

Individual and Nation Building: A Gandhian Perspective

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Article Received: 23 June 2020

Article Accepted: 29 August 2020

Article Published: 30 September 2020

ABSTRACT

Nation building is a multilayered process and phenomena. Various factors like history, demography, polity, economy, culture and ideology of any nation play an important role in its formation. It is achieved through institutionalizing a set of national ideals, values and goals. Gandhian way of nation building is based on character building of individuals and socio-economic and politico-cultural reforms. In the present world materialism has replaced humanism. Matter has become more important than the soul of an individual. The significance of individual is merely mathematical in nature. For Gandhi individual is the supreme consideration. The individual conceived in moral and spiritual terms is of supreme importance in Gandhian political thought. He wanted psychological regeneration of man because he believed that there was something inherently divine in man's nature. This paper focus on the analyse of individual's role in the process of nation building.

The relevance of any thought or philosophy is described as relevant if it offers genuine solutions to the problems faced by the society. It is measured in terms of its pragmatic value to the people and the society. Its relevance is also related to the time and context. Certain beliefs and concepts are relevant for all times to come. Mahatma Gandhi's ideas on different aspects of human activity are relevant in the present context. Gandhian thoughts are relevant because of his non-rigorous and conservative outlook. He based his ideas on experiments and repeatedly pointed out that his aim was to be consistent with truth.

Nation building is a process and multilayered phenomena. Various factors such as history, demography, polity, economy, culture and ideology of any nation plays an important role in its formation. It is achieved through the institutionalization of a set of national ideals, values and goals. In the present world materialism has replaced humanism. Matter has become more important than the soul of an individual. The significance of individual is merely mathematical in nature. Gandhian way of nation building is based on character building of individuals and socio-economic and politico-cultural reforms. Gandhi believed that the real individual is spiritual entity and he has a sense of spiritual self-consciousness and moral internality. Mahatma Gandhi stated that *swaraj* is a state of being of individuals and nations.ⁱ Gandhi mentioned about political, social, economic and spiritual connotations of *swaraj*. Sanskrit meaning of *sva* is one's own or self.ⁱⁱ Early *Vedic* texts signified *Sva-raj* as self-ruling, self-ruler and one's own rule.ⁱⁱⁱ According to Gandhi, self-rule in spiritual sense was of most importance. It is the process of removing the internal obstacles to freedom or spiritual *swaraj* (self-rule). Gandhi derived the idea of spiritual freedom and self-rule from *Bhagavad-Gita* and pointed out that it is a self-transformative activity. He emphasized that spiritually integrated person lives a life of true knowledge. He believed in mental revolution and self-transformation of the individual.

Gandhi believed that mind and senses should be properly disciplined to explore deeper levels of self-knowledge. According to him, training of the body is the first step in the right direction and it should be followed by the training of mind. Gandhi believed in the moral development of life and asserted that without a disciplined mind the senses could not be brought under control nor could the soul proceed freely into its path of moral progress.^{iv} According to Gandhi, a coward person can never become moral. Thus

fearlessness is the base of spirituality. Gandhi pointed out that morality also includes appreciating other person's thought. He argued that even opponents should be respected and honored for the same honesty of purpose and patriotic motives as we claim for ourselves.^v He further pointed out that performance of duty and observance of morality are convertible terms. According to him, civilization is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty.^{vi}

Gandhi saw God in mankind and according to him, love for man leads to the realization of God. For Gandhi individual is the supreme consideration and if the individual ceases to count, what is left of society? The individual conceived in moral and spiritual terms is of supreme importance in Gandhian political thought. He wanted psychological regeneration of man because he believed that there was something inherently divine in man's nature. Man's true aim is the conquest of his own empirical self. Gandhi believed that *Atma-Nigraha* or the suppression of the lower self can alone vindicate the greatness of the human spirit.^{vii} Gandhi asserted that those actions are moral which are done for the sake of doing good and stressed that motive behind the action is important. According to Gandhi, just as an action prompted by the motive of material gain on this earth is non-moral, so also another done for consideration of comfort and personal happiness in another world is the same. In the same way, society is affected by the disapproval of certain laws and customs. According to Gandhi, all morality involves social relations and similarly love, kindness, generosity and other qualities can be manifested only in relation to others. The force of loyalty can be demonstrated only in our relations with one another. Gandhi considered man equal to an animal as long as he remains selfish and does not care for the happiness of others.

Gandhi believed that introspective scrutiny, cultivation of character and the realization of the sense of unity of living beings are essential for moral and spiritual goodness. The individual seeking to better his character and influencing others by moral techniques is the starting point of Gandhian psychology. Man has physical, social, political, economic and intellectual aspects. However, essentially he is a spirit and provides unity to the different phases of his existence. Hence, according to Gandhi, a comprehensive psycho-spiritual solution is needed.

This is dependent upon the energization of moral sensibilities and feelings and hence, according to Gandhi, the stress should always be on the moral and spiritual aspects rather than on the intellectual, scientific and the institutional aspects. According to Gandhi, the human soul is the basic category and did not believe in the lifeless mechanisms of institutions. He insisted that institutions represent only the externalization of the basic psychological wishes, drives and propensities. Like Plato, Gandhi also felt that the community is the result of the qualities and character of the individuals. He was never unmindful of changes in the political, economic and social structure. He believed in the fundamental unity of life and pointed to understand self in terms of its origin, destiny and relationship with other things.^{viii}

Gandhi gave a message that his own life was an experiment in making spiritual freedom socially, politically and economically dynamic. He felt that he would not attain spiritual freedom unless he entered the world of social, political and economic action. The test of the new meaning of self-rule is the ability to act well in the

socio-economic and political arena. According to Gandhi, spiritual freedom needs to have synergy with the social and political conditions. According to him, inter-transformation and integration prepares one to lead the life of an active citizen.^{ix}

Gandhi declared that the individual is the one supreme consideration and held to this belief until the end of his life. Gandhi argued that a man can voluntarily surrender to the service of the society only if he has freedom. He asserted that individual should become fully developed member of the society. According to Gandhi, outward freedom and inward freedom are inter-related, if so, individual should endeavor hard to reform one from within.

Gandhi never compartmentalized life and according to him, political, economic and social actions and reasons on which actions are based are inter related to each other. He regarded these actions essential for freeing his soul from earthly bondages and attaining ultimate truth or *Moksha*. Gandhi firmly believed that without service of the poor and identification with them the self-realization was impossible.^x

The individual, for Gandhi, was a social being and he was conscious of the social structure that surrounded him and of the advantages that accrued to him as a result of his being socialized. It is evident that Gandhi adopted a moral and psychological approach for the solution of economic and political changes. The fundamental and ultimate solution of the matter is religious making of man. The human heart holds the final key to all social and political dynamics. Similarly, the freedom of the individual and the opportunity to develop his potentialities whether material, mental or spiritual must be the first concern of the society. According to him, the *swaraj* of the people is the sum total of the *swaraj* of the individual. Gandhi believed that each nation should have its own system of government in keeping with its own conditions in which there would be the rule of common masses. The key point of his concept of *swaraj* was that power must belong to the people. He aimed at a democratic state based on moral authority. He insisted that democracy would be an impossible thing until the power was shared by all.

Gandhi believed in the active participation of the people in governance and argued that individual liberty of opinion and action should be guarded primarily in democracy. He welcomed healthy and honest difference of opinion and argued that democracy should provide an opportunity to an individual to be best of one self. Similarly, an accountable, honest and active role of individual is required to make democracy successful. According to Gandhi, decentralization could provide individuals the opportunity to participate in the management of their affairs and a feeling of self-government. He believed that proper decentralization was possible in *Gram Swaraj*. It meant self-governance and self-management of village communities. In gram-swaraj, each one was involved in creative activities.

Another principle of Gandhi was trusteeship and he preferred the individual to the state in it. Gandhi's ideal society was *Ram rajya* or kingdom of God on earth. According to him, there would be the sovereignty of the moral authority of the people in *Ram rajya*. Gandhi believed that the voice of the enlightened conscience of the individual was superior to the dictates of laws of the state. The practice of truth and *ahimsa* was the base of *Ram-rajya* of Gandhi.^{xi}

Gandhi's *satyagraha* meant firm adherence to justice and truth and *ahimsa* were the base of Gandhian *satyagraha*. He firmly believed that *Satyagrahi* should be disciplined and obedient. He stressed that no organization can function successfully if its members and officers refuse to carry out its policy without utmost discipline. The substitution of voluntary individual cooperation for the conflicts and compulsions of the present world was his ultimate goal. An attempt to review the individual in such conditions and in spite of all the reaction that it may mean was his humble contribution.^{xii} According to Gandhi, destiny of the individual is mastered by oneself. The Gandhian individual has choice and this includes the ability to resolve disputes in non-violent cooperative ways. *Satyagraha*, then, is a viable method of conflict resolution from Gandhian perspective. Gandhi stressed that the failure of *Satyagraha* depends on the purity of intention and attempt. It means that *Ahimsa* has not been expressed in its fullness. However, it can be claimed that failure of *Satyagraha* to resolve conflicts does not mean the absence of subjective benefit of dignity that comes from leading a moral life.^{xiii}

Gandhi saw the individual as the subject rather than the object of history. He believed that individual and society are inter-related and this relationship was one of the parts determining the whole. Will Durant claimed that Gandhi made little application of history to understand the present. Charles H. Cooley pointed out that the consideration of the individual apart from society is as artificial as considering society apart from individuals. Durkheim postulated that the goals and aspirations of the individual cannot be understood without knowing the social system of which they are members.^{xiv} However, Gandhi emphasized the necessity of constant efforts for the moral and spiritual remaking of man and according to him moral development of society stems from the moral development of the individual. Thus reformation of society and the self are inextricably linked and interwoven.

Gandhi stressed that individual should promote good and actively prevent evil and firmly believed that personality is manifested from his works and deeds. The belief that individual should do for others, what he choose to do for himself and according to him, choice for the mankind and self are inter-connected. Gandhi speaks of freedom that comes with the dignity of being one's own person by living ethically and following one's own dictates. He firmly believed that the path of *Satyagraha* trains the soul and develops character for perfection. The highest form of morality in Gandhi's ethical system is the practice of altruism.

Gandhi regarded that trusteeship system do not allow rich people to accumulate wealth by exploiting poor masses. According to Gandhi, trusteeship is a compromise between private enterprise and state-controlled enterprise. He rejected capitalism and regarded the accumulation of wealth in capitalist system as detrimental to the moral development of the individual. Fundamental to the Gandhian theory of trusteeship is the idea that Freedom and Equality are values which can be realized only through a moral effort on the parts of individuals and groups rather than the creation of external conditions.^{xv}

Gandhi made distinction between legal ownership and moral ownership. According to Gandhi legally wealth belongs to the owner and morally it belongs to the whole society. Thus, in this sense of moral ownership, the laborers and the peasant are also owners of the wealth possessed by the mill owners and the

landlords. Gandhi stressed that trusteeship means the joint trusteeship of capitalists and laborers over the wealth of society. He declared that legal ownership of the wealth must vest in the trustee himself. This point seems to be central to the entire idea of trusteeship.^{xvi} The means proposed by Gandhi for bringing about the state of affairs envisaged by him must be the voluntary conversion of the exploiting class to the cause of socio economic justice by moral appeal to their conscience. His emphasis on moral conversion includes the moral transformation of the exploiters. Gandhi considered that the awakening of the workers and peasants into a realization of their own moral strength, the realization that exploitation could take place only with their cooperation, and that non-cooperation on their part would at once deprive the exploiter of his power to exploit.^{xvii} Thus Gandhi's object is to eliminate not class division, but also class conflict. Gandhi emphasized that this mutual realization of the importance and needs of the conflicting interests, judged from the moral point of view will lead to the establishment of moral equality between them.^{xviii}

Gandhi condemned the nineteenth century doctrine of Laissez-fair. He was opposed to capitalism and a dominant factor for his hostility was that it was based on violence. According to Gandhi the concentration and centralization of capital result in strengthening the engines of violence of the richer section and they intensify the process of exploitation of laborers. Secondly, he criticized the accumulation of capital as immoral. According to him, the amassing of commodities and concentration of capital was bound to result in injustice and coercion and considered accumulation as a kind of theft. It was also an indication of one's lack of faith in the encompassing goodness of the supreme divine being.^{xix}

According to Gandhi, another basic evil of capitalism is the intensification of social polarization between the two opposed social classes- the capitalists and the laborers. This resulted in strikes, lockouts, sabotage and there is a marked decline of social spirit. Thus Gandhi felt that in his ideal state this social antagonism would be replaced by increasing cooperation and mutual reciprocity.^{xx} The economic foundations of Gandhian political philosophy are inspired by a moral orientation. According to Gita, those who eat without working are parasites. Thus Gandhian theory of bread labor strike at the roots of that unjust distinction between mental labor and manual labor.

Gandhi gave special importance to *swadeshi* for the attainment of self-rule. In its ultimate and spiritual sense *swadeshi* stood for the final emancipation of the human soul from its earthly bondage. A votary of *swadeshi*, therefore, in striving to identify himself with the entire creation, seeks to be emancipated from the bondage of the physical body. According to Gandhi, what *the Gita* said with regard to *swadharma* equally applied to *swadeshi*. *Swadeshi* was *swadharma* applied to one's immediate environment. Gandhi stressed that economics that hurt the moral well-being of an individual or a nation are immoral and sinful.

Gandhi does not ignore the divinity of man and in this respect it is very difficult to distinguish between man and man. It is from this deep feeling of spirituality and divinity of man that later on Gandhi derived his ethico-economic theory of trusteeship and inheritance. He wrote, "everything belonged to God and was from God. Therefore it was for His people as a whole, not for a particular individual. When an individual had more than his proportionate portion he became a trustee of that portion for God's people."^{xxi} This was

the main reason that Gandhi always talked of equality of distribution of national wealth. His idea of society was based on the theory that everybody must have equal opportunity in life.

It can be argued that the reasons for leading a *Satyagrahi* lifestyle are directly related to Gandhi's views on the nature and meaning of human existence. He pointed out that individualism should lead to the welfare of all. This process included working towards the reformation and reorientation of society to enable a greater scope for the self-realization of all individuals.

Declarations

Source of Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing Interests Statement

The authors declare no competing financial, professional and personal interests.

Consent for publication

We declare that we consented for the publication of this research work.

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