

Spiritualisation of Politics: Gandhian Perspective

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Contemporary societies are going back to Hobbesian state of nature, wherein man is continuously involved in a perpetual struggle for power. Though there is nothing bad in this struggle provided the one who gets power is working for the welfare of all. Instead the contemporary struggle for power is essentially backed by the pursuit of self interest thus creating a society operating on the principles of “Might Is Right” and “Survival of the fittest” .In the backdrop of above a search is on for different models of Politics. Gandhian model is one such model that is gaining importance today as a remedy to contemporary nature of politics which is a total negation of the ethical principles. Gandhian model of governance speaks about morality and religion as the foundation pillar of the real politics which has to work for the welfare of all not just the dominant sections of the society. The paper therefore seeks to explore the Gandhian approach towards politics as a tool for reformation of politics in modern societies. The place that Gandhi gives to ethical principles becomes quite clear when he says “so long as there is a divorce of ethics from economics or politics, man will remain alienated and will not be able to determine the path for the desired social development.”¹ There is nothing bad about politics for it exerts action and its only through action that societies can be reformed. Politics takes a negative connotation only when it is based on and backed by the pursuit of self interest. This was Gandhi’s perception who said that he was never against politics. What he was against was the politics based on and backed by the pursuit of self-interest.³ He was not against politics

for the simple reason because he always felt that politics exerts action, and action for Gandhi is equally important as the ethical values. He believed that all kinds of reforms can be brought about in a society just by analysing the realities and then moving forward on the basis of an upright conscience and friendly persuasion.²In fact, it is only through action that values like truth, ahimsa etc. can be actualised.

What Gandhi therefore rejected was not politics perse but politics which was based on and encouraged the pursuit of self-interest. Such a kind of politics that promotes only self-interest, of course, follows, the decline of values. Therefore, Gandhi always stressed upon value based politics. He made an unending effort to reform and revolutionize politics on the basis of values. This reformation of politics in Gandhian sense meant taking politics as a vocation rather than a profession. To understand this point, here it is pertinent to make a distinction between what politics means as a vocation and how we make it a profession:

“As a profession, we perceive politics as a ‘game of deception’, exploitation, coercion and suppression which tend to foment quarrels, divisions and fights.”⁴ Whereas politics in the other sense that is politics as a vocation stands for “an art of doing what is morally right and a way of serving humanity on a mass scale. Politics, when taken in a later sense, makes the politician as a person, who is “conscious of a mission to serve his people and inspire them with faith in God and love of humanity.”⁵

Gandhian notion of politics therefore had a substantive content of religious and ethical value set up. Unlike the western liberal thinkers, he did not “separate religion from politics, sacred from secular, pious from profane, things of God from those of Caesar. For him, there was no politics without religion. Yet his religion was not the religion of the superstitious and blind religion but the universal religion of toleration.”⁶

In fact, toleration and assimilation form important parts to make a nation. To quote Gandhi, “A country is one nation only when such a condition obtains in it. That country must have a faculty for assimilation. India has ever been such a country. In reality there are as many religions as

there are individuals; but those who are conscious of the spirit of nationality do not interfere with one another's religion. If they do, they are not fit to be considered a nation. If the Hindus believe that India should be peopled only by Hindus, they are living in dreamland. The Hindus, the Mohamedans, the Parsis, and the Christians who have made India their country are fellow countrymen, and they will have to live in unity if only for their own interest."⁷

Thus attitude of tolerance forms another important attribute of nationality. In Gandhi's words, "when men become obstinate, it is a difficult thing. If I pull one way, my Moslem brother will pull another. If I put on a superior air, he will return the compliment. If I bow to him gently, he will do it much more so; and if he does not, I shall not be considered to have done wrong in having bowed."⁸

Further "those who do not wish to misunderstand things may read up the Koran, and they will find therein hundreds of passages acceptable to the Hindus; and the Bhagvad Gita contains passages to which not a Mohamedan can take exception. Am I to dislike a Mohamedan because there are passages in Koran I do not understand or like? It takes two to make a quarrel if I do not want to quarrel with a Mohamedan, the later will be powerless to foist a quarrel on me; and similarly, I should be powerless if a Mohamedan refuses his assistance to quarrel with me. An arm striking the air will become disjointed. If everyone will try to understand the core of his own religion and adhere to it, and will not allow false teachers to dictate to him, there will be no room left for quarrelling."⁹

If two brothers want to live in peace, is it possible for a third party to separate them? If they were to listen to evil counsels we would consider them to be foolish. Similarly, we Hindus and Mohamedans would have to blame our folly rather than the English, if we allowed them to put us under. A clay pot would break through impact, if not with one stone, than with another. The way to save the pot is not to keep it away from the danger point but to bake it so that no stone would break it. We have then to make our hearts of perfectly backed clay. Then we shall be sealed against all

danger.”¹⁰ Thus in every action of ours, Religion has to act as a guide in making us to follow the values of tolerance, assimilation and others.

In 1938, he said to a group of missionaries : “I could not be leading a religious life unless I identified myself with the whole of mankind and that I could not do unless I took part in politics. The whole gamut of man’s activities today constitutes an indivisible whole I do not know of any religion apart from activity. It provides a moral basis to all other activities without which life would be a maze of sound and fury signifying nothing.”¹¹

In politics, he referred to moral considerations and as a saint he thought his place was not in a cave but in the hurly-burly of the popular struggle for rights and the right. Gandhi’s religion made him political and his politics made him religious.¹² It was this notion of politics which inspired Gandhi to fight for spiritualisation of politics. He always stressed upon religion as the basis of politics. Thus he regarded politics to be the ‘very vehicle of self-realisation.’¹³ As Ramasharay Roy aptly remarks, “politics in Gandhi’s judgement cannot play its ennobling, elevating and emancipatory role if it is divorced from religion in his sense of the term.”¹⁴ Further he remarked, “in particular, Gandhi opposed the divorce of practico-political questions from ethical and moral principles. Politics, divorced from ethics and morality, he said, leads to despotism and militarism, which engender and sustain exploitation, oppression and destruction on a global scale.”¹⁵ Such amoral politics, he maintained, “encircle us like the coils of a snake from which one remarked, “I still hold the view that I cannot conceive politics as divorced from religion. Indeed, religion should pervade everyone of our actions. Here religion cannot mean sectarianism. It means a belief in ordered moral government of the universe. It is not real because it is unseen. This religion transcends Hinduism, Islam, Christianity etc. It does not supersede them. It harmonises them and gives them a reality.”¹⁷ Further in his words, “... should we not remember that many Hindus and Mohamedans own the same ancestors and the same blood runs through their veins? Do people become enemies because they change their religion? Is the God of the Mohamedan different from the God of the Hindu? Religions are different roads converging to the same point. What

does it matter that we take different roads so long as we reach the same goal? Wherein is the cause for quarrelling? ... there are deadly proverbs as between the followers of Shiva and those of Vishnu, yet nobody suggests that these two do not belong to the same nation.

It is said that the Vedic religion is different from Jainism, but the followers of the respective faiths are not different nations. The fact is that we have become enslaved and, therefore, quarrel, and like to have our quarrels decided by a third party. There are Hindu iconoclasts as there are Mohamedan. The more we advance in true knowledge, the better we shall understand that we need not be at war with those whose religion we may not follow.¹⁸ Therefore, to Gandhi religion which does not help to provide solution to practical problems was no religion. In his words, "If any religion of mine claimed to be spiritual is proved to be impractical it must be pronounced to be a failure. I do believe that the most spiritual act is the most practical in the true sense of the term ... for me politics cannot get out no matter how one tries."¹⁶ Therefore Gandhi always supported the introduction of religion in all the spheres of life. He remarked, "I still hold the view that I cannot conceive politics as divorced from religion. Indeed, religion should pervade everyone of our actions. Here religion cannot mean sectarianism. It means a belief in ordered moral government of the universe. It is not real because it is unseen. This religion transcends Hinduism, Islam, Christianity etc. It does not supersede them. It harmonises them and gives them a reality."¹⁷ Further in his words, "... should we not remember that many Hindus and Mohamedans own the same ancestors and the same blood runs through their veins? Do people become enemies because they change their religion? Is the God of the Mohamedan different from the God of the Hindu? Religions are different roads converging to the same point. What does it matter that we take different roads so long as we reach the same goal? Wherein is the cause for quarrelling? ... there are deadly proverbs as between the followers of Shiva and those of Vishnu, yet nobody suggests that these two do not belong to the same nation. It is said that the Vedic religion is different from Jainism, but the followers of the respective faiths are not different nations. The fact

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“Gandhi always stood for spiritualisation of politics and not for politicisation of religion. If politics is spiritualised heaven may come on this earth, conversely if religion is politicized, heaven may turn into a hell.”²⁰ This can be attributed to the assumption of his that the creative and the constructive power of religion had a vital role to play in politics. This can be traced to his understanding of religion between religion and politics. Gandhi, in this context, placed emphasis on ethical dimension of religion. For him, there is the supremacy of the concept of the moral right of conscience as against the power of ascendant groups. The basic view of Gandhi is that the religious ethics of pity, forgiveness, meekness, humility, universal tolerance should influence human action.²¹ As these are the various attributes of the spiritual self, these need to go along the human action. In fact, for Gandhi, there is no way that politics can be undertaken without understanding its religious components. Gandhi therefore talked about the commencement of a kind of politics based on the principles of ahimsa and non-violence. “We must inaugurate a different kind of politics based on Satya (truth), ahimsa (non-violence) and tapas (self-suffering).”²²

According to Gandhi, those who say that religion and politics have nothing to do with each other do not know what religion and politics really are.’ It is in this context that one can argue that Gandhi was an ethical absolutist. He was never ready to make any kind of compromise with the

basic moral principles. Therefore, he emphasized the purification of human action through the implementation of the concept of purity of means emphasized by old religious prophets.”²³ Hence, to provide a solution to contemporary problems, he recommended the ethical basis of religion. Therefore, to provide a solution, as an analyst would argue, Gandhi, first evolved an ethical religion and then translated it into politics and insisted that all ethical men must take part in politics. There is no real politics without ethics and no real ethics without politics. And yet, Gandhian understanding of relation between religion and politics, even from ethical dimension did not fit in any traditional understanding both of religion as well as of politics. By religion, he did not refer to the ritualistic and dogmatic notions. Similarly by politics, he did not mean, the petty power politics. He was strongly opposed to reducing politics to the game of cynical manipulation inclusive of fraud, deceit, farce and self-interest. He never considered it to be an art of snatching power and prestige. Instead, he regarded politics to be an instrument for serving the mankind. For this reason, he would like politics to be made a branch of ethics and thus become an art which should be used for social good and eventually an instrument in the cosmic and spiritual awareness of man.²⁴ Politics as we ordinarily understand has negative connotations – as it is for Gandhi, politics can also be seen in positive manner. Hence, politics is not beyond redemption, and it can serve a great purpose, provided its corrupting nature is duly diagnosed and continually countered through an effective process of moral and spiritual purification.

For Gandhi, the ultimate reality is absolute truth, which is the basis or essence of dharma (moral law or ontological ethics). In the light of this ultimate identity of reality and truth, the ‘real world’ of the politico-political cannot according to Gandhi, be regarded as an amoral or non-ethical field. “I do not believe”, he writes, “that the spiritual law works in a field of its own. On the contrary, it expresses itself only through the ordinary activities of life. It thus affects the economic, the social and the political fields.”²⁵ Social life, Gandhi said, is not divided into water-tight compartments called social, political and religious; every act has its

political, economic and spiritual implications. Accordingly, he conceived of his ideal society as ‘the square of Swaraj’, whose four inseparable or integral sides are the political, the economic, the social and dharma. He said: “some friends have told me that truth and non-violence have no place in politics and worldly affairs. I do not agree. I have no use for them as a means of individual salvation. Their introduction and application in every day life has been my experiment all along.”²⁶

For Gandhi, non-violence is the means to, or a measure of truth. “I have often said that if one takes care of the means, the end will take care of itself. Non-violence is the means.”²⁷ By Ahimsa (non-violence), Gandhi did not mean merely non injury to others. That would be a mere negative or passive connotation of ahimsa, which has also a positive or active meaning, namely, love or charity. Gandhi writes: “In the negative form it [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 includes truth and fearlessness.”²⁸

Gandhi said to a group of Christians in December 1938 that “belief in non-violence is based on the assumption that human nature in its essence is one and, therefore unfailingly responds to the advances of love.”²⁹ By contrast, the method of violence denies the freedom of the individual and hence it militates against true democracy, i.e., the Swaraj of the masses.

“... True Democracy of Swaraj of the masses can never come through untruthful and violent means, for the simple reason that the natural corollary to their use would be to remove all opposition through the suppression or extermination of the antagonists. That does not make for individual freedom. Individual freedom can have the fullest play only under a regime of unadulterated ahimsa.”³⁰

Along with truth and ahimsa, which Gandhi stressed upon, mutual toleration formed another important pillar of Democracy.

Gandhi writes,

“The golden rule of conduct, therefore, is mutual toleration, seeing that we will never all think alike and we see truth in fragments and from different angles of vision. Conscience is not the same thing for all. Whilst, therefore, it is a good guide for individual conduct, imposition of that conduct upon all will be an insufferable interference with everybody’s freedom of conscience.”³¹

Again

“Evolution of democracy is not possible if we are not prepared to hear the other side. We shut the doors of reason when we refuse to listen to our opponents, or having listened, making fun of them. If intolerance becomes a habit, we run the risk of missing truth. Whilst, with the limits that nature has put upon our understanding, we must act fearlessly according to the light vouchsafed to us, we must always keep an open mind and be ever ready to find that what we believed to be truth was, after all untruth. This openness of mind strengthens the truth in us.”³²

Gandhi writes;

“it has been my experience, that I am always true from my point of view and often wrong from the point of view of my honest critics. I know that we

are both right from our respective points of view. And this knowledge saves me from attributing motives to my opponents or critics I very much like the doctrine of the many ness of reality. It is this doctrine that has taught me to judge a mussalman from his own standpoint and christian from his anekantavada is the result of the two doctrines of Satya and ahimsa.³³

The basic principle on which the practice of non-violence rests is that what holds good in respect of oneself equally applies to the whole universe. All mankind in essence is alike. What is, therefore, possible for one is possible for everybody.³⁴

Ahimsa indeed was the concept – both ethical and epistemological because it was defined within a moral and epistemic practice that was wholly ‘experimental’ – which supplied Gandhism with a theory of politics, enabling it to become the ideology of a national political movement. Consequently, it dealt with questions such as the requirements for being a political satyagrahi, his rules of conduct, his relations with the political leadership as well as with the masses, questions about the structure of decision-making, lines of command, political strategies and tactics, and about the practical issues of breaking as well as obeying the laws of the state. Besides, ethical values like Ahimsa or Truth or non-violence forming the pillars of a true religion, there is no possibility of pursuing pure religion without any emphasis on the broader questions of state.

Gandhian notion of politics, in its positive frame, not merely reflected its spiritual basis but also its grounding at the grass-roots level. It is a politics that rather than being imposed from above on alienated mass, evolves at the level of people themselves. Gandhi always stressed upon direct share of people in decision making processes, only this in his view would lead to a democratic society, in its real sense. He was of the opinion that centralisation of the power always corrupts the system. Therefore he strongly opposed the excessive concentration of power either in the hands of the state or a few individuals.³⁵

For state, he said, “I look upon an increase in the power of the state with 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.”³⁶ His opposition to the concentration of power in the institution of state can be attributed to the firm faith of Gandhi in the moral authority of the individual. It is on the basis of this authority that he regarded individual to be the only moral agent rather than the state. Therefore, he considered the ethical individual superior to the state. That is the reason that he was not merely opposed to the excessive centralisation of power in the state but also to varied structures of the state that represented this power. He believed that the real political power should not lie with the government and the Assemblies only. He wanted the wisdom and morality together with political power to bear upon the problems of society and polity.³⁷ It is because of the superiority of the moral authority of man, that Gandhi talked about ‘the system of parallel institutions of participatory Democracy as the power base.’³⁸ These parallel institutions included the structures like Panchayati Raj, Non-Governmental organisations, village republics and other small units which must operate at the peripheral and the grass-root levels of society and polity. These institutions were to play a very vital role not only in supplementing Democracy on the one hand but also bridging up the distance between the government and the grassroots, on the other. Rejecting the traditional institutional democracy, he talked of participatory democracy with popular power as its base, this was his notion of a parallel polity. This parallel polity was meant not to supplant the institutions of representative democracy but to fill the great divide between the government and the grass-roots. Institutions of parallel polity were to be the countervailing power and outlets for direct participation of the people on a continuous basis. When he talked about village republics, panchayats or other similar smaller institutions in other areas. Through them, he was opting for a system of parallel polity that combines democracy with mass-politics...³⁹ Gandhi in fact considered Democracy to be a government of masses rather than classes. “Like the world, it takes all sorts of persons – the rich and the poor, the prince and the peasant, the high and the low, the

strong and the weak, the educated and the unlettered – to make democracy.”⁴⁰ Gandhi states, “I cannot possibly bear the idea that a man who has got wealth should have the vote but that a man who has got character but no wealth or literacy should have no vote; or that a man who works honestly by the sweat of his brow day in and day out should not have the vote for the crime of being a poor man.”⁴¹ Gandhian notion of Democracy does not find its basis in the utilitarian notion of Ruskin’s “greatest good of all.”⁴² In fact, he made a departure from the above doctrine in ‘Unto this

Last’, which he called as Antyodaya. Consequently, he substituted Antyodaya with Sarvodaya. Sarvodaya was an ideal Democracy of Gandhi. It was both qualitative and quantitative. It can be owed to the fact that, it stressed upon the good of all. In Gandhi’s Sarvodaya (True Democracy Realised)’ the “Last is equal to the first and none the last.”⁴³

Therefore, Gandhi conceived of Democracy as a particular form of government. In this form of government, power as well as people both are of immense value. The entire concept of Democracy would be undermined in the absence of these. As far as people are concerned, they find an important place in the etymological definition of Democracy.⁴⁴ Thus a true democracy has mass as its essence and he stressed on creating an understanding among the common masses that they have the capacity to regulate and control the power positions. In this context, it is important to note that Gandhi’s parliamentary democracy is not immune to corruption. In his words, “Real Swaraj will come not by acquisition of authority by a few but by the acquisition of the capacity by all to resist authority when it is abused. In other words, Swaraj is to be attained by educating the masses to a sense of their capacity to regulate and control authority.”⁴⁵

Gandhi in fact regarded an ideal Democracy to be the protector and defender of individual’s basic rights, his freedoms especially the freedom of thought and expression, his sovereignty and integrity. The integrity of man includes an over all development of man in all aspects of life. This overall development can be made possible only through the discipline which Gandhi’s ideal democracy stresses.

This discipline includes the self-discipline as well as the corporate discipline. Therefore, voluntary discipline forms the basis of perfect democracy. “If the masses want to enjoy independence, they have first to learn the secret of observing voluntary discipline. Otherwise discipline would have to be imposed upon them by powers that be. That would not be independence but its negation”.

Endnotes

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41. M.K. Gandhi, *Democracy : Real and Deceptive*, compiled by R.K. Prabhu, Navajivan Publishing House, Delhi, 1961, p. 70.

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44. “True Democracy” Gandhi said, “is the Swaraj of the masses” ... Democracy is the government of all men – one and many, the rich and the poor, the high and the low, the best and the worst, the wise and the otherwise. The world is composed not of some men, but of all men; not of a class but of the masses. Democracy is the people’ government. (Virender Grover (ed.), *Gandhi and Politics in India*, Deep and Deep Publications, Delhi, 1987, p. 210).

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