

SWARAJ, SOCIALISM AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION: INDIA OF GANDHI'S DREAM

Abstract

This chapter puts forward Gandhi's views as presented in his work *Mara Svapna nu Bharat or India of My Dreams* on self-rule for nation state; indigenous model of socialism as against Western socialist ideology; rationale for native social structuring, and his silence on sociopolitical issues such as racial hoax of Aryan-Dravidian divide and Islamic social ills that were gaining traction during that time.

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One may or may not agree with M K Gandhi's views on means and modes of securing Independence, social harmony, reform, observance of certain lifestyle, and so on, but it is nearly impossible to overlook his contribution. His writings and public speeches addressed various kinds of topics of his time and his voice inspired and mobilized countless people, if not the entire nation. The 19th century witnessed a hard churn of contesting views and voices of which M K Gandhi's ideational position still invokes in his readers either devout fascination or critical hostility for him. His public life had such a wide spectrum that his reflections ranged from a tiny lifestyle hack or quotidian cares to national and international political affairs. M K Gandhi was acutely aware of social and political turns of his time and responded to them in his capacity. His informed views on nation state, self-rule, public welfare, social stratification give us an idea about what he missed in social and political cultures of his time or about the points on which he preferred to have silence over an articulate position. From among scores of his writings, a compilation of his articles under the theme of an ideal nation state is called *Mara Svapna nu Bharat* that came out in the fag end of his public life.

India of My Dreams is a compilation of M K Gandhi's articles and public speeches that were published during his lifetime in the magazines, namely, *Young India* and *Harijan*. The English edition was published on 15th August 1947, much like a manifesto on his version of ideal independent India. The text covers various subjects that relate to the lives of individuals in a free nation state. Historical timing and utopian vision of this text make it a notable document for independent India.

Reading this work in Gujarati caters to both aesthetic and cognitive faculties when compared to its English edition. One can perceive in his Gujarati writing a tone specific to native resilience and nerve to call spade a spade. Also, the use of conceptual categories adopted by M K Gandhi cannot be missed. It is intended here to examine a few concerns that find resonance in Indian polity, cultural studies, and Indology.

The search for alternative modernity in Gandhi's formulation of 'swaraj', 'socialism' and 'social stratification' makes a case in point on two counts: a) though Gandhi resorted to native representation frameworks in his ideas and practice, they were not in spirit institutionalized in the federal structure of India by the Indian Government almost forcing them to the status of one man's utopic wishful thinking, and b) Gandhi improvised on setting a pragmatic framework for application of these native ideals vis-à-vis new situation at hand. While reading Gandhi's views, it is difficult to remain indifferent to clarity and force of conviction one finds in his statement. Perhaps, this impact is felt because he states in unambiguous terms predicating on his vast experience of interactions with Indians across regions, his personal take on the dharmic tradition, his exposure to the western life and a general contemplation on human life.

The idea of 'Swaraj', he states, has been common knowledge since Vedic times and the first sense it denotes is 'restraint over self'. According to him, the possibility of self-purification through self-examination and self-control is a nuance that cannot be captured by the English term 'Independence'. *Swaraj* is for him a self-willed responsibility of acting nobly towards all—towards fellow countrymen as well as the world. He then goes on to spell out pre-conditions that act as testimony to the achievement of this ideal.

- At the political level, *Swaraj* in governance is when the natives or immigrants to India or those who are listed as voters or who contribute to the nation through their services elect their own government.
- *Swaraj* is when the people of the country remain self-reliant to fulfill their needs in the course of life and do not wholly depend on their own elected government.
- *Swaraj* is when the native culture flourishes on its own terms, in its own language using its own conceptual frameworks.
- *Swaraj* is when the ethical and nationalist people work and live for the welfare of fellow citizens. For if *Swaraj* is 'self-rule' and those who rule or connive with the government are corrupt, the nation will naturally be characterized as such.
- *Swaraj* is when even the poor can access the basic facilities of life like their rich countrymen. It is imperative for the government to provide all citizens of the country equal access to basic amenities.
- *Swaraj* shall incorporate economic growth, political freedom, moral and social freedom, and religious freedom.
- This non-violent *Swaraj* is oriented towards duties, not towards rights, for every duty in its fulfilment entails endowment of certain right. In fact, the true right is born only from the duties observed.

When these ideals translate into practice then, for Gandhi, it would amount to the realization of *Ram Rajya*.

In the political and public sphere of the 19th century, one major competing theory for the freedom struggle came from socialism and communism. The intellectual part of its discourse remains so mesmerizing that the term 'socialism' succeeded to find its entry into the Preface to Indian Constitution in around the 1970s. However, the fact remains that although Gandhi remained pro-poor and pro-oppressed throughout his life, the succeeding scientific socialist discourse in India could never co-opt Gandhian philosophy. Gandhi knew the difference that lay at core in the framework of that borrowed foreign discourse and addressed it squarely.

Gandhi agrees in principle with socialism aiming towards universal equality and calls it a beautiful word in essence. However, the ideal of socialism has not been alien to the Indian mind as one of the earliest socialist pronouncements, in Gandhi's view, was made in the first couplet of the *Isha Upanishad*. The *loka* tradition acknowledged it in the following way:

*Sab hi bhom Gopal ki va me natak kahan?
Ja ke man mein khatak rahi so hi atak raha.*

In Gandhi's view, this so-called scientific socialism came into existence when some intellectuals no longer believed in human capacity to reason and empathize with the end of transformation of another's heart and mind. Socialist discourse admits aggressive means to bring about classless equality and that would be possible when its ideology is believed in by the greatest number of people at the greatest number of places. Gandhi is clear in refuting that peaceful social equilibrium can never be achieved by pitching one section of society against the other, as it would implant an unrelenting warring gene in the body-politic of society and

infect all its organisms with a terminal illness. People cannot become rulers by killing the king; nor can a worker become rich by killing the owner of factories. The good end of socialism cannot be realized with dirty means of violence. And in like manner Bolshevism of Russia is certainly not an ideal leaf to be taken out of the book of history. To Gandhi, there is no nation on earth that truly exemplifies high ideals of socialism, for only those merit to promulgate that ideology to India or to other nations who are committed in pursuit of truth and non-violence. This predicament makes Gandhi state, 'I am not a socialist' (in the Western sense). He draws his 'socialist' principles from the traditional values of 'Swaraj', 'asteya', 'aparigraha' and 'ahimsa'. These Sanatana dharmic values have been a felt reality for many before Gandhi of whom Gandhi's life is but another example. Gandhi discards mere intellectualism of ideals espoused by Western scientific socialism unless they find among people the right means of revolution. And he adds to it that he would not wait until the rest of humanity concedes to his belief, rather he would act it out as and when he finds it truthful.

As for the class conflict, Gandhi perceives it to be basically opposed to Dharmic nature. The worker and the owner; the rich and the poor are not naturally inimical and absolute binaries. Gandhi says, the basis of all exploitation depends on cooperation of the exploited sought either forcefully or with consent. And the forged consent is often driven by some implicit selfish motive on part of the exploited. The need, in fact, is that of workers realizing their strength and dignity and acting responsibly, which under the circumstances of required impetus can be reciprocated by the rich in similar ways. What is required is to bring about a shift in perspective in the greedy rich through means of *ahimsa* and respect for workmanship which is a matter of basic training and education. In the absence of proper examination of this question at the local and national level of economy and self-understanding of native value system, these factions of society remain vulnerable to the possibility of political abuse. He urges the countrymen to not get swayed by attractive slogans borrowed from the West. Gandhi seeks a renewal mechanism to amend this anathema of industrial economy in the *Varna* system of Hindu civilization. To Gandhi, the following are the results possible to garner from the *Varna* system:

- It can provide a means to calibrate asymmetry between class conflicts; between earning and labour.
- Unnecessary social conflicts and malice resulting from competition can be avoided.
- It helps preserve the reservoir of professional knowledge accumulated over time.
- The village-economy of the country sustains itself.
- It ensures means of livelihood against mass unemployment and poverty.
- People may choose to transfer over to other profession in different social environments.
- Society gets structured on the principle of duties and general welfare.
- The *Varna* system is not a system of Job Work: it allows individual to be in harmony with his/her natural abilities and work of choice so as to attain excellence.
- At a spiritual level, it allows one the space to go within on the quest of self.

The *Varna* system allows a configuration of society based on psychosomatic constitution of individual and pre-natal traces of behavioral inclination, which is unique to Hindu worldview of birth cycle. It recognizes in principle that every individual is born with certain strength and inclinations which are circumscribed by genetic heredity, environment,

emotional and intellectual quotients and one can excel in walks of life and contribute to society in sync with one's aptitude. This model of bioengineering observed pros and cons of performance carefully and devised areas of action accordingly. Gandhi states, although it is a differential mechanism, there is no space in it for hierarchy or superiority or inferiority of performance and as a result it puts check on undue competitive conflicts in the society. The *Varna* system determines one's duties in the course of life and strives to promote an individual in the direction of spiritual quest of self. On the template of *Varna* comes into existence the framework of *Jati*, which is a changeable formation of groups of people. People may walk in or out of certain *Jati*-s given their natural inclination to work. In the course of time several *Jati*-s came into existence in accord with their socioeconomic environment.

Gandhi accepts Manu's social codification so far but the rise of innumerable sub-*Jati*-s which would have served some purpose in the past seem redundant to him. In fact, proliferation of sub-*Jati*-s could have been the result of abuse of the *Varna* system. He opines that under the new social ecology, various sub-*Jati*-s could be clubbed together. However, Gandhi puts forward his apprehension about the modern formation of caste system which was largely a divisive stratification of society that has its origin in works of German Orientalists and British Census Reports predicating the spurious race theory on philological anthropology and Biblical ethnology. Nowhere does the term 'arya' as a noun in the entire Sanskrit classicist tradition happen to denote any race of people, rather it was always found in its adjectival case. Nonetheless, the Aryan Invasion Theory was academically popular then and in the absence of empirical evidence it was believed in by most of the English-educated Indians too. However, Gandhi prudently points out that he is not interested in the question as to whether or not Aryans invaded the country followed by the colonial narrative of Brahmnical hegemony over the native Dravids with Sanskrit as its instrument. (Among many burning issues of the time, this was one major social scientific discourse on which Indian demography was systematically and incrementally getting mapped but not much is found on it in Gandhi's writings, letters, speeches, or public statements) What concerned him was the fact that the preceding generations could set higher spiritual and moral standards of living for the posterity. This problematization of *Varna-Jati* as caste and class was a result of borrowing Western socio-linguistic and racial frameworks. Modern independent India ensured continuity of colonially coded caste-based stratification of society by giving it a constitutional validity.

Gandhi is, however, critical of untouchability and rejects it in all forms. If society is to be conceived of as a living whole, untouchability would be its irksome sore. The cure would be to remove the ailing boil from the body, not to kill the patient. The issue of untouchability or caste superiority emerges when the *Varna* system is not understood in the framework of its intended value system. Gandhi submits at the end that there should be neither any prohibition nor a force regarding inter-*Jati* marriages or eating-ceremonies which is a matter of individual's free choice.

Along these lines, another point of silence in Gandhi's polemics is the social discrimination in Muslim communities. For the Muslims, issues of deprivation, class discrimination, untouchability, partial access to means of social uplift prevailed among Ashrafs (nobility claiming foreign descent), Ajlaf (low class local Muslims) and Arzal (Dalit Muslims converted from fringes of society). Majority of the Muslims who had political and

administrative exposure came from the upper class and were proud to distinguish them from lower Ajlaf and Arzal classes. Foregrounding of the Ashraf class could be seen either explicitly or implicitly in writings of Syed Ahmed Khan, Jamal-al Din al-Afghani, or in various Islamic Movements in India such as Deoband, Nadwatul Ulama, Dehlawites, Faraizi Movement of Haji Shariatullah, Khilafat (Caliphate) Movement led by Ali brothers among others. While Gandhi discarded social discrimination in general and Hindu social ills in particular, his silence on disparity in Islamic social system yielded space to other Islamic scholars. Similar to Gandhi's silence on issues such as ancestral roots of indigenous people of pan Indian subcontinent; class discrimination among the Muslims, one more loose end appears when he holds Mughals in positive light instead of considering them as foreign colonial rulers. Gandhi makes one passing note in Chapter 19 of *Mara Svapna nu Bharat* where he agrees with some maulana named Mohammad Ali (identity not confirmed) to rewrite the history of Mughal period with Muslim sensibility because Western historians and Orientalists had presented Aurangzeb as a religious bigot and an autocrat. A person of his stature and learning surely knows that historical facts are neither journalistic opinions nor legal debates. Nor should historical points be made in jest without internal and external evidence. One wonders if the particulars of *Fatwa Alamgiri* were known to Gandhi before holding his opinion with such ease of conviction.

Excepting the above said greyarea, Gandhi offers from his perspective a renewal mechanism for social and economic parity and growth from within. Gandhi's social philosophy accepts ideals from the *Shruti* tradition while his pragmatic model for implementation is drawn from the *Smruti* tradition in tandem with some modern changes. Resorting to the *Chaturvarna* system in its pure form could be seen as Gandhi's response to master-slave dialectic of Marxist social theory aiming to ward off falling into the loop of binary oppositions. Right work division qualified by right training and education would go into making a duty oriented, non-hierarchical and inclusivist society that is set on its course of *lokasamgraha* or public welfare in service of real *Swaraj*. In the process, Gandhi critiques internal issues such as modern-day caste system, complex and unnecessary ramification of *Jati*-s and untouchability on the one hand but does not seek for its solution a borrowed framework that would rather aggravate the situation. He also critiques uncritical submission to Western social, anthropological and economic theories and shows their possible untoward effects. His approach to progress was, however, dubbed as non-modern by his contemporaries which could be revisited today as an alternative, for the historical non-submission to Gandhian framework now stands exposed as a turn of event that led so called progressive modern India to the crises of communal fault lines, unreal history, and abandonment of native Indic values from the institution of national education. When one looks at this historical text, one may elicit from Gandhi's writings that speculations he dreaded about social chasms and faultlines have not been proved all moonshine as most of them return to haunt us in the plight of disowning ancient Indian civilizational consciousness, identity, and history.

REFERENCES

- [1] M K Gandhi, *Mara Svapna nu Bharat*, ed. R K Prabhu. (Ahmedabad: Navjivan Trust) Gujarati Rpt. Edn. 2014.
- [2] The *Isha Upanishada* states:

Īśāvāsyaṃ idaṃ sarvaṃ yatkiñca jagatyāṃ jagata |

Tena tyaktena bhuñjithā mā grdhaḥ kasya sviddhanam || 1 ||

All that there is in the Universe exists in the Absolute Divine.
Relish by renouncing it. Covet not; whose abundance it is?

[3] In fact, it is interesting to note that Franz Boas, a 20th century American linguistic anthropologist, had put a similar caveat against conducting racial studies on the linguistic anthropological models as it would heavily rely on intangible data as would be hard to ascertain by empirical evidence leading to historical speculations and cultural biases.

[4] Closer to the times when Gandhi wrote for his journals, Nietzsche spoke on the *Varna* system in altogether different context of critiquing Western metaphysics. In his often-marginalized final work *Ecce Homo* (1918), he upholds the logic of *Varna*. It reads:

A book of laws such as the *Code of Manu* has the same origin as every other good law-book: it epitomizes the experience, the sagacity and the ethical experimentation of long centuries....To draw up such a law-book as Manu's means to lay before a people the possibility of future mastery, of attainable perfection—it permits them to aspire to the highest reaches of the art of life....The order of castes, the highest, the dominating law, is merely the ratification of an order of nature, of a natural law of the first rank, over which no arbitrary fiat, no 'modern idea', can exert any influence. In every healthy society there are three physiological types, gravitating toward differentiation but mutually conditioning one another, and each of these has its own hygiene, its own sphere of work, its own special mastery and feeling of perfection. (Section 57)

[5] 'Kowmi Ekta: Chapter 19' in *Mara Svapna nu Bharat*, p. 242, edn 2014