

SOCIAL WELFARE PROGRAMMES OF GANDHI AND HIS POLITICS

Meeta Garg*

ABSTRACT

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, a well known national leader and Father of the Nation was not only loved by the people in his times but even today he is much praised in India as well as in many other countries. A simple dhoti clad man could lead the nation to Independence because the masses simply adored him and followed his word. The world saw the mighty British with all their artillery standing helplessly before Gandhi many a times. That was the power of Gandhi because of which British officers and Indian leaders thronged his ashram for discussions. Even in that grim scenario, Gandhi had the vision of a nation that had to be built up again. He could envision that independence alone from the British dominance was not the solution for the Indian people. Besides slavery, Indian social scene was marred by many social ills like low position of women, low level of education, lack of women participation in social life, caste system that was eating into the very roots of the nation, commercialization of agriculture, growing industrialization which had resulted in low living quality of the slums, poverty, etc. So, Gandhi took up social reforms along with the problem of slavery and intertwined both these aspects in his programmes. In this way Gandhi tried to find an answer to many a problems simultaneously. While on one hand he had plans like Satyagraha to combat the deceitful laws of the British, on the other hand he introduced constructive programmes like Khadi, Swadeshi, Untouchability eradication, etc. And this is what had made Gandhi the most loved and respected national leader of the times then and even now.

Keywords: Sarvodaya, Environment, Khadi, Charkha, Swaraj, Untouchability, Rigid Caste System, Cleanliness.

Introduction

The Charisma named Mahatma Gandhi that had swept the Indian Politics in the twentieth century is a phenomenon that must be studied, not only for the public dealings of that man, his mass following, his hold on the common man of India, but also for his social welfare programmes. Besides challenging the mighty British with his seemingly simple movements, he churned the very core of the British Raj in India. He could think of uplifting the poor, downtrodden and socially discarded people and find ways to improve their lot. Thus his politics was not isolated from social causes. In fact his politics had impact on the people because Gandhi sought ways for the upliftment of the economically and socially poor alongside the struggle for independence. Thus his politics became for the people and of the people. Ever since Gandhi assumed leadership of the Indian National Congress party in 1921, he led campaigns for diminishing poverty, increasing women's rights, providing social liberties to women and untouchables, building a religious and ethnic environment based on love and respect for each-other, ending untouchability, and achieving Swaraj (self-rule) for the nation.

Let us analyse some facets of Gandhian ideologies and some of his works. To start with - 'Sarvodaya' the maximum good of all through truth and non-violence formed the core goal of Gandhi in his concept of social welfare. And his methods of working towards this goal were different from those of other leaders and social reformers on the India scene. Gandhi took a wholistic view of life and he never divided life into blocks or compartments. He saw man as a part of the society. He believed that happiness of a man lies in the happiness of the society and vice versa. Thus, when he looked at freedom of India from the British, he had a vision of freeing India from poverty, untouchability and other social dilemmas too. He had the vision to see that only an economically, socially and mentally strong India can gain independence from the British and maintain that independence.¹

* Assistant Professor (History), SPNKS Government PG College, Dausa, Rajasthan, India.

Gandhi also deserves to be considered as the first public figure who sensed and articulated concern regarding environment. One can probably call him as the first great environmentalist. If one reads the famous book of Gandhi- Hind Swaraj, one finds that in 1908 itself, he spoke out against the coming of the western civilization in India. It was different from the Indian system of 'live and let live'. This new system was exploitative of nature. It pushed mankind to a self-centered system that led to exploitation of human beings and environment at the hands of more powerful, well-connected or rich humans. It taught over use of the Earth's resources. This civilization also led to over consumerism to keep up the high standards of living, exploitation of the mill workers and farmers and accumulation of money and power in the hands of a few individuals. These in turn led to more social and political evils. At the environmental level, such a strategy was bound to fail for it exerted undue pressure on the environment. As per Gandhi, human beings nurture their surroundings and they in turn provide people with food and other things. If the world starts exploiting the nature unchecked, it will not be able to sustain long. If such a case persists, nature will collapse. Gandhi considered the Earth as Mother of all living beings for she nourishes them and provides food and shelter. But this new civilization was bringing along with it exploitation, over use and disrespect for Earth's blessings. Therefore Gandhi criticized the western style of living life. He was out and out a nature lover and all his life he lived as an ideal environmentalist.²

In 1918 Gandhi started the Khadi movement as a constructive measure to eradicate poverty from Indian villages. Spinning the charkha and making Khadi cloth provided the masses a medium to express solidarity with the national movement while at the same time giving them a source of livelihood. Spinning and weaving was elevated to an ideology for self-reliance and self-government. Every village was supposed to plant and harvest its own raw-materials for yarn and every woman and man was to engage in spinning. He wanted that every village must weave cloth for its own use. At that time raw materials were being exported out of India to England, only to be re-imported as a costly finished cloth. This meant loss of profit on the cotton as well as huge spending on foreign cloth. Gandhi also realized that spinning Khadi was a way to bring forward the importance of manual labour in our country where working with hands was being looked down upon. Gradually with time Khadi also became a medium to bring the high and the low, the rich and the poor together, and to display the dignity of hand-labour. He asked everyone and not only the needy, to spin at least for an hour everyday as a duty to his country, and for the poor. Thus, Khadi became an ideology, a way of life.³

A relationship could be seen in the Khadi clothes and its wearer. A person's Khadi was a sign of his following Gandhi and working towards nation's freedom. In this way each person started contributing towards the nation's cause. And his clothes then became central to his identity but not in a rigid or deterministic way.⁴ Even after gaining independence, many of those who were wearing Gandhi continued to wear only this hand spun cloth all through their life. Khadi became a symbol of a fighter for Indian Independence in the early years of struggle for Independence and later it came to symbolize a person who had lived Gandhian way of life. Gandhi himself also became a symbol. He led the people by first doing what he preached. He led and the people followed. He spoke wisely in simple language, wrote simple English that could be readily understood, and he articulated his views in his articles and Hind Swaraj. But it was his actions that spoke louder and he became a true leader.⁵

In 1921 during the Non-Cooperation movement Gandhi called for destruction of the foreign clothes. He asked people to for sake all foreign goods and inspired them to use only Swadeshi or indigenous goods. He believed that buying foreign goods was like inviting the foreigners to rule the land. On 31st July 1921, he himself lit bonfire of a huge collection of foreign cloth on grounds of a friendly Bombay textile mill. The spectacle was electrifying and it was witnessed by a huge crowd of people who were wearing coarse and white khadi. For Gandhi the exhilarating moment was a "soul-stirring sight" and he called it a *yajna*.⁶

Even in South Africa, Gandhi did not like the filthy living and unhygienic habits of Indians. He made attempts to educate the people regarding health and hygiene through his columns and speeches. Even in his ashrams in South Africa and here in India, rigid personal and civic hygiene had to be maintained. He firmly held that "it is established beyond doubt that ignorance and neglect of the laws of health and hygiene are responsible for the majority of diseases to which mankind is heir. The very high death rate among us is no doubt due largely to our gnawing poverty, but it could be mitigated if the people were properly educated about their health and hygiene". For Gandhi 'Cleanliness was next to godliness'.⁷

Another problem demeaning the Indian society was the rigid caste system and untouchability. Gandhi believed that while still standing in the caste system, it was possible to overcome untouchability. He opined that untouchability was a blot on humanity and therefore upon Hinduism. It could not pass the

test of reason and it was against the fundamental ideals of Hinduism.⁸ He called the Untouchables as Harijans i.e devotee of God or the one who loves God. For Gandhi the removal of untouchability was vital to his programmes. Charles F. Andrews who was a friend as well as a co-worker of Mahatma had once accused him for giving more importance to the mission of removing untouchability than securing the independence of India or even Hindu-Muslim unity. Mahatma had then reminded his friend that untouchability was a bigger problem. Of course he wanted India to be free but freedom from this social evil was more important. He feared that becoming free of this evil was more difficult than gaining political freedom from the British.⁹

In his ashrams he lived what he taught. There all people had to do all their works by themselves and untouchables lived there like other people were living with no discriminations. At the time of the Second Round Table Conference, when Ambedkar had asked for Separate Electorates for the untouchables, Gandhi signed Poona pact with Ambedkar that gave 148 Reserved Legislative seats to the untouchables instead of the 78 seats allowed under the Separate Electorate System.¹⁰ Gandhi's writings, speeches and efforts led many caste Hindus to change their perspective on the matter of untouchability. Untouchables were given permission to use public wells, enter and pray in temples all over the country. Inspired by Gandhi, many High-Caste Hindus publicly embraced untouchables and openly dined with them. In 1933 an organisation named Harijan Sevak Sangh was set up by Caste Hindus. The constitution of this organization stated its methodology, ideology and objective as - Eradication of Untouchability with all its evils and to secure equal status for the Untouchables at par with the other Hindus, by using truthful and non-violent means.¹¹

In this way we can see that Gandhi was able to intertwine social welfare with politics. The common man of India started relating to Gandhi and listening to him because Gandhi was solving the problems of his home first. And thus Gandhi became Gandhi Baba or father of the Nation. It is a truth that Mahatma Gandhi was able to crystallize all the living forces of the soil around him. People followed Gandhi and many High-Caste Hindus forsook the caste system entirely. In a similar way drinking liquor and wearing foreign clothes was forsaken by almost all. This in turn dealt a heavy blow to the English economy and showed them that now it has become very difficult to rule India. His constructive programmes formed the crux of his politics and it was because of his social outreach that he became relevant to the people and politically he was able to carry the nation with him. This is the charisma of Gandhi and this is the truth of his political outreach. It is remarkable to note that the Mahatma freed us not only from foreign rule but also detangled the webs that we had woven ourselves.

References

1. Chitra Desai, Gandhi's concept of Social Welfare, <https://www.gandhi-manibhavan.org/educational-resources/gandhi-s-concept-of-social-welfare>
2. Devavrat N. Pathak, Gandhi - From Culture of Violence to Culture of Peace, <https://www.gandhi-manibhavan.org/educational-resources/gandhi-from-culture-of-violence-to-culture-of-peace>
3. Ektaa Jain, Khadi- A Cloth and Beyond, (mkgandhi.org)
4. Emma Tarlo, Clothing Matters. Dress and Identity in India, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1996
5. Peter Gonsalves, Clothing for Liberation: A Communication Analysis of Gandhi's Swadeshi Revolution, New Delhi: Sage. 2010
6. Source: Gandhi Marg, January-March 2005
7. Dr. Savita Singh, Former Director, Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti, New Delhi. <https://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/cleanliness-next-to-godliness.html>
8. K. Swaminathan, ed., *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, hereafter CWMG (New Delhi: The Publication Division of the Government of India, 1966), "Speech at a Meeting, Vykom," vol. 26: 265
9. "Letter to C. F. Andrews," CWMG 19:289
10. See pp.191-192, B.R. Nanda, Mahatma Gandhi-A Biography, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1958. Pp 197-192
11. Stanley Wolpert, Gandhi's Passion: The Life and Legacy of Mahatma Gandhi, Oxford University Press, Oxford,2001), 170.

