



## Gandhi's vision of development: Relevance for 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Smt. G. Aruna Kumari, Lecturer in Economics, SKSD Mahila Kalasala UG & PG (A), Tanuku

Sri A. Naganna, Lecturer in History, SKSD Mahila Kalasala UG & PG (A), Tanuku

Sri B.Samsoni, Lecturer in Politics, SKSD Mahila Kalasala UG & PG (A), Tanuku

**Abstract:** *Development through the use of state apparatus is integral to the notion of freedom, and poverty becomes a problem of politics and power. This process confers rationality and acceptability practices and techniques of the government (and agents) among the individuals in society. Mahatma Gandhi was deeply suspicious of the power of state to influence growth, and hence relied on the self-control of an individual as the force that could transform the Society. He believed that there was no need to have a society based on the Western notions of greed and wealth but on moral individuals who cared for each other and followed their spiritual goals. This translated in his vision, to a more equal society based on different religious groups showing tolerance towards each other, and engaged in small-scale economic activities.*

**Key words:** *Development, religious groups, Starving Millions'*

### Introduction

Without exception, all political leaders promised change in the lives of ordinary people as they challenged the colonial rule, which translated into expectations of relief from poverty and hunger, medical care, education and advanced standards of life once India gained Independence. There was a broad understanding that British rule had led to drain of wealth due to transfer of profits to Britain besides taxes, expenditure of government, killing of Indian industry and continuance of poverty and famine. The British, on the other hand, blamed the continuance of poverty to Indian people, its hot climate, and lack of modern attitudes. The Karachi session of the Indian National Congress (1931) spelt out in detail the concept of Swaraj that could provide economic freedom to the 'Starving Millions' towards a more egalitarian society. While there was a consensus on

the ultimate objective of Swaraj; how it was supposed to be achieved was an area polarised between the visions of Gandhi and Nehru.

While their respective personalities and experiences did shape their visions of development, it would, nonetheless, be instructive to underline the difference between Gandhi and Nehru in the way they articulated their visions of the new India. In 'Hind Swaraj' (1910) and also after his return to India in 1915, Gandhi made it clear that true self-rule was not merely political independence by Indians. It meant a change in the economic pattern and political power through moral revolution of the individual upwards through society as a whole. He believed that there was no need to have a society based on the Western notions of greed and wealth but on moral individuals who cared for each other and followed their spiritual goals. This translated, in his vision, to a more



equal society based on different religious groups showing tolerance towards each other, and engaged in small-scale economic activities. He distrusted large-scale means of production since it led to an increase in inequality and non-harmonious relations between the members of society. Furthermore, Gandhi was deeply suspicious of the power of state to influence growth, and hence relied on the self-control of an individual as the force that could transform the society. To formulate his theory, he delved not only into Hindu and other Indian religions but also the contrarian Western thoughts which asserted that industrialisation had led to spiritual and social decline of the Western society. In sharp contrast to Gandhian ideals is Nehru's vision.

Gandhi was openly critical of the manner in which the provincial governments before Independence had abandoned his constructive programmes to renew the nation. He blamed them of functioning just like the British. It was not surprising, then, that after his assassination; the Indian state merely abolished untouchability and allowed encouragement of cottage industries alongside large-scale industrialisation.

It is not, therefore, surprising that Gandhi found the modern civilisation, for all its achievements, fundamentally rooted in the pursuits of everincreasing wants with its harmful consequences. He was forewarning the imbalance that modern civilisation causes between human beings and the environment. "It may be considered a heresy, but I may be bound to say that it were better for us to send money to Manchester and to use flimsy Manchester cloth than to multiply mills in India. By using Manchester cloth we only waste

our money; but by reproducing Manchester in India, we shall keep our money at the cost of our blood, because our very moral being will be sapped, and I call in support of my statement the very millhands as witnesses" (Hind Swaraj:58).

Ruskin's influence on Gandhi is reflected in his rejection of Western economics which were utilitarian and not based on any moral and ethical concerns. This led him to state: "Real home-rule is self-rule or self-control" (Hind Swaraj: 64) since he saw morality and freedom as inextricable from each other. He famously said:

#### Marginalisation of Gandhian Discourse

While Gandhi's thoughts on development were clairvoyant more so in hindsight, these were rejected paradoxically for the same reason. What tilted the balance was Nehru's invocation of 'modernity' that appealed to the imagination of a country unshackling itself. Gandhi's vision were seen to appeal too much to the moral and spiritual side rather than to 'modernity', and hence growth.

Gandhi's thoughts on economy were intertwined with his views on morality, which were not 'elegantly structured' and lacked 'theoretical rigour'; and 'Gandhi's insistence on pure theory was not always translatable into action' (Misra 2005). He was further seen as against technology even though he was more concerned with technology that was appropriate to the context and which did not come in the way of self-development. Gandhi has been further criticized for his ideas of trusteeship to mean that he was not in favour of change on the class relations and for this reason, he



sympathized with the capitalist ideology. While Gandhi drew intellectual inspiration from Ruskin, Tolstoy and others of the 19th Century

The Gandhian ideas of development were further marginalised when a National Planning Committee was made by the Congress President in 1938 with Nehru as its chairman. The Committee discussed basic issues concerning economic policy and planning and appointed 26 sub-committees to study and report on different sectors of economy and on certain specific problems relating to national planning. Gandhi was not happy with it. He termed it as wastage of money and labour. The task of the committee was, however, interrupted by the outbreak of the World War II in 1939 and arrest of Nehru and others. Reports of the Committees were submitted in 1939, 1940, 1945 and 1946, all of which led to considerable discussion. In 1944, eight prominent businessmen published "A Brief Memorandum Outlining a Plan for Economic Development of India" which highlighted economic planning in India, the general lines on which development should proceed, and the demands that such a planning is likely Gandhi's Vision of Development / 133 Nuti Namita to make on country's resources". They emphasized the importance of planning for the betterment of country.

Concessions were made to the Gandhian beliefs in giving utmost importance to the agricultural group having a variety of schemes to expand production of more food and increase rural wealth. Second group consisted of 'nationbuilding' services like education, medicine and public health. Third group comprised of power and industry, with a village as focal point for Plan and rural

development. The committee, however, stated that "the sole criterion by which any scheme will be judged is the concrete contribution it makes to the physical and moral well-being of the people...that people develop a sturdy self-reliance and work whole-heartedly for the advancement of their own happiness, prosperity and moral uplift".

During this time, a number of other reports were prepared: Burns Memorandum on the technical possibilities of agricultural development; Report on location of industry in India, Report of Bhole Committee on medical and health programmes, Sargent report on educational development, etc. Hence, the professionals and experts had begun stirring into action with their visions of new India.

Gandhi but his vision found acceptance among the multiclass Indian state. It was not only because he wanted to have a strong and united India but because his vision of planned development in a democratic manner enabled the elites to capture the state power without fundamental change in the state structure of pre-Independence India.

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