MAHATMA GANDHI’S CONCEPTION OF DECENTRALISATION AND PEOPLE’S EMPOWERMENT – AN ANALYSIS

Thesis Submitted to the University of Calicut for the Award of the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
IN PHILOSOPHY

By
BISHA C.M.

Under the Supervision of
Dr. RADHA S.

DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY
UNIVERSITY OF CALICUT
KERALA
2009
CHAPTER - SIX

CONCLUSION
The concept of decentralisation marks the culmination of Mahatma Gandhi’s Experiment with Truth and Non-violence in the varied aspects of life. It played a crucial role in fulfilling Gandhiji’s dream of rebuilding India from bottom upwards so as to strengthen the villages as self-sufficient and self-ruling units of administration. He was of the considered view that the soul of India consists not in her few cities but in her innumerable villages. Gandhiji conceived that when once the villages perish India too will perish testifies the same.

His vision of village reconstruction was based on a set of inter-related concepts such as Sarvodaya and Swaraj characterized by equality, brotherhood and simplicity. Swaraj embodied the multi-faceted constructive programme with its eighteen items along with emphasis on equitable social relations and development of localized non-violent village economy and revival of village industries and rehabilitation of handicrafts as a solution to the problem of India’s ‘enforced poverty’.

Gandhiji’s concept of decentralisation can be properly understood and appreciated within the frame work of his fundamental ideas, faith and convictions which culminated in
his living and unshakable faith in Truth as God. Truth, Gandhiji considered as the ‘Sovereign Principle’—the pole star of his life which includes numerous other principles. Truth he considered as Absolute Reality which include the relative truths as well. Relative truths are nothing but the stepping stones to Absolute Truth which has to be observed in thought, word and deed. Truth is God and it is also the substance of all morality.

Gandhiji synthesized religion with morality for he thought that morality does not preclude religion. Man cannot reach Truth without morality. The ultimate goal of human life is Self-Realization which is identified with Truth and God realization and this goal can be reached only through disinterested service of our fellowmen. Morality is found to be the fundamental pre-supposition to realize Truth. According to Gandhiji, the highest moral law is that in which we should unremittingly work for the good of mankind. “A moral act”, Gandhiji wrote, “must be our own act, it must spring from our own will. If we act mechanically, there is no moral content in our act. Such action would be moral, if we think it proper to act like a machine and do so. For doing so, we use our discrimination. We should bear in mind the distinction between acting mechanically and acting intentionally.”¹

1
One of the salient aspects of Gandhian ethics is the identification of morality with spirituality. To him, God is ethics and morality. In Indian philosophical tradition morality is only a ladder to climb upon to reach the summits of spirituality. It is only a means to an end and not an end in itself. As such, is there any justification for regarding ethics and religion as identical? The reply would be that Gandhiji’s ethics like his religion has an intuitive basis. Gandhian ethics has not only a metaphysical but also an intuitive basis. Gandhiji identifies the moral sense with conscience which is man’s inner guide. Gandhiji laid stress on unflinching obedience to the dictates of conscience, for the voice of conscience is the will of God and final judge of the rightness or otherwise, of all our thoughts and deeds. It is the ‘Inner Voice’. The still Small Voice was, Gandhiji believed, his unerring guide when he took momentous decisions. Moral laws are also spiritual laws. The dictates of conscience, according to him convey both the moral sense and the will of God. For Gandhi, “morals, ethics and religion are convertible terms. A moral life without reference to religion is like a house built upon sand. And religion divorced from morality is ‘sounding brass’ good only for making a noise and breaking heads.”

172
Gandhi’s ethical religion pervades the entire gamut of man’s actions and all departments of human life. The individual should order his life in unquestioning obedience to certain fundamental moral principles. It constitutes the realm of individual morality. But man is usually described as a social animal and to be social is an innate and inborn tendency in man. These two aspects of man are like the two sides of the same coin. It is an undeniable fact that these two aspects though distinguishable are not really separable from each other. Perfection of individual is closely related with social perfection, where society must provide opportunities for the full development of his personality.

Gandhiji’s mission in the social realm consists in the construction of an ideal social order, which he calls Sarvodaya – an egalitarian society which aims at the good and welfare of all and not of a select few. The ideal social order envisaged by Gandhiji took concrete measures as a remedy for the ills of both individual and society which consist in the eradication of evil practices rampant in Indian social order. He wanted to construct an egalitarian society with equality prevailing in every sphere of life. To him none is law, and none high all are on equal footing. His ideals of spiritual unity, the equality of
mankind and the ideal of common good are the off-shoots of his firm religious faith and convictions.

In Gandhi’s system of thought man is one of supreme consideration. Man is at the root of all progress, civilization and culture. But this emphasis on man does not mean the neglect of society. It is the conscience or spirit which dictates what to do and what not to do. This amounts to saying that the inner core of reality of man is spirit. Man is essentially spiritual in nature. Morality both personal and collective has a bearing on this spiritual nature of man. Before doing any thing we must think of the larger whole, the society to which we belong. Hence whether an individual is good or bad is not merely his own concern but, really the concern of the community, nay of the whole world.

In the ideal social order envisaged by Gandhiji all are knit together in the Silken net of Love. Love signifies universal love, which is non-violence. Sarvodaya which epitomizes the whole of his social philosophy aims at the prevalence of equality in all spheres of life. But the individual must out of his own free will should submit himself to social restraint for the benefit of himself as well as society. Further the Sarvodaya
ideal is out and out spiritual. Hence the means used for its establishment must also be spiritual, for according to Gandhi, means must be in exact proportion to that of the end. Happiness in the Sarvodaya society is more moral and spiritual than material.

The concept of decentralisation has political overtones as well. It was Gandhi’s firm conviction that human life being an undivided whole, no line can ever be drawn neither between its different compartments nor between ethics and politics. One’s every day life is never capable of being separated from one’s spiritual being. Both act and react up on one another. Politics as conceived by Gandhiji is closely connected with ethics and religion. Gandhiji’s very entry in to politics is to spiritualise it. It was Gandhiji’s firm religious faith and conviction that drew him into the field of politics. According to him every activity must be derived from religion and politics is no exception. Religion provides a moral basis to all human activities. A man of true religion identifies himself with the whole of mankind and this necessarily involves taking part in politics because no aspect of life is untouched by politics. This is the reason why Gandhiji said that, “those who
say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means.’”

He considered politics as an ‘unavoidable evil’. It is religion that compelled him to take part in politics. But he was a religious man first and a politician only afterwards unlike many other religious man. That is why Gandhiji insisted that the rule of all without rule of oneself is proved to be deceptive and fatal. Therefore Gandhiji insists that the state and its institutions must first of all be based on the twin pillars of Truth and Non-violence. His main aim in politics was to establish ‘a kingdom of righteousness’ on earth which he called ‘Ramarajya’ which stood for the sovereignty of the people based on pure moral authority. In both society and the state the moral will or authority of the individual must reign supreme. This ethical outlook is the backbone of the entire political philosophy and political techniques of Gandhiji.

Gandhiji was against the sovereignty of the state over the individuals. Individuals are responsible moral individuals. Morality necessitates freedom of the will. The compulsive nature of the authority of the state damages the moral nature of the individual. Hence he considered the state as a
‘necessary evil’. The state is vested with power and authority which necessarily involves violence and which is contrary to the very conception of a non-violent state. He has no objection against an organization which is voluntary and based on Truth and Non-violence. Gandhi’s main aim was to win Swaraj for the masses. The Swaraj of Gandhi’s dream was the poor man’s Swaraj. It makes no discrimination on the basis of caste, creed, colour and sex. For Gandhi, Hind Swaraj is the rule of all people, is the rule of justice. Swaraj is not rule by anyone in particular but equally by all. It is the government of the people, by the people and for the people. Its guiding principle is equality and justice.

Further, Gandhiji does not regard political power as an end in itself. It is only a means to an end to better the conditions of all people. Everyone becomes his own ruler without creating any problem for others. This is the state of enlightened anarchy. The non-violent state as conceived by Gandhiji is a democracy in which non-violence become a creed, an article of faith rather than a matter of mere polity. Democracy in Gandhian sense is both disciplined and enlightened. Perfect democracy is possible only by perfect non-violence, because no true democracy can prevail in an
atmosphere of violence. Gandhiji stood for the decentralisation of political power. This he believed was possible only by beginning from the bottom upwards.

Gandhi’s mission in the political sphere consisted in avoiding violence and to eliminate violence concentration of power must be avoided, through decentralisation of power from the state. But he had doubts regarding the realization of a fully non-violent state and government for obvious reasons. Firstly, it represents all the people. Hence Gandhiji thought about the possibility of a predominantly non-violent state which is essentially non-violent. Gandhiji maintained that such an end can be achieved only under decentralization. Centralization as a system is inconsistent with the non-violent structure of society. Gandhiji considered government, whatever its external form may be as merely an externalization of the moral level of the individual.

According to Gandhi, that government is the best which governs the largest number of happy virtuous individuals. He preferred democracy as the best form of government. But it should be both disciplined and enlightened. What is actually
needed for the effective functioning of non-violent democracy is not factual knowledge but right education.

Perfect democracy is possible only by perfect non-violence because no true democracy can prevail in an atmosphere of violence. Democracy and violence can ill go together. Gandhiji became highly critical of western democracy for it lacks the genuine spirit of democracy. Democracy in the west, Gandhiji said, is only ‘so called’. If India has to evolve the true type of democracy there should be no compromise with violence or untruth. Non-violent democracy has its basis in self-sufficient village Republics. In the true democracy of India the unit is the village. True democracy cannot be worked by twenty men sitting at the centre. On the contrary it has to be worked from below by the people of every village.

In Gandhi’s concept of village Swaraj every village must be free to manage its own affairs without external interference. Gandhiji held the view that the government of every village will be conducted by the Panchayat. The Panchayat of every village is a key unit for decentralisation of legislative, executive and judicial powers. It represents the
values of a true democracy wherein power and authority are shared and exercised by different functionaries. The individual in such a set up will have complete freedom and will be largely regulated by the spirit of non-violence, self-sacrifice and patriotism. Thus in the village republic as envisaged by Gandhiji there is perfect democracy based on individual freedom. The law of non-violence rules him and his government for the law governing is that ‘he will suffer death in the defense of his and his village’s honour’. In his scheme of village, Swaraj the individual is at the centre and the village, and the group of villages encompassing each other in concentric circles. In such an oceanic circle, Gandhiji believed that the individual will rise to the occasion and will be prepared to sacrifice everything for the cause of his village. Under such a decentralized structure governing rural India ‘the outermost circumference will not wield power to crush the inner circle but give strength to all within and derives its own from the centre. If there ever is to be a Republic of everything in India, then I claim verity for my picture in which the last is equal to the first, or in other words none is to be the first and none the last.’“

180
Gandhiji pleaded for decentralisation of political and economic power through the organization of village panchayats. He held the view that by serving the villages, Swaraj (self-rule) could be established. He categorically stated that we have to make a choice between India of the villages and India of the cities which are a creation of foreign domination. He was optimistic when he stated that, the dream of Panchayat Raj come into true, the humble and the lowest Indian could be equally the ruler of India with the tallest in the country. The polity of the Panchayat Raj is altogether different from the polity of the mass scale. It is for this reason that Gandhiji could not accept the parliamentary democracy which he called “the tyranny of the majority”

Gandhiji was very particular of the inclusion of the topic of the village panchayat in the Constitution as they reflect the people’s voice. Gandhi wrote, “I must confess that I have not been able to follow the proceedings of the Constituent Assembly.... there is no mention or direction about village panchayats and decentralisation in the foreshadowed constitution. It is certainly an omission calling for immediate attention if our independence is to reflect the people’s voice.
The greater the power of the panchayats, the better for the people.”

The village panchayat the basic unit of administration provides scope for direct popular participation. It gives relief to the undeveloped sections of the community. The village panchayat functions along democratic lines. Gandhiji envisaged a three tier system of rural and local self government namely-the village, the block, the district level panchayats so as to ensure the participation of the adult female and male members of the village. Gandhiji insisted that the democratic structure of the local institutions should be decentralized to the grass root level so that the lowest and the last is empowered by participating in the decision making process.

Gandhi’s dream of establishing an ideal non-violent Sarvodaya socio-political and economic order assures the participation of the masses in the discussion of their own affairs through the three levels of Panchayat Raj system. He visualized an ideal social order with a view to reconstruct society along the democratic ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity. It is essentially an egalitarian society which has its
own political and economic order. The economic order envisaged by Gandhiji stood for a moralized and humanized decentralized economic structure with the village as its nucleus. Although he has not written any elaborate treatise on economics, his economic theory was essentially normative with a warm human touch. In this economic structure, he preferred production by the masses rather than mass production.

The success of political decentralisation in turn depends on economic decentralisation. Decentralisation in the economic sphere implies the fundamental principle of self-sufficiency. It is not absolute self-sufficiency but confined to the basic needs of the people such as food, clothing and shelter. What he wanted was that people should be independent as regards the satisfaction of the elementary needs. He dreamt of a society free from exploitation of the weaker sections of the society and also his advocacy of charka and village industries demonstrate his living faith in decentralization of economic power. The popularization of Khadi movement and village industries meant decentralization of both production and distribution of the necessities of life for economic decentralization is primarily designed to promote
the interest of the lowliest of the low and the helpless. Khadi symbolizes the unity of Indian community which provides economic freedom and equality. The basic theme of his philosophy of decentralization is oriented towards full employment of human resources of a society and also to provide adequate opportunity for manual labour.

Gandhiji became a trenchant critique of the modern western civilization on the ground that it is unsuited to the Indian soil. He was suspicious of its charm and beauty along with material prosperity totally neglecting the essential nature of man namely the spirit. The modern industrial societies are largely centralized systems and people are dependent for their livelihood upon capitalistic classes. There existed a wide gulf between ‘capital’ and ‘labour’. But Gandhiji wanted to transform the lives of the downtrodden masses through economic decentralization. He strongly opposed the process of mechanization of industry on the ground that the poor will be devoid of labour. What he wanted was villages to be production centres and the cities and towns have to act as clearing houses for such product. Gandhiji preferred non-violent economy in which the dignity of man and his labour will be given the highest consideration. Gandhiji was eager to
advocate the philosophy of bread labour based on simple life, dignity of labour and trusteeship which provide a means of transforming the present consumerist society into an egalitarian one. The rich must be the trustees of the poor and their excess wealth has to be laid in trust for the benefit of the society. He recognized private ownership of property so far as it contributes to the welfare of society. Gandhiji considers that country as the richest which nourishes the greatest number of noble and happy human beings. The end to be achieved is human happiness along with full mental and moral growth.

The structure of the Sarvodaya society is not like a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom but it is more like an oceanic circle whose centre will be the individual always ready to perish for the village. Further Sarvodaya society is not a state in the modern sense of the term. It is a state in which national life becomes so self-regulated that there will be no need for any centralized political power to regulate it. Such a state is a state of enlightened anarchy. Gandhiji believes that the coercive power of the state, which is nothing but violence in a concentrated form, destroys man’s individuality. Sarvodaya is true democracy according to Gandhiji. In true democracy we would regard the humblest
and the lowest Indian as being equally the ruler of India with the tallest in the land. Everybody would know how to earn an honest living and make no distinction between intellectual and physical labour. Everybody would observe Swadeshi as the rule of life and regard every woman, not being his wife, as his mother, sister or daughter according to her age, never lust after her in his heart.

To Gandhiji political freedom was not an end in itself but a means to better the conditions of people in every field of life. He has dedicated his life for the attainment of Swaraj for the masses. Swaraj of his dream meant poor man’s Swaraj. He has dreamt of little village republics with village panchayats as the basic unit of administration. The Indian political institution that Gandhiji visualized came to be known as panchayat Raj - grass root democracy - democratic decentralization - Grama Swaraj - village republic, with its base at the village level. Panchayat Raj is the only way to real Swaraj. It represents the system by which the innumerable village republics of India were governed. The panchayat system acquired greater significance during the non-co-operation movement. It offered an alternative to the British system of judiciary aiming at the replacement of courts by the
The panchayat functions as arbitration courts to dispense speedy justice to the parties. The village panchayat has full functional and financial autonomy which in a way provide financial assistance to the undeveloped sections of the community. Its main focus is on agriculture and small scale industries with preference not to mass production but production by the masses.

Gandhiji wanted the panchayats to end exploitation and to carry on its functions on co-operative basis. The relation of village panchayats to higher level is not one of subordination. On the contrary, they wield power from the lower units. They have only to co-ordinate the activities of the village panchayats. The panchayat of his conception became an effective instrument for the diffusion and decentralization of power and authority. In this system there will be ample scope for individual autonomy, people’s participation and self-expression. On the contrary, centralization as a system is inconsistent with Gandhi’s dream of non-violent structure and functioning of the society and the state. The more the centralization the less will be people’s participation and the less of democracy and violence and exploitation of the poor will be in the increase. Gandhiji visualized an egalitarian socio-
political and economic order with individual at its centre. Further he affirms that without decentralization it is impossible to ensure individual freedom and the moral well being of man. It is equally essential for the realization of the democratic ideals and also for people’s participation in the decision making process and its implementation. Decentralization does not merely mean devolution of power alone. But it is a system or process by which duties and responsibilities have been transferred from a centre authority to the institutions at the lower level. Panchayat Raj, Gandhiji visualized will give power to the powerless irrespective of caste, sex, creed and religion and in which, “the humblest and the lowest Indian could be equally the ruler of India with the tallest in the country”. Villagism and village republicanism were significant milestones in the onward march towards the realization of democratic decentralization.
2 Harijan, 03-10-1936, p.268.
3 A Passage from Gandhi’s Autobiography, p.383.
4 Mahatma Gandhi, Panchayat Raj, 1959, pp. 8-10.
6 Harijan, 25-12-1947, p. 473.