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Gandhi's Ideas on State and Government : Context and Relevance

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ABSTRACT: In Gandhi's assessment, the state (Western type) was the symbol of violence in concentrated form. In order to ensure allegiance from the citizens the state (which means its authority) applies coercion or violent measures mercilessly. Once he said "the individual has a soul but the state is a soulless machine, the state can never be weaned away from violence to which it owes its existence". In other words, Gandhi treated both state and violence or coercion synonymous. He further says that there is a state but not violence or coercion in any form cannot be imagined. He gathered experience in South Africa that more and more power to the state meant more and more violence or greater amount of coercion. In the name of the maintenance of law and order the South Africa's white government acquired enormous power and this led to the ruthless administration, exploitation and curtailment of individuals' liberty.

KEYWORDS: Gandhi's, state, government, violence, exploitation, liberty, coercion, law, order

I. INTRODUCTION

He once said that a political organisation based on violence would never receive his approval. Rather, he is always afraid of such an organisation. What he felt about the Western state system is quite explicit in a comment which he made, "I look upon an increase in the power of the state with greatest fear, because although while apparently doing good by minimising exploitation, it does the greatest harm to mankind by destroying individuality which is at the root of progress".¹

From the above analysis it is absolutely clear that Gandhi rejected the state of Western model on the ground that it represented violence or coercion. Now the question is why did he oppose violence so much? The modern state, according to Gandhi, was about to destroy individuality—that individual freedom and spontaneous urge to work. Secondly, the individualism is the root cause of progress. Gandhi believed that nothing could be done by applying coercion. Again, the individual cannot be forced to do any work against his will or spontaneous desire. To put it in other words, according to Gandhi the progress of the society can be achieved through the functions which the individuals perform willingly.²

Here Gandhi appears to us as a great individualist philosopher. The two great utilitarian philosophers—Bentham (1748-1832) and J. S. Mill (1806-1872)—wanted to put curb upon the activities of the state to enhance the quantum of freedom of the individuals. The state, prescribed by Bentham and Mill, is called limited state. Both Bentham and J. S. Mill did not approve coercion for demanding allegiance from the individual's. But Gandhi appears to us as more aggressive. Under any circumstances the individual's freedom cannot be sacrificed. Gandhi's love for individual's freedom ranks him with the great anarchist philosophers (we shall discuss his anarchism later on). The central idea is that to Gandhi state is an undesirable political organisation because of its close connection with violence. Since Gandhi had no faith on state which is an embodiment of violence and coercion, he did not support any other branch of this political organisation. Let us take parliament or legislature which is one of the three branches of government. His vitriolic tirade against British parliament is a source of amusement to many.³

But let us see what he said about the British parliament. He said that the British parliament is the mother of all parliaments. But this parliament, on its own accord, has not performed a single good work. Though it is headed by renowned persons like Balfour or Asquith, the work is not praiseworthy at all.

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So this parliament is like a sterile woman. Prof. Jayantanuja Bandyopadhyay in his noted work—Social and Political Thought of Gandhi calls this harsh statement of Gandhi “a youthful exaggeration”. He subsequently revised his opinion about the importance of parliament. He later on said that the legislatures of today perform useful jobs. No attempt should be made to destroy them. He believed that the present legislatures were better than old legislatures. The first comment about the sterility of British parliament was the outburst of emotion. The second one was the expression of real situation. In the second half of thirties of the last century Gandhi fully realised the utility of legislature consisting of people’s representatives. Gandhi was not interested at all in building up a comprehensive and well-argued political theory. He was a mass leader, philosopher and freedom fighter. On various issues and situations he expressed opinions which constitute certain aspects of political theory and state sovereignty is such a theory. In Western political thought, state sovereignty is a much talked theory and large number of scholars and philosophers has dealt with this concept. Bodin and Hobbes are chief among them.⁴

In general terms, sovereignty means the supreme coercive power of the state. We have already mentioned that Gandhi strongly objected to this power because supreme coercive power usurps individual’s liberty in a ruthless way. Sovereignty receives allegiance by force. Such a power of the state, it is needless to say, cannot get approval of Gandhi. The Zulu “rebellion” of South Africa moved his mind and thought immensely. The South African government released a reign of terror and torture upon the innocent people of Zulu and the state authority exercised sovereign power. It was unimaginable to Gandhi that a so-called civilised government could be so much cruel, so much soulless. So he concluded that sovereignty was nothing but the application of coercive power by that state and hence such a power could never constitute the basis of a non-violent state organisation.⁵

III. DISCUSSION

In the Western political thought sovereignty has two forms—monastic theory of sovereignty and pluralist theory of sovereignty. Though the latter form insists upon giving more freedom and autonomy to individuals and organisation, ultimately the state will have freedom and authority to use coercive power. Naturally even the pluralist approach of sovereignty failed to impress Gandhi. To conclude, both forms of sovereignty failed to create a favourable impact upon the mind of Gandhi.⁶

Gandhi also viewed sovereignty in the light of morality. He disapproved sovereignty on the ground that it was the usurper of individual’s morality. If an individual refuses to show obligation to the state, it is admitted, he has that freedom and he should be allowed to do that. But if sovereign power forces him to act according to the direction (of sovereignty) that invariably violates morality. It is also immoral to force a man to support an immoral, unlawful act. If the sovereignty commits an immoral act or is involved in unlawful activities it cannot expect to get support from rational citizens and in that case if the sovereignty claims allegiance by coercive way that can also be treated as immoral. Individual is governed by morality and conscience and his obligation to these only and not to any organisation or person.⁷

Though, in general view, sovereignty is a political concept, Gandhi did not admit its dissociation from ethics, morality and other universal ideals and values. For this reason the general view of sovereignty was not acceptable to him. “Gandhi was an ardent advocate not of traditional state sovereignty but of popular sovereignty strongly advocated by one of the social contract theoreticians.” J. J. Rousseau (1712-1778). Rousseau wanted to introduce popular sovereignty of the Greek city-state in his home state. In the scheme of Rousseau’s popular sovereignty the citizens had the opportunity to assemble in open places periodically and to participate in the variety of functions of state. Gandhi contemplated the same type of popular sovereignty for India.⁸

He thought that after freedom rights would be restored to the people and they would have freedom to participate in all affairs of state, particularly those affairs with which they are intimately related. He did not consider sovereignty as a resident of ivory tower. But it resides among the people and people themselves exercise the supreme power. In fact, Gandhi did not think of imposing of any decision upon the citizens against their wishes. Here we add that so far as

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liberty, right, democracy, sovereignty etc. are concerned Gandhi comes very closer to Rousseau than many other philosophers of the Western world. Like J. S. Mill and Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) Gandhi was not an uncompromising individualist because he admitted the utility of state. But he did not support the emasculation of state like the anarchists. To sum up, Gandhi stands between Herbert Spencer and the advocates of monastic theory of sovereignty.⁹ Though Gandhi does not deal with society and its relationship with state it is not difficult to frame certain conclusions about his attitude to society keeping his general outlook and philosophy in mind. His inordinate love for liberty rights of the individual and democracy and strong opposition to violence and coercion make it abundantly clear that he stressed more importance on society and less importance to state.¹⁰

In his judgment society is the best place for the free play of individual's opinion, in society people enjoy freedom of speech and expression and mainly in society individuals get ample opportunities to mould and remould their views This is due to the fact that the area of state is vast and always it is not suitable for individual's free and spontaneous activities. A very considerable part of Gandhi's philosophy is covered by satyagraha and non-violence. People, in the opinion of Gandhi, can start Satyagraha and non-violence against the state because the state is the usurper of liberty and encroacher of rights these people do form a platform which is, for all practical purposes, society. Since individual's relationship with society is direct, it is more important to them People from their views about morality, ethics, ideals and many other eternal values as members of society.¹¹

In Hegelian philosophy the society had no special importance but Gandhi did not share this view. In his political philosophy absolute sovereignty had no place—naturally society was more important. Gandhi's glorification of society may be treated from another perspective. He believed that through the society people can develop their individuality properly. In his account state is to some extent foreign to the individuals. Not only Gandhi many others have been found to think in the same time.

IV. RESULTS

Prof. Jayantanuja Bandyopadhyay has defined Ram Raj (literally Divine Rule) in the following words: "It is possible to distinguish between two levels of the social and political thought of Gandhi—the ideal and the practical.

The former, represented by a form of pure anarchy called Ram Raj by Gandhi, embodies the maximum social consummation of the ultimate values of non-violence,¹² Freedom and Equality The practical social ideal, derived from the sum total of Gandhi's practical ideas resembles..... a form of liberalism, socialism and embodies relative non-violence' freedom and equality'. Nonviolence, brotherhood is also important elements of Ram Raj about which Gandhi spoke a lot.

From the above definition we derive several aspects of Ram Raj. One is it is a type of Divine Rule. In the Ramayana, we come to know that Ram established a kingdom based on equality, freedom and justice. But when he used the word Rama he did not specially refer to Rama of our great epic Ramayana.

Rama or Rahim were of equal importance to him. By Ram Raj is meant sovereignty of people on pure moral authority. In Ram Raj there shall exist a maximum amount of consummation (perfect relationship) between equality, liberty and morality of the people Ram Ka; can also be identified with sacrifice on the parts of both ruler and the ruled.¹³

In Ram Raj the king/ruler will rule the kingdom not for his personal benefit or gratification but for the general upliftment of all categories of citizens. His Ram Raj is identified with the highest form of common good, morality and justice.

Ram Raj is an ideal social order based on equality, liberty and non-violence. The Ram Raj is amoral Political organisation and it resembles Plato's ideal state and Rousseau's moral public person. Needless to say that Rousseau

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being influenced by Plato contemplated a political organisation (which we call state) to be based on certain universal values such as idealism, morality etc. Plato also spoke of a justice and his theory of justice is still classic. Gandhi also wanted to build up the foundation of his Ram Raj on the universal principles including justice.²

An important aspect of Gandhi's Ram Raj is he has combined politics with ethics and morality. Gandhi clearly disowned the Machiavellian concept of separation of politics from morality and religion. He was firmly convinced that only the amalgamation of politics with religion and morality could provide a perfect social order.

Again, he did not treat Rama or Ram Raj in the light of Hinduism. The Hindu fundamentalists have very often misinterpreted Gandhi's Ram Raj primarily as a Hindu concept. But in fact this is not so. He frequently warned us of the aspect of his Ram Raj, Gandhi never preached religious division of society.

Though he was an orthodox Hindu he always cherished religious toleration and to him all the religious sects were equally important. Ram Raj is also the symbol of impartiality and the term impartiality is to be interpreted broadly. The state must treat all persons irrespective of their faith and belief equally and try to achieve welfare objectives for all. This is the brief interpretation of Gandhi's Ram Raj. Any analysis of Gandhian theory of state is bound to be incomplete without any reference to democracy because he imagined of a state which must be democratic. Hence his state is from top to bottom democratic. We shall never be able; it is warned here, to reach a clear conception about democracy if we start to study it in light of Western idea of democracy. Gandhi viewed democracy not simply as a political concept.⁴

A true democracy can be set up only when India will achieve Swaraj. A foreign-ruled state cannot have a democracy. There is a second aspect of Gandhi's view about democracy. It must be associated with truth and non-violence. People can never set up a democratic structure with violent means and untruthful ways. Only authoritarian regimes resort to violence and untruthful means. So there is an inherent contradiction between democracy and violence.

In order to be democratic a state must create a congenial atmosphere for the proper development of freedom and rights. Gandhi, we come to know from his writings, is very much sensitive about freedom. He believed that if freedom is lost the entire individuality is also lost.⁶

Only Swaraj can ensure true democracy and in such a system there can exist freedom. There is still another point. If individuals feel that they are deprived of freedom they can fight to gain it in non-violent ways.

The most important elements of Gandhi's concept of democracy are: participation of men in the affairs of state, people's right to protest the immoral and anti-people's acts of government, nonviolence, people's right to choose their own ways and prevalence of justice and equality.¹⁰

V. CONCLUSIONS

The Gandhian theory of state is based not only on the principles of freedom, non-violence, morality, justice and truth but also on decentralisation. To him swaraj and democracy are synonymous but decentralisation of power must be the basic part of democracy.

In Greek city-states there was a system of decentralising the political power. In the writings of Rousseau we get support for decentralisation of power. Of course, Rousseau did not directly deal with this concept but his advocacy for open assembly concept provides a basis for decentralisation.¹²

In modern constitutional, system, decentralisation is stressed. But Gandhi's decentralisation has a different character. Through the decentralisation of political power individuals will get full scope to participate in the affairs of state and

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they can do it absolutely in non-violent way. Again, decentralisation is the best means for the realisation of all democratic rights and freedoms.

So, without decentralisation all these will remain distant hopes. Coercion and violence are associated with centralisation. Authority receives or want to receive allegiance from the citizens by means of coercive measures. But decentralisation means people will act everything on their own volition. Through decentralisation men will be able to develop their various faculties.

Thus, we find that in Gandhian perspective state, democracy, freedom, participation and non-violence all are closely connected. Gandhi's decentralisation can be stated in the following phrase: expansion of democracy upto the grass-root level. Democracy without decentralisation is practically an impossible concept.¹³

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