

Gandhi and social justice

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Abstract

The concept of social justice in the fair and just relation between the individual and society. This is measured by the explicit and tacit terms for the distribution of wealth, Opportunities for personal activities and social privileges. A social justice assigns rights and duties in the institutions of society, which enables people to receive the basic benefits and burdens of cooperation. The relevant institutions of a include taxation, social insurance, public health, public services, labor law and regulation of markets, to ensure fair distribution of wealth equal opportunities and equality of outcome. This paper tries to explain the Gandhiji's concept of Social Justice.

Keywords: Social Revolution, Untouchability, Civil Rights, Social Practices, Deprived Sections, Destruction, Satyagraha

Introduction

In this century of social revolution Gandhi is considered as an example of a modern democrat who launched social revolution successfully in India. He generated a movement that shook the entire social system of India. He was one of the greatest champions of the rights of the exploited and humiliated individuals and groups and nations in modern times. He was the pioneer of an era of democratic process and spirit who applied constructive work and non-violent direct actions within the framework of Satyagraha. The entire life and activities of Gandhi reflected his fighting spirit in quest of equality and justice. He regarded the restoration of politico-socio and economic rights as an indispensable condition for the establishment of justice and peace in the world. His crusade against untouchability and his assumption of leadership of Indian independence movement was based on the ideal of socio-political justice. Gandhi questioned and challenged social injustice against women. He was the first Indian in the twentieth century to launch a campaign for civil rights. But his ideal of social justice could not be fully realised in free India due to his assassination on 30 January 1948. Nevertheless, his struggle for equality and justice influenced constitutional change for safeguarding the interest of the underprivileged and deprived sections of the society. Now the issues which need to be looked into are:

- a) What factors motivated Gandhi to struggle for the restoration of equality and justice?
- b) What action did he take to address the Dalit and women's problems to ensure social justice in India?
- c) Were his ideals of social justice safeguarded by way of constitutional guarantees? and,
- d) What factors stood in the way of realisation of his ideals of social justice?

Unjust discriminative racial laws

Gandhi was a strong believer in the rights of men. He regarded conceding of right as an important condition for promotion of social justice. In quest of the rights of man Gandhi struggled against all illegitimate and unjustified colour prejudices,

unjustified social customs and irrational political conventions. Gandhi felt angry and pained whenever he met a situation that crushed an individual and denied him his rights as an individual. His political philosophy was based on an individual's inalienable right to resist a coercive social and political system.

He launched his movement in South Africa where indentured Indian labourers were imported and were living in slums from 1860's onwards. Most of them were recruited as cheap labour for European plantation and mines but they were denied basic civil rights. They were not allowed to migrate from one province to another even within South Africa. The South African Government imposed restrictions of their freedom of movement. The Government followed a policy of human segregation and discrimination against Asians. Out of 100,000 Indians all except a few merchants were second class citizens and named as coolies or sammies. All non-Christian marriages which had legal and moral sanction were threatened by a judgement of justice serrals of the Cape Supreme Court of 4 March 1913 which invalidated all non-Christian marriages. Gandhi went to South Africa in 1893 for obtaining justice to the suffering Indians in that country and stayed there up to 1914. In 1893 while he was in South Africa he personally became a Victim to the discriminatory policy of South African Government. He was forced out of a 1st class train compartment in a cold winter night by a constable though he possessed a valid first class ticket. Such a thing happened because all first class compartments were reserved for the whites only. When Gandhi refused to leave the compartment he was pushed out of the train at the next station. Such and perhaps other unfortunate experiences which Gandhi underwent personally in South Africa ignited a spark of revolution in his mind which generated fervor for launching a crusade for social justice. He wanted to find out the reason of the whites for practicing, a discriminatory policy against the Asians including Indians in South Africa.

In addition to these events, even the defenseless Zulu tribes of South Africa were not spared by the African Government of Natal headed by Jan Christian Smuts who perpetuated

brutalities against them.

Struggle To Secure Civil Rights for Indian Community in South Africa

The impact of these and other events on Gandhi's mind resulted in his launching of the first Satyagraha movement in South Africa on 11 September 1906 which continued for eight years. The movement was launched to secure the governmental recognition of the rights of equality of Asiatic races in South Africa. The issues involved there were mostly connected with the civil rights of the Indian community which were denied to them. They were:

- a) Imposition of annual tax of three pounds each on Indian labourers who desired to settle in the province of Natal at the expiry of their term of services;
- b) Restrictions on freedom of movement in the nation territories;
- c) Validation of non-Christian marriages; and, d. The anti-Asiatic bias in the immigration policy of the Government.

Thus the basic demand of the Indian community related to the restoration of civil and personal rights of the citizens in South Africa. Gandhi in a personal letter to Smuts demanded restoration of full rights of residence, trade and ownership of land for the resident Indian population. He pointed out that importation of indentured labour from India was prohibited under the Immigration Regulations Act.

In fact the continuous Satyagraha struggle from 1906 to 1914 finally ended in an agreement between Gandhi and General Smuts in 1914 under which the imposition of tax on indentured labour was abolished and the indentured system itself was derecognised and prohibited. However its impact was soon felt in Natal and other provinces of South Africa.

Gandhi's Voluntary Service to Secure Justice for Indian Community

In order to ensure citizenship rights in South Africa, Gandhi formed an Indian Voluntary group of 1100 corps including himself to aid and help the government during the Boer War of 1899-1902 by performing their duties in the form of extension of their support to the legally constituted government. He joined the Voluntary Ambulance Service with his voluntary group to attend affected persons when the war was in full swing. The voluntary service of the Indian group was appreciated by the South African government who later awarded 36 Empire war medals to Indian migrants to Africa including Gandhi.

The extension of support by the Indian community to the constitutional government of South Africa was later fully acknowledged by one of the secretaries of General Smuts when he remarked to Gandhi:

I do not like your people and do not care to assist them at all. But what am I to do? You help us in our days of need. How can we lay hands on you? I often wish you worked to violence like the English strikers; then we would know at once how to dispose of you. But you will not injure even the enemy and that is what reduces us to sheer helplessness.

Gandhi continued the nonviolent struggle by involving tens of thousands of Indians in a peaceful march across the streets and deliberately violated the segregation law in South Africa. As a

result hundreds were struck down by the police force and thousands went to prison. Thus the launching of peaceful and continued struggle through rallies and marches ultimately compelled Smuts to offer a Civil Rights compromise formula which Gandhi accepted, but because of opposition to the formula by the influential whites, Smuts under pressure withdrew his offer. This event gave a big emotional jolt to Gandhi who renewed the struggle which again resulted in the filling of jails with hundreds of new Indians who refused to obey discriminatory laws. These developments effected Prime Minister Smuts, who ultimately failed and reached a fair settlement with Gandhi'. In 1915 Gandhi returned to India at a time when India needed him most. Having accomplished his fight against social injustice in South Africa he took up his fight against it in India. To ensure social justice in Indian society Gandhi launched the Harijan movement and also addressed himself to the problems of women.

The problem of untouchability in all its aspects was ever present in Gandhi's thought. His perception on the caste system was that the untouchability was a blot on the Hindu social system. He observed that the Hindu would die if the untouchables lived and the untouchability had to die if Hinduism was to live. He wanted to purify the hearts of caste Hindus from the evils of untouchability. Gandhi said that he did not believe in casteism in the modern sense of the term and considered it as an excrescence and a handicap in progress. He felt that a sort of hierarchy had been evolved by the caste system. As such the assumption of superiority by any person over any other was a sin against God and man. Thus caste insofar as it connotes a distinct status was an evil. He saw untouchability as an aspect of this caste division. Gandhi regarded caste as an excrescence which had been handed down to caste Hindus from the past generations. Likewise, many evil practices in vogue had been handed over to the Gandhian generation. But so far as Gandhi was concerned he felt that the problem of untouchability was known to him during his early days of life when his mother told him not to touch a particular boy whom she considered as an untouchable. But Gandhi did not hesitate to question his mother on such inhuman behaviour and social discrimination which had created a revolt in his mind. Consequently, Gandhi felt that this issue needed special attention. He advocated reforms in the social system which could be brought about by patient argument and correct conduct.

At the same time another educated and enlightened leader B. R. Ambedkar pleaded the cause of the Dalits who were facing hardships. Some Dalits burnt Manusmriti (in 1927) and launched the Kelarqam temple Satyagraha (in 1930) in order to press for opening temples to the Dalits and even demanded a separate electorate for them (in 1930-31).

However, these developments stirred Gandhi who saw that such development would harm both the Dalits and the country as a whole. He said that there was a body of Hindu reformers who wanted to remove the evil of untouchability. In the meantime the British Prime Minister MacDonald accepted the demand of the Dalits for a separate electorate through the Communal Award of 17 August 1932 which Gandhi resisted by undertaking a fast unto death. His series of fasts moved the entire nation including B. R. Ambedkar who then proposed to modify his stand on the Communal Award under the Poona Pact of 26 September 1932. Consequently, the Dalits were given separate representation in the legislature by the Hindu

electorate', and the Hindu temples were thrown open to them.

- In his speech at a women's meeting in Palghat (Kerala) on 10 January 1934 Gandhi said:

I have come here to ask you to forget that there can be a single human being who can be called untouchable.....I will repeat that untouchability is an institution of the devil.

Gandhi also addressed the women folk of Kerala on the same day but in a different place. In Guruvayoor he appealed to women by remarking: "Women must lead the battle against untouchability".

- Gandhi assigned women the role to fight untouchability. He asked women:

If you consider Harijans untouchables because they perform sanitary service, what mother has not done such service for her children? He exhorted women to root out untouchability from their hearts. Gandhi asked the Congress Party to pay attention to the problems of Dalits. According to K.C. Yadav and R. S. Yadav (both belonging to the Dalit group) Gandhi launched a fiercer attack on untouchability and he became more active in his work for the Dalit upliftment. But after Gandhi's death some social organisation which conducted surveys in some villages of India felt that untouchability was still in practice as the Dalits were not allowed the same type of social facilities as were allowed to other sections of people.

According to some critics of Gandhi, the Gandhian agitation for the admission of untouchables to temples was not a purely socio-religious issue but a scheme of the Congress to get the Dalits into its fold and secure their votes.

The former Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Mayavati and her party president (from the Bahujan Samaj Party) Kanshi Ram's remarks about Gandhi seem to be unfortunate in view of the fact that Gandhi, Ambedkar, Naicker, Periyar and Phule worked with the same objective. This objective was the upliftment of the Dalits. After independence B. R. Ambedkar was selected Chairman of the Drafting Committee. He is known as an architect of the Indian Constitution. The Drafting Committee provided adequately for promoting social justice to the deprived sections of the society.

In the Constitution of India, special rights and privileges of the minorities and the depressed sections of the society such as the Harijans and the Tribals are ensured. Article 17 of the Constitution of India abolishes untouchability and provides that the enforcement of any disability arising out of untouchability shall be an offence, punishable in accordance with law. In 1955 the Indian Parliament passed the Untouchable Offence Act which was extended to the whole of India. Punishment was provided for refusing admission to Dalits or other underdeveloped sections of population, to hospitals, places of public entertainment and public worship".

In the march towards social justice, that the Government of India is launching various schemes for the upliftment and emancipation of the weaker, the disadvantaged and the long suppressed sections of the people.

Struggle for upliftment of women

Gandhi addressed himself to the problems of women. While appreciating India's age old culture and high ideals of religious life he felt deeply disturbed over the women's problems. He observed that women have been considered subordinates or

slaves by men. He therefore revolutionised public opinion against women's disabilities by assigning important roles to them during the country's freedom movement and launched constructive programmes to eradicate evil social practices related to women. By recognising women's identity Gandhi made women capable of denouncing their subordinate position in society. He was of the opinion that as the companion of man, woman had an equal right to participate with man in every aspect of society. She had an equal right to freedom and liberty. He cautioned women not to adorn themselves for man including their husbands and cease to be the object of man's lust.

Gandhi had the greatest respect for women. For him women symbolised the aspect of mother with the highest capacity for suffering. She was to be a colleague and comrade rather than a competitor. He was opposed to the female emancipation which he felt was an evil of modern civilization. He apprehended that women's emancipation might lead to the destruction of stability of home life.

Gandhi was pained to see that young girl's inaccessibility to education had hampered their development. He was of the opinion that women should not be made slaves to kitchen. He felt that the immemorial tradition had unjustly branded her inferior to man. He opined that man had converted her into an instrument of pleasure and a domestic, animal in spite of regarding her as his better half and a helpmate.

Gandhi attempted to raise the status of Indian women in the 1930's when the elections were held in provinces. Tickets were given to some prominent women to contest the elections. They were elected and offered ministerial positions. One such woman was Vijay Laxmi Pandit. Likewise, women got voting rights too. To a question that if a woman was engaged in public work she may have to neglect her child or household, Gandhi remarked, "Neglect of present duty was on way to destruction". In addition to the upliftment of women and the Dalits Gandhi wanted to bring about social revolution through Sarvodaya which according to the president of the Sarvodaya Economic Conference, Kaka Kalekar, represents an ideal social order. In Gandhi's Sarvodaya there is common room for prince and peasant, Hindu and Muslim, untouchables, white and black, saint and sinner, where no individual or group is to be suppressed, exploited or liquidated. All were to be treated as equal members of the social order.

To conclude, Gandhi was a remarkable non-violent social revolutionary who fought against injustice, tyranny and oppression of the people. He struggled for the liberation of the suppressed and the exploited lower classes in India including women, Dalits and others. He also struggled for the Indian community in Africa to ensure their civil rights. All these activities reflected that Gandhi's life and work was a crusade for social order through social justice.

But in order to promote complete social justice society has to change traditional undemocratic perceptions regarding women and the Dalits who had been given practically subordinate hierarchical position in terms of their social status. After India's independence although constitutional guarantee for equal rights have been accorded to both women and the Dalits, yet in practical life they still face enormous problems in their society. To overcome these social problems the application of Gandhian moral and ethical principles in day-to day life will perhaps become more and more relevant.

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