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

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CHAPTER - THREE

POLITICAL DECENTRALISATION
Gandhiji’s political philosophy and political techniques were the outcome of his life long Experiments with Truth. His main aim was to invite a revolution by extending religion and ethics in to the field of politics. He was not a theoriser in the field of politics. He endorsed the view that ‘theory is all gray - ever green is life’. In his scheme of things, theory was subordinate to that of life which is an organic unity. Life is understood as an organic whole, and that the different departments of life act and react upon one another and influence one another.

Gandhiji took a religious and moral approach to politics. There is no distinct department called ‘political’ in Gandhiji’s scheme. It is only a phase and an aspect of life. The ‘political’ has to be viewed in the context of life itself. The purified will is the source of all kinds of action - social, political and moral. The synthesis of the political and the moral is seen at work in his analysis of the dominant concepts of political theory. There is no watertight compartmentalization between the secular and the sacred. Gandhiji’s ‘Ethical Religion’ stands outside the domain of both supernaturalism and theocracy. He was of the view that the spirit of Ethical Religion should pervade politics through and through. It was Gandhiji’s living and unshakable
faith in God in the form of Truth that drew him in to the field of politics. According to Gandhiji a man of true religion identifies himself completely with the whole of mankind and this necessarily involves taking part in politics because no fact of life remains untouched by politics. Gandhiji’s very conception of religion as belief in the ordered moral government of the universe largely depends on human activity. For him there is no religion higher than ‘Truth and Righteousness’.

Gandhiji has invited a revolution in the field of politics. Unlike the political theories of the modern times which deals with the pursuit and capture of power, Gandhiji moralized and humanized politics. According to Gandhiji politics should be founded on ‘principles’ and he challenged the substantial presupposition of political theory. Gandhiji said, “If I seen to take part in politics it is only because politics encircles us today like the coils of a snake from which one cannot get out no matter how much one tries. I wish, therefore to wrestle with the snake as I have been doing with more or less success.”\(^1\) So it is religion that compelled him to enter into the field of politics. Gandhiji was basically a religious man and even his love for his own nation counts only secondarily. He turned to the field of politics because he was religious unlike many
other religious men. He wrote, “Most religious men I have met are politician in disguise. I however who wear the guise of a politician, am at heart a religious man”.\(^2\)

Politics meant the rule of all. Rule of all without rule of oneself is proved to be deceptive and fatal. Ethical Religion provides the solid foundation for Gandhiji’s political technique and action. Political power is not an end in itself but one of the means for the realisation of the greatest good of all for which Sarvodaya stands for. Sarvodaya is understood in the sense of an egalitarian socio-political economic order with the individual as its centre. Hence Gandhiji’s main objective was to win Swaraj for India. Swaraj meant self-rule. To Gandhi Swaraj signifies ‘poorna’ or ‘complete independence’. Swaraj stands for the poor man’s swaraj. In such a state sovereignty vests in the people. He becomes his own ruler and he ruled in such a way he is never a hindrance to others. He respects the like freedom of others. It provides opportunity for individual growth and developments. Gandhiji’s concept of Ramarajya stood for the sovereignty of the people based on pure moral authority. The moral authority of the individual must reign supreme. This ethical outlook is the back born of the political philosophy of Gandhiji. The individual is essentially spiritual
and moral. The individual should be self-disciplined, truthful, non-violent and pure hearted. They must be self ruling individuals who need no external agency howsoever powerful they may be either in the form of a state or a government to rule over them. So in Gandhiji’s dream of independent India, if the people are competent there is no need of the state.

Political freedom, according to Gandhiji is only a part of the longer connotation of freedom. The outward freedom will be in exact proportion to the inward freedom. Political freedom did not mean isolated independence. Gandhiji said, “I do not want India to rise on the ruins of other nations ...... I want the freedom of my country. But not at the expense or exploitation of others.”

3.1 DECENTRALISATION VERSUS CENTRALISATION

Gandhiji’s concept of decentralization is not an isolated concept but largely shaped by his general philosophy of life. Gandhiji’s insistence on faith in good coupled with the law of non-violence provides the key to understand the concept of decentralization. The concept of decentralization has both political and economic overtones. Further his insistence on the moralization of every aspect of human life, insistence on
freedom and equality, opposition to state authority over the individual, Swaraj, Trusteeship, critique of industrialization and technology, Swadeshi and Khadi largely reflect the central idea of decentralization. Gandhiji advocated decentralization of political power rather than its centralization. Gandhiji viewed centralization with the greatest fear that though it does well to the people it largely damages the moral will of the individual. Hence he longed for decentralization in which power and authority will be shared among the people. The individual is the custodian of power and hence Swaraj is the best rule.

Centralization of power leads to violence. Gandhiji a humble seeker after truth was against all forms of violence. The more the centralization the more the violence. In Gandhiji’s view centralization perpetrates exploitation of the individual materially and intellectually and exploitation is treated by Gandhiji as part and parcel of violence. Decentralization and violence seldom go together. So they cannot be reconciled. He said that, “Ahimsa comes before Swaraj... Ahimsa must be placed before everything else while it is professed.” 

Ahimsa means not only the avoidance of physical injury or killing any life out of anger but it means
avoidance of injury to anything in thought, word and deed. Hence Gandhiji the foremost champion of Ahimsa could not admit the centralization of political power.

The positive aspect of non-violence is the largest love and the greatest charity. Perfect democracy is possible only when there is perfect non-violence. Individual freedom can have the fullest play only under a regime of unadulterated ahimsa. Centralization of power and authority in any form is a hindrance to the moral development of the individual, as morality necessitates the freedom of the will of the individual. In true test of democracy, it attempts to replace force and violence by social will. In order to facilitate the full growth and progress of the individual a democratic society must have its basis in rational understanding, mutual co-operation and concern for the well-being of all. For this Gandhiji advocated decentralized type of democracy followed by the self-governing and self-sufficient village republics.

According to Gandhiji, “Swaraj of a people means the sum total of swaraj of individuals. Swaraj will come not by the acquisition of the authority by a few, but by the acquisition of the capacity by all to resist authority when it is abused”\(^5\)
Gandhiji stood for decentralization of political power for obvious reasons. Violence too must be avoided for which concentration of power must be avoided through decentralization. Therefore to avoid violence; Gandhiji recommended decentralization which is founded on non-violence. Gandhiji suggested that, “If India is to evolve along non-violent lines it will have to decentralize many things. Centralization cannot be sustained and defended without adequate force.”

Centralization of power naturally leads to exploitation. Always the poor are the exploited. Further centralization leads to the misuse of power and hence it could not be maintained without adequate force. Gandhiji recommended decentralization as a necessary political measure to safeguard individual initiative and freedom. Regulation imposed by people upon themselves is non-violence to the extent that it is possible in society. A society organized on the basis of complete non-violence would be the purest anarchy. That state is perfect and non-violent where the people are governed in the minimal level by an external agency in the form of state or government. The nearest approach to purest anarchy would be a democracy based on non-violence.
3.2 NON-VIOLENT DEMOCRACY

Gandhiji regarded the people as the custodian of political power. Unlike other forms of government which promote the interest of a select few, democracy aims at the promotion of the interest of the majority. Democracy is that form of government in which people are in power. Gandhiji wrote, “In democracy the people’s will must rule.” In other words power resides in the people. Even the parliament has no power or even existence independently of the people. Popular sovereignty based on pure moral authority is vested with the people. In the words of Gandhiji, “A democracy must in essence ....... mean the art and science of mobilizing the entire physical, economic and spiritual resources of all the various sections of the people in the service of the common good of all.” A true democrat has to be a born disciplinarian. He has to yield willing obedience to all laws whether human or divine. He has to be selfless. Political power is completely decentralized. Democracy must work at the grass root level and has to be guided by the Sarvodaya Ideal, a system in which the weakest should have the same opportunities as the strongest.
Gandhiji followed both the negative and the positive approaches in explaining the concept of democracy. In the negative approach, Gandhiji has stated what democracy is not? Democracy is not dictatorship. Democracy is not a state in which the people act like a sheep. Under democracy individual liberty of opinion and action is guarded. Democracy is not mobocracy. Democracy is an impossible thing until the power is shared by all. But democracy should not generate into mobocracy. Democracy is neither slavery nor mastery over others. In the positive approach Gandhiji has stated what democracy is. In his notion of democracy ‘the weakest should have the same opportunity as the strongest’. This can never happen except through non-violence. The necessaries of life should be shared and enjoyed by everyone. In true democracy every man and woman is taught to think for himself or herself. In democracy the individual will is governed and limited by the social will namely the state which is governed by and for democracy. True democracy is essentially non-violent and decentralized. Decentralization of political power represents true democracy based on individual freedom. The science of non-violence alone can lead to pure democracy. Democracy and violence can ill go together. Gandhiji stated that, “The
states that are today nominally democratic have either to become frankly totalitarian, or of they are to become truly democratic, they must become courageously non-violent.”

The recognition of non-violence on a national scale ensures true democratic government. For non-violence as the law of our life includes individual, social, political, national and international spheres. The spirit of democracy cannot be imposed from without. It has to come from within. Gandhiji said, “A democracy established by non-violence, there will be equal freedom for all. Everybody will be his own master.”

Non-violence, Gandhiji considered as the means, the end is complete independence. Gandhiji wrote, “If one takes care of the means, the end will take care of itself. Non-violence is the means; the end for every one is complete independence. There will be an international league only when all the nations, big or small, composing it are fully independent. The nature of that independence will correspond to the extent of non-violence assimilated by the nations concerned. One thing is certain that in a society based on non-violence, the smallest nation will feel as tall as the tallest. The idea of superiority and inferiority will be wholly obliterated... The conclusion is irresistible that for one like me, wedded to non-violence,
constitutional or democratic government is a distant dream so long as non-violence is not recognized as a living force, an inviolable creed, not mere policy. While I prate about universal non-violence, my experiment is confined to India. If it succeeds, the world will accept it without afford. This is however a bit But. The pause does not worry me. My faith brightest in the midst of impenetrable darkness.”
3.3 SWARAJ, VILLAGE SWARAJ

The concept of ‘swaraj’ was developed by Gandhiji during the Indian freedom struggle. Gandhiji considered Swaraj as the best form of government. Swaraj meant ‘self-rule’ or ‘self-government’. It cannot be established merely by freeing India from British rule. Its establishment is possible only by ‘turning the search light inward’ so as to generate ‘soul force’ or ‘love’. Gandhiji said that, “swaraj for me means freedom for the meanest of our country men……. I am not interested in freeing India from any yoke whatsoever, I have no desire to exchange ‘King log for king stork’.”\textsuperscript{12} Real Swaraj comes only when the masses become conscious or their capacity to regulate authority when it goes astray. “It will come not by the acquisition of authority by a few but by the acquisition of the capacity by all to resist authority when it is abused. In other words, Swaraj is to be obtained by educating the masses to a sense of their capacity to regulate and control authority.”\textsuperscript{13}

Gandhiji’s aim was to win swaraj for the masses. So the swaraj of Gandhiji’s dream “is the poor man’s swaraj.”\textsuperscript{14} Gandhiji wrote, “It has been said that Indian swaraj will be the rule of the majority community, i.e., the Hindus. There could
not be a greater mistake than that. If it were to be true, I for one would refuse to call it Swaraj and would fight it with all the strength at my command, for to me Hind Swaraj is the rule of all people, is the rule of justice.’’ Generally, we used the term swaraj to describe political and economic independence. In this generic sense it denotes a people or a group being able to exercise all of the necessary function of power without intervention from any authority which they cannot themselves alter. Gandhiji wrote, “Swaraj means self-rule and self-restraint which ‘independence’ often means.”

Swaraj, thus, is not rule by any one in particular but equally by all. It is not the government of the omnipotent state but the government of the people, by the people and for the people. Its guiding principle is the principle of equity and justice. It is the rule of the individuals who give precedence for duties over rights and who have nothing but the welfare of the people at heart. “Swaraj of a people”, wrote Gandhiji “means the sum total of the Swaraj [self-rule] of individuals. And such swaraj comes only from performance by individuals of their duty as citizens. In it none thinks of his rights. They come when they are needed, for better performance of duty.’’
Swaraj, whether it is political or economic should be exercised and shared equally by all. It should never be a monopoly of anybody. Gandhiji wrote, “Swaraj of my-our-dream recognises no race or religious distinction. Not it is to be the monopoly of the lettered person or yet of moneyed men. Swaraj is to be for all, including the former, but emphatically including the maimed, the blind, the starving, toiling millions.”

Gandhiji stood for the swaraj of the toiling millions who find it difficult to get one square meal a day. Real swaraj must be felt by all-man, woman and child. Until and unless all the ordinary amenities of life that a rich man enjoys are guaranteed to the last man, surely there is no poorna swaraj in its actual sense. Gandhiji used the prefix ‘Poorna’ meaning complete, before the term swaraj because it denotes as much for prince as for the peasant, as much for the rich landowner as for the landless tiller of the soil.

By Swaraj Gandhiji never meant majority rule. Swaraj for Gandhiji is rule of all people. It is the rule of justice. Self-discipline or rule over self - is the first condition of self-rule or swaraj. Swaraj can be won only by one’s own efforts. What others get for me is not home rule but foreign rule. Self-rule even if it leads to anarchy is better than foreign rule. “Anarchy
under Home-Rule were better than orderly foreign rule.” In the following passage Gandhiji gives the nature and characteristics of real home-rule: “(i) Real Home-Rule is self-rule or self-control. (ii) The way to it is passive resistance: that is soul-force or love-force. (iii) To exert this force, swadeshi in every sense is necessary. (iv) What we want to do should be done, because it is our duty to do so.” Then will be it becomes poorna swaraj. By poorna swaraj Gandhiji meant “an awakening among the masses, a knowledge among them of their true interest and ability to serve that interest against the whole world,” Through poorna swaraj Gandhiji wished to establish harmony, freedom from aggression from within or without, and a progressive improvement in the economic condition of the masses.

Freedom of expression is, according to Gandhiji, one of the fact of life and, therefore of swaraj as well. Gandhiji wrote, “freedom of speech and expression is the foundation of swaraj. If the foundation stone is in danger, you have to exert the whole of your might in order to defend that single stone.” This understanding made Gandhiji to work for freeing India from foreign rule. It was his conviction that freedom and liberty alone pave the way for progress. Self-rule will alone
bring the freedom. The only training in swaraj we need is the
ability to defend ourselves against the whole world and to live
our natural life in perfect freedom. Good government is no
substitute for self government. Swaraj as conceived by
Gandhiji can be maintained only if the nation has a large
number of selfless workers who are ready to sacrifice even
their lives for the cause of the poor ad the down-trodden.
“Progress towards swaraj will be exact proportion to the
increase in the number of workers who will dare to sacrifice
their all for the cause of the poor.”23 To Gandhiji political
power is only a means for enabling people to better their
condition in every sphere of human life. Gandhiji wrote,”
Swaraj can never be a free gift by one nation to another. It is a
treasure to be purchased with a nation’s best blood. It will
cease to be a gift when we have paid dearly for it... Swaraj will
be a fruit of incessant labour, suffering beyond measure.”24

Swaraj is essentially non-violent in nature. Here a
question may arise: in a non-violent society is there any need
for a government? Gandhiji’s reply would be there is need for
some form of government but its nature has yet to be
specified because it is still in the making. “I have purposely
refrained from dealing with the nature of government in a
society based on non-violence.... when society is deliberately constructed in accordance with the law of non-violence, its structure will be different in material particulars from what it is today. But I cannot say in advance what the government based wholly on non-violence will be like.”

Gandhiji wrote, if we wish to achieve swaraj through truth and non-violence the only way is to build-up from the bottom upwards by constructive efforts. These rules out the deliberate creation of an anarchical state. Thus for Gandhiji, Swaraj meant, “the government of India by the consent of the people as ascertained by the largest number of adult population, male or female, native born or domiciled, who have contributed by manual labour in the service of the state and who have taken the trouble of having their names registered as voters.....real swaraj will come not by the acquisition of authority by a few, but by the acquisition of the capacity by all to resist authority when it is abused. In other words, swaraj is to be attained by educating the masses to sense of their capacity to regulate and control authority.”

Thus for Gandhiji real Swaraj meant decentralization.
In Gandhiji’s picture of independent India, the unit is the village community. Every village has to become a self-sufficient republic or panchayat. In essence, the panchayat of every village is a key unit for decentralization of executive, legislative and judicial powers. Village swaraj, thus represent true democracy wherein power and authority are exercised by different functionaries. Non-violent democratic state of Gandhiji’s conception will be a federation of more or less self-suffering and self-governing village communities who always abide by the ideal of truth and non-violence. To establish swaraj, according to Gandhiji we want to save our villages. Thus every village will be a republic or panchayat having full powers and should become the unit of administration. And thereby the last man will become the unit in decision making process. “The law governing every village is that he will suffer death in the defence of his and his villager’s honour.”

In his scheme of village swaraj the individual is at the centre, then the village and finally the group of villages. It is not like a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom but an oceanic circle, whose centre will be the individual who is prepared to sacrifice everything for the cause of his village. Gandhiji always remembered us that India lives not in her few
cities but in her innumerable villages. Therefore if India has to attain true freedom, it should give due consideration to villages in which her soul lives. Gandhiji’s idea of village swaraj was that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbors for its own vital wants and yet inter-dependent for many others in which dependants is a necessity. Thus Gandhiji pleaded for village swaraj as a necessary pre-condition for actualizing Moral kingdom on earth.

Decentralization for Gandhiji is true democracy. He, therefore, observed: “True democracy cannot be worked by twenty men sitting at the centre. It has to be worked from below by the people of every village.’’ \(^{28}\) Gandhiji’s concept of decentralization starts from the bottom where people are independent in making their policies and in deciding and implementing them without any rigid and strict control of the higher authorities and their frequent interference in day to day working.

3.4 PANCHAYAT RAJ

Gandhiji’s charismatic leadership coupled with the mantra ‘Do or Die’, India had won her political freedom. But to Gandhiji political freedom was not an end in itself but a means
to better the conditions of the people in every field of life. He had a dream of a new independent India. He had dedicated his life for the attainment of Swaraj for the masses. With this end in view, he had launched programmes to reconstruct India radically by utilizing all the resources locally available and in harmony with our own culture and civilization. He had dreamt of little village Republics with village Pachayats as the basic unit of administration.

Gandhiji was of the view that every village should enjoy maximum freedom to manage its own affairs even to the extent of defending itself against external invasion and to attain social and economic self-reliance. All that he said and did reflected the Indian framework of thought. The Indian political institution that Gandhiji visualized came to be known as Pachayat Raj, with its base at the village level. Panchayat is the only way to real village swaraj. Gandhiji wrote, “independence must begin at the bottom. Thus, every village will be a republic or panchayat having full powers. It follows therefore, that every village has to be self-sustained and capable of managing its affairs even to the extent of defending itself against the whole world. It will be trained and prepared to perish in the attempt to defend itself against any
onslaught from without. Thus ultimately, it is the individual who is the unit. This does not exclude dependence on and willing help from neighbours or from the world. It will be free and voluntary play of mutual forces. Such a society is necessarily highly cultured which every man and woman knows that he or she wants and, what is more, knows that no one should want anything that other cannot have with equal labour.”

Panchayat have been in existence in India since times immemorial. Rural progress depends entirely on the existence of an active organization as the village which can bring all people including the weaker sections into the main stream of social action. Gandhiji wrote, “Panchayat has an ancient flavours; it is a good word. It literally means an assembly of the five elected by villagers. It represents the system, by which the innumerable village republics of India were governed.” Therefore Panchayat Raj means a system of governance by the elected five. It is the Indian political institution with its base at the village level consisting of five members with the functional ability of legislature, executive and judiciary. The basic deficiency in the planned development process is the lack of people’s participation at
the grass root level. Gandhiji’s view of Panchayat Raj is based on the principle of democratic decentralization. He wanted to re-orient village life through the institution of panchayat. Villages are the backbone of our nation. Villages of India, according to him, ‘are the real India’. According to Gandhiji, real significance of swaraj was the opportunity to shape India’s rural development in accordance with our own tradition. Gandhiji took a keen interest in the development of the rural society.

He contributed a great deal in raising the panchayats to their rightful place in a democratic set-up. To Gandhiji, decentralization is the basic requirement for the success of democracy. He has made panchayats as a part of his scheme for the reconstruction of the society and through its establishment; values of true democracy would be attained. It is the only way to realize the value of democracy from the grass root level as it will provide room for the people to participate and in implementing decisions without a central higher authority. Moreover, it is the only alternative to reduce the interference of the state in day-to-day affairs of the people.
Gandhiji made first reference to panchayats in 1916 by appreciating the working of the ‘Indian Panchayat System’. In his presidential address at Belgam Congress, Gandhiji referred to the panchayat system as the right medium for securing justice as well as for avoiding reliance on the government for the settlement of mutual disputes. At the Round Table Conference in 1931, he recommended the panchayat system as the basis of true representative government. Further in 1943, in reply to the pamphlet published by the government of India, he replied, “no congress man would care to deny the statement though it must be added that the roots were to be founded in the old panchayat system.”  

Similarly, in 1947, he pointed out, “when panchayat raj is established, public opinion will do what violence never does…. In Panchayat Raj only the Panchayat will be obeyed and the panchayat can only work through the law of their making.”  

Gandhiji wrote in 1948, “in the true democracy of India the unit was the village. Even if one village wanted Panchayat Raj which was called republic in English, no one could stop it. True democracy could not be worked by twenty men sitting at the centre. It had to be worked from below by the people of every village.”  

In fact
Gandhiji repeatedly emphasized panchayat raj till the last moment of his life.

Gandhiji was very much particular of the inclusion of village panchayat in the constitution for it represent the people’s voice. Gandhiji said, “I must confess that I have not been able to follow the proceedings of the constituent assembly…… (The correspondent) says that there is no mention or direction about village panchayat and decentralization 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 panchayat the better for the people.”

Considering the relevance of the topic Article 31A has been included in the constitution. That after Article 31, the following new Article be added (31A). According to which “the state shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority has may be necessary to enable them to function as self-government.” Later on Article 40 was included in part IV (Directive Principles of State Policy) of the constitution to provide place for panchayats.
The concept of democratic decentralization received new dimension with the 73rd and 74th amendments to the constitution. The new legislation had given ample scope for the realization of democratic decentralization. It provided a ‘concrete form’ and ‘unified structure’ for the realization of the local self-government. Based on this new legislation at the centre the government of Kerala has also given shape to a legislation called Kerala Panchayat Raj Act, 1994. The Kerala Panchayat Raj Act, 1994 chapter 19 provides a detailed account of the distribution of financial resources and income of the panchayat. It also suggests to constitute state - district planning bodies along with the lines of democratic decentralization.

The village panchayat is the basic unit of administration with full functional and financial autonomy. It gives financial assistance to the undeveloped sections of the community. Its main focus is on agriculture and small scale industries. Preference is given not to mass production but production by the masses. Initially as a part of democratizing this institution three tier system of rural and local government has been suggested namely, panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishat. But Gandhiji pleaded for the decentralization of the
democratic structure so as to make available its services even unto the last. He suggested a three tier system of administration namely, village - block - district panchayats. Grama Sabhas consisting of adult citizens of the village were constituted to review the work done by the village panchayats periodically. The Grama Sabhas were also entrusted with the work of representing the aspirations of the villagers through Village Panchayats.

The next tier of administration is the block level panchayat. The Block Panchayat Samiti consists of the presidents of village panchayats and elected members by providing proportionate representation in the Samiti with the objective of providing representation of all sections of community within its jurisdiction. The third level is District Panchayat consisting of the representatives of Block Panchayat Samitis, MPs and MLAs, representatives of co-operative organizations and special organizations.

The main objective behind Panchayat Raj system is to set up institutions at the village, block and district levels to ensure representation without any consideration political or otherwise i.e., election should be free and fair without the
interference of any political party. Gandhiji’s concept of Panchayat Raj can properly work if only his other concepts like Swadeshi, Swaraj, Non-violence, and Decentralization were implemented in toto. Gandhian objectives, programmes and principles are integrally related to each other. Gandhiji was not a hard core theorist. We find in him a blend of theory and practice. It is not enough if we understand theory alone. It is equally important to understand his practice in the light of the theory. Hence our first and foremost duty is to understand, interpret and classify the concept in order to practice it correctly. ‘Without true understanding of the ideal, we can never hope to reach it.’

Panchayat system envisaged decentralization in politics and in economics. But both are inseparable bound up with each other. He conceived each village as little Republic, sufficient with wants and organically linked with the higher bodies and enjoying the maximum freedom in deciding and implementing the decisions relating to the affairs of the locality. In the final stage, the purpose was to achieve Rama Rajya through the decentralization of power, the coercive state authority to be transformed into pure democracy. It is a medium of people’s participation and symbolizes the power of
the people. This is swaraj and it signifies poor man’s swaraj – swaraj of the masses. By swaraj, Gandhiji meant “government by the consent of largest number of voters.”

Gandhiji has devoted himself completely to rural reconstruction and to uplift the standards of rural life through the direct and active participation of the people themselves.

The concept of Panchayat Raj was evolved along the Gandhian principles of Gramaswaraj. In this scheme, the village was made the centre for development activities. Gandhiji stated that “My idea of village swaraj is that it is complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its vital wants, and yet inter-dependant for many others in which dependence is a necessity. Thus the villages’ first concern will be to grow its own food crops and cotton for its cloth. It should have a reserve for its cattle, recreation and play ground for adults and children. And if there is more land available, it will grow useful money crops, thus excluding ganja, tobacco, opium and the like. The village will maintain a village theatre, school and public hall. It will have its own water works ensuring a clean water supply. This can be done through controlled wells or tanks. Education will be compulsory up to the final basic course. As far as possible, every activity will be
conducted on co-operative basis. There will be no caste, such as we have today with their graded untouchability. Non-violence with its technique of Sathyagraha and non-cooperation will be the sanction of the village community. There will be a compulsory service of village guards who will be selected by rotation from the register maintained by the village. The government of the village will be conducted by the Panchayat of five persons annually elected by the adult villagers, male and female, possessing minimum prescribed qualifications. They will have all the authority and jurisdiction required. Since there will be no system of punishment in the accepted sense, this Panchayat will be the legislature, judiciary and executive combined to operate for its year of office. Any village can become such a republic without much interference, even from the present government whose sole effective connection with the villages is the exaction of village revenue. I have not examined here the question of relations with the neighbouring villages of the centre, if any. My purpose is to present an outline of village government. Here there is perfect democracy based upon individual freedom. The individual is the architect of his own government. The law of non-violence rules him and the government. He and his
village are able to defy the might of a world. For the law
governing every villager is that he will suffer death in the
defence of his and of his and his village’s honour.”

Thus, Gandhiji worked out meticulously for the details of
a wide variety of practical things which are vital to build a
graceful village life. His conception of the village was not
anchored on the modern notion of development but on the
post-modern perspective of quality of life. His main emphasis
was on the quality of life.
1. Young India, 12.05.1920, p. 2.
5. Young India, 29.01.1925, p. 41.
8. Ibid, 27.05.1939, p. 143.
12. Young India, 12.06.1924, p. 195.
14. Young India, 26.03.1931, p. 46.
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