

Co-existence of labour & capital: A Gandhian perspective

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Abstract

In today's time when the interest of capital and labour stands at opposite poles, Gandhian economic ideas, if applied in industrial relation, can bring harmony between labour and capital as such ideas are based on non-possession of resources.

Keywords: Labour, Capital, Trusteeship, Sarvodaya, Swadeshi and Bread Labour

Introduction

Gandhian concept of economic development

Gandhian concept of development is the development of body, mind and soul of every individual. Development is more than just materialistic development, i.e. possession of luxurious items; it should be moral development leading to equality, liberty and dignity of every individual in society. His economic ideas rests on decentralization, self-sufficient village based economy with emphasis on handicrafts and labour intensive technology in place of capital intensive technology. His concept of equality is not about equal distribution of wealth among all, rather for him, it is the distribution of wealth and resources according to the needs of all. He writes, "The real implication of equal distribution is that each man shall have to wherewithal to supply all his natural needs and no more ^[1].

For him, who indulge in accumulating more than his/her requirement is not less than a thief? In his opinion, since an individual undertakes economic activities throughout his/her life, so these activities must be according to the ethical values and most importantly ahimsa. His economic ideas revolve around the survival and co-existence of all in a peaceful and harmonious society. Economic activities must not result in the monopolization of resources of production.

Gandhiji's idea on the relation between labour and capital becomes clear when we look at his concepts of 'Trusteeship', 'Bread labour', 'Sarvodaya' and 'Swadeshi'.

This article is divided into five sections. The first section deals with the Gandhian concept of Trusteeship. Second section relates the concepts of Sarvodaya and Swadeshi in bringing labour and capital closer to each other. Third section brings out the importance of Bread and Labour in everyone's life. Fourth section sheds a light on the relationship between labour and capital and how it can be made harmonious and cordial with special focus on the respect of labour. Lastly, fifth section gives the rationale for adopting the Gandhian perspective in the study of relation between labour and capital. Following section deals with the Gandhian concept of Trusteeship.

Trusteeship

Trusteeship as advocated by Gandhiji is based on the basic principles laid in religion. On the importance of the concept of trusteeship, he writes, "It is not make-ship, certainly no camouflage. I am confident that it will survive all other

theories. No other theory is compatible with non-violence. It has the sanction of philosophy and religion behind it ^[2]. The concept of trusteeship is a method to establish equal distribution of wealth. Trusteeship is the concept which advocates usage of wealth not for the selfish interest but for the greater happiness of the greater number of people. Capital owners are not entitled to use the capital owned by them when there are millions of people who are unable to fulfill their basic needs. Gandhiji had envisaged the role of Capitalists as 'trustees' of wealth they possess with the sole responsibility of welfare of working class working under them in their production houses. According to Gandhiji, "The man who takes for himself only enough to satisfy the needs customary in his society and spends the rest for social service becomes a trustee ... ^[3]. He was not against capitalists, he was against the concentration of capital in hands of few who use that for their benefits only. Gandhiji writes, by the nonviolent method we seek not to destroy the capitalist, we seek to destroy the capitalism. We invite the capitalist to regard himself as trustee for those on whom he depends for making, the retention and the increase of his capital. No need the worker wait for his conversion. If capital is power, so is work. Either power can be used destructively or creatively. Either is dependent on the other. Immediately the worker realizes his strength, he is in a position to become a co-sharer with the capitalists instead of remaining his slave. If he aims to become the sole owner, he will most likely to be killing the hen that lays golden egg ^[4]. He wanted to reduce the inequality between labour and capital through this concept.

According to Gandhiji the gap between the capitalist and the working class must be based on ahimsa. He did not believe in the theory of class war between the 'haves and have nots' as proposed by Marxism. In Marxism the structure of equality is based on the complete destruction of capitalist class with violence. Gandhiji never thought of any sort of ahimsa. In place of destruction, he proposed the idea of conversion of capitalists into trustees. However, this concept of trusteeship which is based on aparigraha is considered as an ideal or utopia. Till today this concept has failed to take a concrete shape in reality because people gave importance to wealth and this importance has increased over the years.

On the part of the capitalists who become trustees. Gandhiji wanted to give them freedom to hoard as much wealth as they can because then the accumulation of wealth would be for the welfare of the society and not just for their personal

luxuries ^[5]. The following section looks into the concept of 'Sarvodaya' and 'Swadeshi' and its relevance to bring capital and labour closer to each other.

Sarvodaya & Swadeshi: Protecting the interest of labour & capitalists

It means rise of all. Rise of all include the rise of workers along with capitalists not only in materialistic terms but also in terms of morality and ethical values. When welfare of workers is included in every policy of government and activities of capitalists then workers themselves would stop looking at capitalists as their enemies. Production must be socially controlled and wealth generated by such production system must be enjoyed by all on the basis of equality. This would eventually results in rise of all as is envisaged by Gandhiji in 'Sarvodaya'.

Another concept that can bridge the gap between labour and capital is the concept of 'Swadeshi'. This concept emphasized the usage of locally produced goods. This safeguards the interests of local capitalists as they would not have to face the stiff competition from goods produced in other countries. This concept can be linked to the importance given to the village industries including cottage industries which have the capacity of generating employment opportunities for the large number of workers as they use labour intensive techniques of production. This would further stop the mankind to become slaves of machines. It is the duty of government to support and protect such industries. It is also helpful in protecting the interests of the workers as it helps in securing their paid work in such industries. Village based industries also has the potential to overcome the problem of migration of workers from one place to another in search of work. As we all know that migrant workers do not get importance in the new states especially if they indulge in the manual work. However, it is not to suggest that Gandhiji was completely against big and heavy machines based industries.

The following section deals with the concept of 'Bread Labour'.

Bread Labour

Gandhiji's another concept that can result in harmonious relation between labour and capital is the 'bread labour'. According to this concept, one has to do certain amount of physical work every day. Capitalists by indulging in physical work can realize the amount of hard work done by the workers and they themselves would be able to decide whether the wages paid by them to the workers matches the hard work done by the workers or not. As far as workers are concerned, when they would see that their employers are doing physical work just like them they would not look at their employers as those who are enjoying the fruits of labour of workers. This is also necessary to bring the manual labour at par with the mental labour. This would create equality not only between capitalists and labour class but also would result in homogenization of labour class.

The following section brings out the reason for bringing in these concepts given by Gandhiji to remove the ever increasing gap between the capital and the labour.

Keeping the idea of economic activities and development as envisaged by Gandhiji, following sections focus on relation between labour and capital.

Labour & Capital

For Gandhiji, labour and working class is very important because he was confident about the power this class can be in society if gets united. The prominent position of labour in his ideas is based on the teachings of Geeta. For him, eating food without labour to earn that food is a stolen food. On the other hand, he openly criticized capitalism. For him, capitalism is based on violence as one has to fight to keep anything to oneself which is needed by others more than its owner. Nibedita Dash brings out the criticism of capitalism as raised by Gandhiji. Nibedita Dash writes, "Gandhiji was a critique of capitalism and was unreconciled to the capitalist system of production and technical growth. He opposed capitalism on the following grounds

1. Capitalism was based on violence. In capitalism the richer section of the people resorts to violence as they centralize capital. They exploit the labourers who are superior to capital.
2. Capitalism opposes aparigraha or non-possession. It believes in an immoral activity like accumulation of capital which results in injustice and coercion.
3. Always there are two poles in such a society, the capitalists and the labourers. As a result of which the lack of cooperation and mutual reciprocity ^[6].

Gandhiji's criticism of capitalism is also based on his critique of machinery. Sunil Sahasrabudhey relates emergence of machinery responsible for converting "man's labour into wage labour ^[7]. He further writes, "The machine today in fact is a form of capital. Wage labour is a great consequence of it. But neither capital nor labour are part of the machine ^[8].

As per the views of Gandhiji, labour and capital should not look at each other with the sense of suspicion and outsiders who are against each other's interests. He wanted to incorporate these two as members of 'great family' where unity, peace, friendship and sense of inter-dependency exist. The role of capital has to be more than just the material wellbeing of capitalists and survival of working class. The capital must work as means to achieve the spiritual and moral wellbeing which can be achieved only if these two support each other. Gandhiji writes, "... I have always said that my ideal is that capital and labour should supplement and help each other. They should be a great family ... ^[9].

Gandhiji made it clear that working class depends on capitalist class to earn their livelihood for survival and capitalists are integral part of society. For capitalists, he wanted them to understand that by not using the wealth possessed by them for the welfare of the labour class, they are working against their own interests. When workers do not receive the correct return of their work in the form of wages, they tend to lose their interest in the work which directly impacts their productivity at shop floor.

The conversion of capitalists into trustees has to come to the capitalists naturally through awareness and internal awakening. If this not being achieved, then Gandhiji suggested that it becomes the duty of workers to end their exploitation by themselves through nonviolent, non-cooperation with capitalists. Gandhiji on this matter writes, "Just as pure blood is proof against poisonous germs, so will labour, when it is pure, be proof against exploitation. The labourer has but to realize that labour is also capital. As soon as the labourers are properly educated and organized and they realize their

strength, no amount of capital can subdue them... Our internal strength will render all exploitation impossible^[10].

Gandhiji made one point clear that since workers used capitalists and their property, workers must not indulge in any activity which could harm either capitalists or their properties. Further, he opined that since workers and capitalists are partners in the production, workers harming the property of capitalists would mean harming their own interests. He writes, "... This violent action cannot benefit society. Society will be the poorer, for it will lose the gifts of a man who knows how to accumulate wealth^[11].

In this regard, the first step is to bring awareness among the working class in respect of their exploitation and the power they possess. Gandhiji believed that when it comes to the discharging of one's duties, it is the capitalists class who neglect its duties especially towards the welfare of workers whereas workers discharge their duties assigned to them in return of wages more effectively and efficiently. Capitalists can never calculate the correct monetary value of the needs of workers for which they depend completely on their wages. It is the workers who know their needs and amount of money they require to satisfy those needs. With this in mind Gandhiji wanted the workers to be educated so that they can correctly calculate the monetary value of their needs as well as their labour power. Education is also necessary for workers to know their rights and to know the process required to implement their rights. B.R. Nanda brings out the reason for the utmost importance given to education by Gandhiji. He writes, "The intimate knowledge of the Champaran peasantry during this inquiry convinced Gandhi that root of trouble 'lay in their ignorance, which made them easy prey to oppression. Education was the obvious remedy^[12].

According to Gandhiji if working class gets united and trained themselves for the sacrifice that they may have to make on the path to achieve non exploited working conditions and fair wages, then the capitalists would have no other way but to accept working class as their partners and not as subordinates or servants. It is the choice of working class whether to get easily exploited in the hands of capitalists or stand united against any kind of exploitation. However it is not easy to convince the capitalists to work for the betterment of the workers. The way suggested for this is the strike. Further, according to Gandhiji, the workers on strike have to prove that they are ready to do any kind of manual work and that they do not depend on other's money for continuing the strike, then only they will be able to force their employers to fulfill their demands.

The working class is not without the greed to accumulate wealth, just like the capitalists. The problem with the working class as seen by Gandhiji is that workers themselves dream to own capital and become one of the capitalists. This has led to the absence of unshakeable solidarity within the working class against the unshakeable solidarity in the capitalist class who are united against the working class in times of agitations by workers.

Another hurdle in achieving unity in the working class is that the worker has become a 'cog of wheel' where he works like a machine on a machine. Workers are forced to learn new skills suitable to do only certain type of work needed by capitalists. This has given the ultimate power to capitalists to decide the wages paid to workers. Knowledge of limited skills has hampered the intelligence of the workers.

According to Gandhiji the relation between capital and labour has eroded and they have forgotten that they both depend on each other. All capitalists are concerned is to get maximum productivity from workers at minimum wages. On the other hand workers also indulge in activities where they try to minimize the work to be done by themselves at current rates of wages. This creates the constant struggle between the two which could lead to revolution against capitalists. The only way to avoid such situation is to accept the concept of trusteeship by the capitalists. We have example of Mr. Jammalal Bajaj who followed the Gandhian's principle and established Jammalal Seva Trust in Maharashtra to serve people.

Out of the concern for workers, Gandhiji was in favour of setting up of minimum wages for them after taking into consideration of basic needs. According to him, wages must be periodically changed in the light of changes in the prices of goods and services. Further, he was aware of the possibility of influence of party politics on the labour movement and urges to avoid such influence for the benefits of both labour and capital. He also wanted to reduce the gap between the wages paid to workers having different skills.

The urge to incorporate Gandhian ideas

It is easy to label Gandhiji as pro-workers who is completely against the interests of capitalists. However, this is not true as he had cordial relations with capitalists of his times. On the matter of Gandhiji's relation with both capitalists and labour, it has been written that, if anyone in India has achieved complete identity with the poor, it is Mahatmaji. He is the very embodiment of compassion. He is mindful that while removing the disabilities of the poor, no injustice is done to the rich and it should not give rise to the least degree of enmity between the different classes. It is because of this that people belonging to all religions, sects and classes in India look upon him as their own^[10]. Such position of Gandhiji made him the right person to consult in order to remove the hostility between labour and capital in today's time.

The world is now dominated by the capitalism. Capitalism with the help of globalization has conquered not only every part of the world but also our morality and ethics. Most of the time economic activities are undertaken by individuals devoid of morality and ethical values. The main focus is on amassing the wealth which has resulted in the concentration of wealth in few hands. In such circumstances, workers are not satisfied. Economically, they are not paid adequately which can satisfy all their needs. Emotionally, they are not receiving the respect and care from capitalists. Physically they are exploited especially in labour intensive industries. All this has led to conflicts between labour and capital. To resolve such conflicts many conflict resolving mechanisms are used such as trade union activities, negotiations and in-house grievance resolving mechanism. Yet such conflicts are far from being resolved peacefully which is acceptable in true sense to both the parties.

Bringing in the concepts of Trusteeship, Sarvodaya, Swadeshi and Bread Labour in labour policy that shapes the industrial relation focusing on labour and capital would result in peace and cordial relation between them. Gandhiji's idea of interdependency of both for survival and importance to physical labour along with the participation of workers in management of industries will definitely bring both of them

closer to each other where both can be benefitted from each other.

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