

Mahatma Gandhi And Concept Of Trusteeship : A Critical Evaluation

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During the Indian freedom struggle Mahatma Gandhi observed that my concept of development means even unto the last. He further said 'I do not want to rise on the ashes of the blind, the deaf and the dumb.

Mahatma Gandhi wrote : My ideal is equal distribution but so far as I can seek it is not to be realized. I therefore work for equitable distribution'. In the context of India's economic requirements in terms of her masses he elaborated his ideas: By all means let monied people have tasteful ornamentation, whether in dress or office surroundings, but I do plead for an observance, as between themselves and their starving brethren, of a due sense of proportion such as is always observed in well ordered society. India's minimum is a langoti requiring less than 1/6 of a square yard. Let our fashions have some correspondence to this minimum', On another occasion he remarked I do not envisage a dead artificial level among the people. There will be a variety amongst them as among the leaves of a tree'. His scheme of constructive programme, he remarked, will, however, be a structure on sand if it is not built on the solid foundation of economics equality. Economic equality must never be supposed to mean possession of an equal amount of worldly goods by everyone. It also means that the cruel inequality that obtains today will be removed by purely non violent means.'

Gandhiji relised that in the garb of an equitable distribution, efforts may be made to justify the existing pattern of income distribution. He was against this approach and remarked, 'Let no one try to justify the glaring difference between the classes and the messes, the prince and the pauper, by saying that the former need more. That will be idle sophistry and a travesty of my argument. He realized that peace will not reign if inequalities persist. His advice was that 'A non-violent, system of

governments clearly an impossibility so long as the wide gulf between the rich and hungry millions persists A violent and bloody revolution is a certainty one day unless there is voluntary abdication of riches and the power that riches give. Similar sentiments were expressed by Wooden when she observed that it is not only that gross economic inequalities are incompatible with respect for individual human dignity, political democracy itself degenerates into a sham in a privilege-ridden environment." Like Gandhiji, Marx was also opposed to privilege and authority. The cause of the have-nots was the basic sentiment running through his ideas. He too intensely felt for the well-being of the poor and the oppressed.

The paradoxical situation is that while we regard equality as the ideal we have created a socio-economic system which has resulted in increasing inequalities and the conferment of greater and greater power in the hands of the few. Cole had foreseen this. He said.'...under conditions of large-scale operation, central bureaucracies have a strong tendency to gather more and more power into their hands and to choose yes, men to occupy key subordinate posts.' Scientific and technological developments that have taken place during the last century have accentuated these tendencies. 'By supplying the ruling oligarchy with more affective instruments of coercion and persuasion, applied science has contributed directly to the centralization of power in the hands of the few. But it has also made important indirect contributions to lie same end. It has done it in two ways; first by introducing over ever large areas of the industrial and agricultural economy the methods of large, scale mass production and mass distribution; second by creating, through its very progressiveness, an economic and social insecurity which drives all those concerned, owners amid managers, no less than workers, to seek the assistance of the nation state," Russell observes, This tyranny of officials is one of the worst results of increasing organization, and one against which it is of the utmost importance to find safeguards if a scientific society is not to be intolerable to all but an insolent aristocracy of Jacks in office.'

The questing that is to be answered is how can such a society which has an inherent tendency towards centralization, concentration of power and the resultant exploitation, become one which is just, fair and equalitarian. A solution has been sought by two schools of thought, the centralists and the decentralists. The centralists believe that

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inequalities are inherent in the existing system of society. Motivation factors lead to individual aggression and the desire to possess more of material goods and powers. The real solution, therefore, is to concentrate greater power in the hands of the state, so that it can keep in proper check these individual traits in order to make them sub serve the common good. They feel that reforming the individual is out of the question. The centralist thinking can be sub-divided into two broad types: the leftists and the supporters of the welfare state.

Those who advocate socialism suggest that these inequalities and class distinctions can be abolished through organized and concerted action on the part of those who are being oppressed and exploited. The proletariat need organization and revolutionary fervour to overthrow the economics system that promotes the concentration of wealth. This will necessitate capturing state power which, under the capitalistic order, is the handmaid of the bourgeois. Class conflict the socioeconomic system is destined to march towards its goal of a classless society. The oppressed and the exploited have only to capture state power and utilize this power to speed up this change. The wise, therefore, should help the destined, the inevitable, to happen speedily and offer their co-operation towards this transformation.

Accentuating of class differences and worsening of the plight of the masses are therefore to be welcomed and positively encouraged. With the passage of time political power will ultimately pass into the hands of the proletarian and there will be no privileged class of people in the state. When this stage is reached human society would become classless, and ripe for peace, equality and freedom from war and violence. Thereafter there will low classes and class conflicts, no private property in the means of production and no profiteering or exploitation. In the absence of exploitation nonviolence will become a natural way of individual and group behavior. Very soon the state will wither away leading to enlightened anarchy wherein the maxim from each according to his capacity and to each according to his need' will be the order of the day. Since the course of events is predetermined i.e. the march of human progress points to the direction of a classless society the means are subsidiary. Hence recourse to violence is not ruled out; rather, violent means are welcome because these are likely to speed up the transformation of a class ridden society into a classless society. Ends justify the means.

However, the ultimate goal of the Communist is a nonviolent socio-economic order - or enlightened individuals who acts in the interests of the society, who owns nothing and who is willing to perish for the common good.

All this has resemblances with the Gandhian concept to trusteeship. Gandhiji however did not subscribe to the view that ends justify the means. To him ends and means were convertible. He felt that good and desirable ends could not be attained through wrong means. Violence and hatred will breed violence. The communist way implies worsening condition of the masses before any good could be brought about. Only after a complete overhaul of the society, class distinctions would be obliterated. However, in this strategy the individual has no role to play. He has to be passive; he must abandon, if need be, all cannons of civilized behavior, even though temporarily, in the fervent hope that his behavior is helping the cause of the revolution.

Gandhiji's Solution

Gandhiji felt that such a classless society is just a mirage. 'A true classless society is possible only when there is almost no permanent division of functions, and all people take part in almost every act necessary act for life. But in a complicated society, such as we live in, it does not seem possible, even with a decentralized economy, to have a state of classlessness. What can be achieved at best is possible class harmony.' If you want capital to be extinct or your want to abolish monied men or the capitalist, you will never succeed.' For him there was 'nothing like an inevitability of class conflict' because he was confident that he could bring about class harmony through his method of non-violent mass action. He emphasized I do not see the necessity of class conflict. If I thought it inevitable I should not hesitate to preach it and teach it.' It does not mean that Gandhiji did not believe in the existence of class struggle. He did not believe in the necessity of fomenting it and keeping it up.

Another objection to the Gandhian approach is that such an approach undermines the position of the common man, makes him weak, and creates an environment wherein the individual can be exploited. While recognizing the need of trade unions and labour organizations he remarked once, 'I can tell you from experience that your every union can become one of the causes of your bondage if you do not comply with other conditions which I shall mention to you.' These conditions

were that ‘each one of you should consider himself to be a trustee of the rest of his fellow labourers and not be self-seeking’ and ‘use your union as much for internal reformation as for defence against assaults from without.’ He had a feeling that unless these conditions were satisfied, labour could become ‘more tyrannical than capital.’

The welfare social scientists also feel that there is no incapability about class conflict. Inequities can be reduced and the aspirations of the common man fulfilled through progressive action in various fields. Provision for educational facilities, assurance of minimum incomes and comprehensive social security measures, progressive taxation like income tax, control of expenditure through measures like expenditure tax and allocation of scarce resource, and speedy state action will ensure the removal of the evils associated with the existing system and provide for fuller, better and more contented individual and social life. They like the Communists, believe in increasing the power of the state so that individual urges, which keep the system working, are held in check. If the citizens methods of earning spending and savings do not lead to the cherished ideal of a stable, ever growing and economically viable society, the state must step in through its policy of public spending and investment ensure the even working of the economic system. Governments, and those who guide state policies, should acquire greater and greater powers to meet the situation that modern technology is creating.

Such an all powerful state will decide everything for its citizens. It will decide what industries, should develop and at what rate, it will allocate labour and other resources amongst different industries. It will determine money incomes that individuals should earn.

In the words of Huxley, ‘Socialism by autocracy or oligarchy is not socialism, or anything like it. It is just benevolent despotism and there is nothing in the record of history to justify us in the belief that many benevolent despotism will for long retain its benevolence. Gandhiji remarked. The state represents violence in a concentrated and organized form. The individual has a soul but as the state is a soulless machine. It can never be weaned for violence to which it owes its very existence. Hence, I prefer the doctrine of trusteeship.’ Again I look upon an increase of the power of the state with the greatest fear, because although while apparently doing good by minimizing exploitation it does the greatest harm to mankind by destroying individuality which lies at the root of all progress. Gandhiji had realized that the use of force and violent methods

would leave the masses largely untouched. A process of change in which the masses are not actively participating will not mean any improvement in their status. He had faith that his technique of non-violent non co-operation confers upon every individual considerable power to resist injustice. I have always held that social justice, even unto the least and the lowest is impossible of attainment by force. I have further believed that it is possible by proper training of the lowliest by non-violent means to secure redress of the wronged suffered by them. That means non-violent non-co-operation Freedom received through the efforts of others, however benevolent, cannot be retained when such effort is withdrawn. But the lowliest can feel its glow as soon as they learn the art of attaining it through non violent non-cooperation’

Gandhiji did not believe in inherited riches. He observed “What belongs to me is the right to an honorable livelihood no better than enjoyed by millions of others. The rest of my wealth belongs to the community and must be used for the welfare of the community.” He opposed unconscionable dividends and advocated that profits of big concerns must bear due relationship to the wages of the workers. He was the hope that a time must come, and the sooner the better, when there would be a respectable proportion between dividends, wages and prices.” Gandhiji thought that individuals would be willing to bring about this change voluntarily. He did not want to deprive the talented ones of the opportunity to earn more. His wish was that these persons would take out of the common pool whatever was fair and reasonable. Fair and reasonable return will not be determined in isolation by those who are in command of the economic forces but will have to bear some definite relationship with minimum incomes. No plan makes sense unless it includes restrictions on movements upwards as well as downwards, a desirable income policy will imply maximum incomes in relation to minimum incomes. He repeatedly pointed out that no one had a right to live more comfortably than ordinary workers and peasants. But this does not imply that those who have greater ability and better talents should waste them. People with talents will have more, and they will utilize their talents for this purpose. If they utilize their talents kindly, they will be performing the work of the State. Such people exist as trustees, on no other terms I would allow a man of intellect to earn more. I would not cramp his talent. But the bulk of his greater earnings must be used for the good of the State.” He explained that the rich man

would be left in possession of his wealth, of which he would use what he reasonable required for his personal needs and he would act as a trustee for the remainder to be used for the society.

What will happen if these individuals do not voluntarily surrender their privileges? Gandhiji considered it to be criminal that some should possess so much of wealth. In this in all countries of the world, possession of inordinate wealth by individuals should be held as a crime against humanity. Therefore, the maximum limit of taxation of riches beyond a certain margin can never be reached. Why should there not be death duties?. The inheritance should rightly belong to the nation. ‘Yet on another occasion he observed. I would be very happy indeed if people concerned behaved as trustees, but if they fail, I believe we shall have to deprive them of their possessions through state with the minimum exercise of violence. But he believed that the smooth working of the society depended upon non monetary motivation and interties which he explained as a some of trusteeship. Only when it was incentives did not advocate a minimum of state power and action. “What I would personally prefer would be not a centralization of power in the hands of the State, but an extension of the sense of trusteeship, as in my opinion the violence of private ownership is less injurious than the violence of the State. However, if it is unavoidable, I would support a minimum of state-ownership.

The real sanction, however, behind the theory of trusteeship is mass action against those who refuse to behave with a sense of social responsibility. ‘Exploitation of the poor can be extinguished not by effecting the destruction of a few millionaires, but by removing the ignorance of the poor and teaching them to non-cooperate with their exploiters. That will convert the exploited also. Gandhiji held the view that if masses are organized on truly non-violent lines the socio-economic environment could be so designed that exploitation would be abolished. Still there may be a few who may refuse to act as trustees. For such Gandhiji’s prescription was non-violent non-co-operation and civil disobedience. If however, in spite of the utmost effort, the rich do not become guardians of the poor in the true sense of the term-what is to be done? In trying to find that solutions to this riddle I have lightened on non-violent non-co-operation and civil disobedience as the right and infallible means. The rich cannot accumulate wealth without the cooperation of the poor in society. If this knowledge were to penetrate

to and spread amongst the poor, they would become strong and would learn how to free themselves by means of nonviolence from the crushing inequalities. ‘He did not want that independence should in any way weaken the capacity of the masses to organize mass nonviolent action against injustices. ‘Swaraj’, he affirmed, ‘will come not by acquisition of authority by a few but the acquisition by all of a capacity to resist authority when it is abused.’

R.H. Tawney holds the view that democratic societies will survive only when to conditions are satisfied. The one is a ‘resolute elimination of all forms of special privilege and the second is the conversion of economic power, now often an irresponsible tyrant, into the servant of society, working when clearly defined limits and accountable for its action ‘If democracy fails it will fail not through any fortuitous combination of unfriendly circumstance, but from the insincerely of some of its professed defenders and the timidity of the remainder. If it stands, it will stand, not because it has hitherto stood, but because ordinary men and women very determined that it should , and throw themselves with energy into broadening its foundations.

Such non-violent mass action cannot be had for mere asking. Conscious efforts have to be made to organize and awaken the masses.

It can be argued that the scheme of trusteeship is unlikely to work. The septic can point out that even Gandhiji was not able to bring about this conversion. No capitalist ever behaved as a trustee. To the critics Gandhiji’s reply was “It is highly probable that my advice will not be accepted and my dream will not be realized. But who can guarantee that the socialist’s dream will be realized.’ He conceded, ‘Trusteeship, as I conceive it, has yet to prove its worth. It is an attempt to secure that best use of property by the people by competent hands. He was repeatedly questioned whether history at a time records such a change in human nature. His reply was. Such changes have certainly taken place in individuals. One may not be able to point to them in a whole society. But this only means that up till now there has never been an experiment on a large scale in nonviolence Ahimsa (non-violence) is definitely an attribute of society. To convince people of this truth is at once my effort and experiment. ‘He therefore asserted, ‘My theory of trusteeship is no making shift, certainly no camouflage. I am confident it will survive all other theorise ... That the possessors of wealth have not acted up to the theory does not prove its falsity; It proves the weakness

of wealth. No other theory is compatible with nonviolence in time non-violent method the wrong-doer compasses his own end, if he does not undo the wrong. For, either through non-violent non-co-operation he is made to see his error, or he finds himself completely isolated.'

We may dismiss these ideas at our peril. It will be argued that most men and women are not fit to act up to this ideal. They are too selfish, irresponsible and unresponsive. 'If that be so, and if these qualities are too deeply rooted for anything to be done about them, all say is that the outlook for humanity is poor indeed,' Albert Campus, the great French novelist and humanist wrote: 'Over the expanse of five continents throughout the coming years an endless struggle is going to be pursued between violence and friendly persuasion, a struggle in which, granted, the former has a thousand times more the chances, of success than time latter. But I have also held that, if he who bases his hope on human nature is a fool, he who gives up in the face of circumstances is a coward.'

History has proved this, that Gandhi has shown the courage in executing his ideas for the betterment of society and his concept of trusteeship is one of the glaring example of this, Gandhi wrote once if the concept of trusteeship is executed honestly in the Indian Society by individual, riches and masses then exploitation of poors will be minimized and ideal society of my dream could be formed.

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