fulfillment of basic needs of every individual in the society, only then man can think about participation in politics and other activities in society. Gandhi was in favour of cottage, small scale industries and adoption of 'Swadesi'. For him all-round development of rural areas assumes great significance. It will not only give employment to people but also make village self-sufficient. So there is need to move back to Gandhian economic ideology. The main focus of this paper is on the relevance of Gandhian economic ideas.

**Keywords:** Swadesi, Gandhian idea, economic equality

### Introduction

Gandhi was a many-sided personality. He was at once a saint and a politician, an educationist and a journalist, a humanist and a social reformer. Truth, non-violence, peace, tolerance, universal love, equality and liberty were the constituents of his personality. He was neither a theorist nor a philosopher. He was a man of action and an activist. He was basically not an economist but given his ideas on economic issues, he always struggled against the exploitative policies of Britishers. His economic ideas should be taken along with his whole philosophy. His main idea aims at the socio-economic reconstruction of society. So his economic thought must be analyzed in this context.

Gandhi's economic ideas intend to bring economic equality and avoid exploitation of men by men. He believed that economic equality was the basis of other rights of man. Political and social equalities are incomplete in the absence of economic equality. According to Gandhi, first of all there should be fulfillment of basic needs of every individual in the society, only then man can think about participation in politics and other activities in society.

In the ideal society of Gandhi's conception there would be absolute equality of incomes for all types of work and for all individuals. According to him all work was equally necessary from the social point of view. The same amount of work in any occupation, therefore, ought to be rewarded by the same amount of wages. An exemplary life of independence which would be the envy of the world, all the bhangis, doctors, lawyers, teachers, merchants and others would get the same wages for an honest day's work.

By economic equality Gandhi certainly did not mean the doctrine of absolute equalization of property, opportunity etc. the simple reason was that such a concept could not correspond to actual reality. According to him "Even in the most perfect world we shall fail to avoid inequalities" (Nayak, 1996:153) <sup>[1]</sup>. For "Inequalities in intelligence and even opportunities will last till the end of time. A man living on the bank of a river has any day more opportunities of growing crops than one living in an arid desert." (Ibid) <sup>[2]</sup>. So too many needs vary from person to person as those of the "elephant and the ant" (Ibid) <sup>[3]</sup>. One may need two shawls in winter whereas another does not require any warm clothing whatsoever. And that means equality cannot imply that everyone would have the same amount of goods.

Thus, economic equality, to Gandhi, did not mean that everyone should literally possess the same amount. It simply signified that everybody should have enough for his or her need. According to Gandhi it meant that everybody should have enough of facilities to provide for his basic needs as a human person. No one can deny a man that right. Every man has an equal right to the necessities of life. In this he also instinctively included each man's right to opportunities for the fulfillment of his personality.

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"Economic equality", he held "must never be supposed to mean possession of an equal amount of worldly goods by everyone. It does mean, however, that everyone will have a proper house, sufficient and balanced food to eat, sufficient Khadi with which to cover himself. It also means that the cruel inequality that obtains today will be removed by purely non-violent means (Sharma, 1986:63) [4].

### Objectives

- To understand the techniques and methods to bringing economic equality in the society.
- To understand the implementation of these methods.
- To understand the relevance of Gandhian Economic ideas in 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

### Research Methodology

The present study is based on secondary data. Data has been collected through content analysis such as books, journals, magazines, newspaper records, other reports and Gandhi's own writings also. Mainly qualitative techniques have been used.

### Methods of Economic equality

As regards the methods of bringing economic equality, Gandhi advocated non-violent means. Gandhi wanted to bring economic equality through the doctrine of trusteeship. He wanted that the rich should themselves renounce their extra wealth, because material progress of the rich, beyond a limit, is highly immoral and it retarded real progress. Therefore, the rich should, by their own accord, become trustee of their properties and so help in non-violent distribution of wealth. According to Gandhi the basic idea of trusteeship was quite simple: To quote him, "The rich man will be left, in the possession of his wealth, of which he will use what he reasonably requires for his personal needs and will act as a trustee for the remainder to be used for the society." (Bose, 1948:78) [5].

### Theory of Trusteeship

Gandhi's trusteeship theory was designed to point a way to the painless extinction of capital and property as a source of iniquitous inequality and consequent violence and exploitation in social relations. Gandhi's social philosophy did not permit of violence (based on capitalistic or feudal exploitation) being eliminated by counter-violence. He believed that the violence of the system was bound to generate counter-violence on the part of the masses. Thus he said: "A violent and bloody revolution is a certainty one day, unless there is a voluntary abdication of riches and the power that riches give, and sharing them for the common good. I adhere to the doctrine of trusteeship, inspite of the ridicule that has been poured upon it" (Ganguli, 1973:273) [6].

According to Gandhi if the idea of trusteeship is accepted the evils of both private enterprise and state enterprise would be eliminated. The inequality and exploitation created by private enterprise as well as the violence and loss of freedom caused by state enterprise would at once come to end. The institution of trusteeship would, moreover eliminate all possibilities of class conflict.

Gandhi recognized that the acquisition and ownership of property in any form went with the exercise of certain functions and qualities which must be used not for selfish ends, but for the good of the community. He thought that it

was possible to inspire the capitalist or the man of property to use, for the good of the society, his intelligence and talents that were responsible for the acquisition of capital and property. Capital was the result of labor and the cooperative effort of society (Ibid: 270) [7].

Fundamental to the theory of trusteeship, however, is the principle of the non-expropriation of the owners. Gandhi, of course, seemed to make distinction between legal ownership and moral ownership. Legally wealth belongs to the owner, morally to the whole society. The transformation in labor-capital relations, thought Gandhi, could be brought about by the institution of trusteeship. "Working for economic equality", Gandhi, "means abolishing the eternal conflict between capital and labor. It means the leveling down of the few rich in whose hands is concentrated the bulk of the nation's wealth, on the one hand, and a leveling up of the semi starved, naked millions on the other. A non-violent system of government is clearly an impossibility so long as the wide gulf between the rich and the hungry millions persists (Bose, Op.cit:77-78) [8].

In the midst of his exacting political preoccupations, he took pains to expound the new ideas of "Statutory trusteeship" and "Social control". In 1946 the concept of "State-regulated" or "Statutory Trusteeship" emerged in somewhat sharp clearness but posed questions which Gandhi tried to answer later. Gandhi said: "The present owners of wealth would be allowed to retain stewardship of their possessions and to use their talent to increase the wealth, not for their own sake, but for the sake of the nation, and, therefore, without exploitation. The state would regulate the rate of commission, which they would get, commensurate with the service rendered and its value to society. Supposing India became a free country tomorrow, all the capitalists will have an opportunity of becoming statutory trustees" (Ganguli, 1973:275) [9]. Certain interesting ideas emerged as forming a kind of ensemble : (i) capitalists turning into laborers and receiving a state-regulated remuneration as "Commission" for services rendered; (ii) Trusteeship being defined and regulated by statute; (iii) the capitalists, labor being "socially-necessary labor". In 1947 Gandhi occasionally returned to his theme of "Trusteeship" from various points of view. He struck a spiritual note while expounding the essence of his trusteeship doctrine and expressing his wish that "it should become a gift from India to the whole world" (Ibid: 276) [10]. Said, "Everything belonged to God and was from God. Therefore, it was for his people as a whole, and not for a particular individual, when an individual had more than his proportionate portion he became a trustee of that portion for God's people. If this truth was imbibed by people generally, it would become a legalized institution" (Ibid) [11].

### The Principle of Bread –Labor

The principle of bread-labor, or of performing manual labor for earning one's own bread, which Gandhi derived from Ruskin, Tolstoy, the Bhagavad Gita and the Bible was also regarded by him as an important means for the removal of all inequalities, economic as well as social. Non-exploitation is the essence of bread-labor; since everyone earns his minimum requirements through bread-labor and contributes the rest of his labor, whether physical or intellectual, to society, instead of using it for the accumulation of personal wealth. Logically, anyone who takes his food without performing bodily labor for it is guilty of exploitation and a thief according to Gandhi.

He observed, "There is a world-wide conflict between capital and labour, and the poor envy the rich. If all worked for their bread, distinctions of rank would be obliterated; the rich would still be there, but they would deem themselves only trustees of their property, and would use it mainly in the public interest" (Ibid: 51) <sup>[12]</sup>.

### **Against Industrialization**

Gandhi also opposed the use of machines beyond a certain limit. His objections were based on ethical as well as economic grounds. Machines were repugnant in his thinking to good life. In *Hind Swaraj* Gandhi argued "Vigorously for a simple society characterized by high thinking and high moral values which, he thought, was represented by ancient India" (Tendulkar, 1953:188) <sup>[13]</sup>. He was against industrialization. According to him industrialization was the cause of the exploitation of the poor people. Displacement of human labor was an essential characteristic of a machine, and this was held out by Gandhi as a great argument against it. He said, "Machines will only help in making all the thirty-five crores of people unemployed" (Verma, 1959:196) <sup>[14]</sup>.

According to Gandhi, machines led to the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few, therefore, great disparities in the distribution of income. "I want the concentration of wealth", he said, "not in the hands of a few, but in the hands of all. Today machinery merely helps a few to ride on the backs of millions" (Ibid: 161) <sup>[15]</sup>.

Gandhi's opposition to industrialization was due to his predominantly spiritual genius. To him man was essentially a moral being. His purpose was self-realization rather than the material accumulations. He believed that material development obstructed spiritual progress" (Ibid: 1959:229) <sup>[16]</sup>. As the Bible says, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God" (Sharma, 1986:150) <sup>[17]</sup>. All these supposed evil characteristics of machinery led Gandhi to conclude in *Hind Swaraj* that machinery "represents a great sin" (Collected works of Gandhi, 1953:58) <sup>[18]</sup>.

Gandhi gave a new plan according to which individual freedom would be ensured to the maximum, but at the same time misuse of it would not be permitted. It was a new type of mixed economy. It may be called, if a name is to be given to it, a Labor-oriented economy. As he said, "under my system it is labor which is the current coin, not metal" (Tendulkar, 1952:167) <sup>[19]</sup>. In Gandhian ideal economy, agrarian civilization would be revived, emphasis would be laid on decentralization of power, economic as well as political, and regional self-sufficiency in matters of basic needs would be aimed at. Under that type of economy, there would be more emphasis on agriculture than industries.

### **Small-Scale Industries**

Gandhi was in favor of small-scale industries. He wanted village to be self-contained. According to him the village should produce all it needs. In the villages the small scale industries should be established, producing various articles of need. One of the many items, and at the same time very significant, in the scheme of rural economization was Khadi. In Khadi, Gandhi saw the revival of the entire economic, social and culture life of the villages that constituted India. To him it connoted, "The beginning of economic freedom and equality of all in the country" (Constructive Programme, 1961:12) <sup>[20]</sup>. Through Khadi he "wanted to make every

village self-supporting for its food and clothing" (Sharma, Op.cit:154) <sup>[21]</sup>. It symbolized freedom, and self-reliance for the society as a whole. It was "a movement in which the prince and pauper, men and women, boys and girls, Hindus and Mussalman, Christians, Parsis and Jews, Englishmen, American and Japanese, if they wish well to India get rid of the spirit of exploitation, can also take part" (Ibid) <sup>[22]</sup>. The Charkha was an attempt to eliminate the exclusiveness and the exploitationist character of modern machinery. Khadi, moreover could ensure the proper utilization of human labour. It would supply work to millions of villages.

### **Khadi**

Khadi signified decentralization of the production as well as of distribution of necessities of life. It signified a simple and chastened life and the awakening and realizing the spirit of collective responsibility for the wellbeing of the society. Khadi signified the service of the less fortunate and also putting self-imposed obligations to achieve social solidarity, without which socialism would be a dead letter. Apart from Khadi, which constituted the part and parcel of rural economy, Gandhi has mentioned some other significant village industries. They were such as hand-grinding, hand-pounding, soap making, tanning, oil pressing etc. But, as he said, these stood on a different footing. They could not have, he observed, the existence of their own. At the same time, "Khadi will be robbed of its dignity without them" (Constructive Programme, 1961:16) <sup>[23]</sup>. Gandhi was sure that if the small industries were provided proper protection and encouragement that would certainly mean going ahead rather than putting the hands of the clock back. For a balanced growth of an economy the major and the minor industries should develop in harmony with one another. This is what Gandhi meant by rural economy.

### **Suggestions and Conclusion**

If we properly understand Gandhian philosophy, we will find that it is very much relevant today, when the world is facing crises due to mass poverty and unemployment. Gandhi builds his economic ideas in such a manner that avoids exploitations of man by man. It must be observed that concentration of economic power goes hand in hand with concentration of political power.

Therefore, the gap between the rich and poor has increased. Most of the private enterprise is established in urban and big cities so that villages are totally ignored by the industrialist who would lead them demoralize. On the other hand India is a country of villages where most of the people lives. However, the production on large scale would create conflicts between labor and capital. Here capital takes upper hand over labor. Such conflicts may not occur in the case of rural industries. Rural industries are the symbols of unity and equality. The small scale and cottage-industries should get a deliberate place in our planned economy towards the fulfillment of the socio-economic objectives of Gandhi, particularly in achieving equitable and sustainable growth.

Going back to the year of 1947, when India achieved independence from British rule, it faced stagnation in economy and was caught up in a vicious circle of poverty. Then Indian Government took policy of 'laissez-faire', which was articulated by Jawaharlal Nehru. India focused on the import substitution policy. Due to that ongoing process, India had stressed on expansion of industrialization at large scale.

As a result new and foreign industries are coming to Indian market. This enhances India's growth, but this type of progress is one sided. Because the profit goes only to entrepreneurs and business class.

So we should induce the creative talent of the villagers and develop their indigenous market in the present 21<sup>st</sup> century. Gandhi's term, 'Swadeshi' consists in enhancing and stimulating cottage and small scale industries. It also provides opportunities to the original talent and imagination of the people. It can generate employment for Indian youths. So, India should adopt the economic model and ideas of Gandhi, which are need of today's Indian economy. India's balance of payment is unfavorable because India export more from other labor intensive technology. The products imported by India are advance technology based. On the other hand, if India follows his ideas of self-sufficiency and 'Swadesi', India will never face such type of problems. So, there is need to move back to Gandhian economic ideology.

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