

GANDHI AND THE ETHICS OF DEMOCARCY

Abstract

This paper attempts to talk about the nature of democracy as envisaged by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. The main aim is to understand the true essence of Gandhian democracy and how different it was the prevailing western conception of democracy. In Gandhi, we can find a very unique definition of democracy and this analysis can be useful in the contemporary context. Moving away from the institutional basis of democracy, in Gandhi we find an idea wherein the individual is of prime importance.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi has today become an iconic figure, a symbol of many things for many people. He is seen variously as the great opponent of European colonialism, as a champion of civil rights for racial, religious and other minorities, an important critique of the modern civilization and the industrial system of production, a great pacifist and as a person who stood against the injustices in a non-violent way and articulated the ideas of *swaraj* and *satyagraha*. In the core of Gandhian thought also lies his views on democracy and the kind of democratic polity that he envisaged for free India. For Gandhi, promoting the idea of democracy was essential for a non-violent, free society which was essentially premised on a dialogic conception seeking to promote tolerance and growth.

While the idea of democracy was quintessential for attainment of *swaraj*, yet at the outset it is important to highlight that conceptualization of democracy in the thoughts of Gandhi was paradigmatically different from the conventional liberal understanding of democracy. Gandhi had a complicated view of democracy and was sceptical of the modern state and its allied institutions. Minimally if democracy is understood as a set of institutions that feature regular elections, broad representation and a range of individual rights to lay emphasis on the idea that individuals are free and equal and the ultimate source of political authority then it has to be concluded that Gandhi was substantially unimpressed by democracy though not completely opposed to it.¹ In his major writings, Gandhi is seen as highly critical of the idea of elections, representation and individual rights. His suspicion towards the modern institution of democracy is clearly evident in *Hind Swaraj*, wherein he famously characterized the British parliament as a, “sterile woman and prostitute” and also explicitly articulated, “I pray that India never be in that plight.”²

Gandhi never sought to work out a grand political theory or an ideological system, rather he worked out his theory – as a form of praxis, and understood that it had to evolve constantly in relation to his and other people’s experiences. The method that Gandhi perennially insisted

1. Mehta, Uday. *Gandhi on democracy, politics and the ethics of everyday life*. 2010. *Modern Intellectual History* 355-371., p. 355

²Parel, Anthony J, and (ed). 2011. *'Hind Swaraj' and Other Writings*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press., p. 10

was essentially dialogic in nature- wherein it implied an openness between moral equals and one in which knowledge is seen to arise from discussion. The manner in which Gandhi lived out his life among the masses and the manner in which he dressed was a clear reflection of his espousal of the democratic belief that he firmly believed in. In a similar vein, Gandhi's endorsement of democracy was very much in a lower key which was nestled in the everyday and commonplace practices of social life. Yet at the same time, the ideas of self-rule, transparency, accountability and inclusiveness which are associated with the basic ethos of democracy are fundamental to Gandhi's thought, life and practice. He did more than any other single individual during the struggle against colonialism to bring the common man, oppressed and the woman into the forms of public life on terms that were free from the dominance of hierarchy and authority. It can be rightly attributed to Gandhi that it was due to his influence and calibre that the struggle against colonial rule was democratic and inclusive.

For Gandhi, democracy was not merely procedural but also substantive. The real purpose of democracy, he argued, 'is that under it the weakest should have the same opportunity as the strongest. This can never happen except through non-violence.'³ Within a democratic set up not all conflicts would disappear, but the role of political leadership according to Gandhi should be to maximize the ethos of democracy by promoting the ideas of non-violence and conciliation. The principle of non-violence would be the foundational ethos in Gandhi's democracy. He hoped to devise a system of government which secured freedom and individual integrity and which also promoted non-violence. For Gandhi, any government that relied on violence was bound to lose its legitimacy whether it was democratic, or any other form of regime. According to him, violence is antithetical to democracy, because a social system based on the former cannot provide protection for the weak, while democracy requires that, 'under it the weakest should have the same opportunity as the strongest.'⁴ In essence, therefore a truly democratic and non-violent social order will be difficult to be realized as long as the wide gulf between the rich and the hungry millions persist.⁵ While talking about the exploitative aspects of Western democracy, Gandhi in an interview with an American journalist at Sevagram in April 1940, said that:

My notion of democracy is that under it the weakest should have the same opportunity as the strongest. That can never happen except through non-violence. No country in the world today shows any but patronizing regard for the weak. . . Western democracy as it functions today is diluted Nazism or Fascism. At best it is merely a cloak to hide the Nazi and Fascist tendencies of imperialism.⁶

Majority rule based on the Western model was unsuitable for the Indian context as it ignored and silenced the great mass of people. Decision making within any democratic set up for Gandhi was to be premised on the idea of diffusion of power thus focusing on the idea of a decentralized polity. Gandhi departed from the dominant model of democracy which emphasized on competitive elections and interest group pluralism since he was always in

³M.K. Gandhi., ed. 1948. *Non-Violence in Peace and War, Vol. 1*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan, p. 269

⁴M.K.Gandhi. 1961. *Democracy: Real and Deceptive*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan., p. 68.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid, p. 78.

favour of a small setting with a relatively simple economy, while the pluralists have been concerned with the problems of representation in large, highly diversified societies. Gandhi found the pluralist conception of democracy especially problematic since each individual is concerned in defending his own interests, and little attention is paid to how this affects the rest of the society. He sought to redefine political life in ways that emphasize the community rather than individual interests. Therefore it does not come as a surprise that Gandhi placed his ideal democracy in the village where life was simpler, power diffused and the economy decentralized.

The individual in Gandhi's understanding of democracy was of prime importance. He shared the liberal concern for individual freedom and his social theory was premised on the fact of the democratization of the social structure. But he found the liberal-democratic method of securing social order through the amoral, objectified state to be at the expense of the political freedom of the individual. Gandhi argued that the modern liberal democratic framework led to a vast emancipatory achievement for mankind by recognising the ideas of freedom of judgement, choice and contract. Yet at the same time there is a dichotomy in the liberal democratic framework as the political sphere is reified and transformed into the representative state, which then becomes the bearer of the alienated political rights of the citizens. Gandhi was sceptical of the modern democratic framework, because unlike integral or participatory democracy, the frame of liberal democracy only gave the people an opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them. Thus for Gandhi there was a fundamental contradiction in the guarantee of freedom to the individuals as conceptualized within the liberal democracy and it was this very malaise that Gandhi sought to address through his alternate vision of participatory democracy.

Gandhi, as we saw attacked the modern state for its fascist tendencies and he firmly believed that there was an imperative for the redefinition of the modern state for the redemption of the individual freedom. The modern state posed a greater harm to mankind by destroying individuality which lies at the root of all progress. According to Gandhi:

The state represents violence in a concentrated and organized form. The individual has a soul, but as the state is a soulless machine, it can never be weaned from violence to which it owes its very existence.⁷

Gandhi, therefore sought to remedy the liberal democratic understanding of freedom and democracy without endangering social harmony by combining swaraj (participatory democracy) with the satyagraha mode of integrating politics and morality. The alternative idea of participatory democracy as envisaged by Gandhi had to be worked from the bottom by the people of every village.⁸ While not negating the need of a 'central government administration' he insisted that 'democracy is an impossible thing until the power is shared by all.' As argued by Gandhi:

⁷ M.K. Gandhi. 1954. *Sarvodaya*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan., p. 74

⁸M.K.Gandhi. 1961. *Democracy: Real and Deceptive*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan., p.7.

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 a sense of their capacity to regulate and control authority.⁹

The emphasis in Gandhi's idea of democracy was on decentralization and delegation in the direction of local associations and enhancing reciprocal responsibility.¹⁰ By revitalizing direct democracy from below, it was capable of displacing imported models of state and representation and at the same time stressed that the democratic structure would not be a pyramid but an oceanic circle that pushed his ideas of democracy into more anti-statist and more individualistic directions. To quote Gandhi:

In this structure composed of innumerable villages, there will be ever-widening, never ascending circles. Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. But it will be an oceanic circle whose centre will be the individual always ready to perish for the village, the latter ready to perish for the circle of villages, till at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals, never aggressive in their arrogance but ever humble, sharing the majesty of the oceanic circle of which they are integral units.¹¹

In retrospect, it can be argued that Gandhi associated swaraj with an extensive program of economic and political decentralization as being paramount to his conception of democracy. The ethics of democracy in the Gandhian thought was intimately premised on the idea of self-rule for the masses. Gandhi often contrasted the true democracy of peasant swaraj to modern representative democracy and the pathologies that it entailed. The modern democratic politics for Gandhi embodied an elite struggle for power and competition and there was little room in it for moderation, reciprocity, transformation and right judgement. Gandhi was highly suspicious of the centralized structures of democratic competition, therefore he wanted to prioritize political authority and participation at the local level since only in such contexts it was possible for the individuals to directly shape political agenda as well as best judge the intentions of political actors and the consequences of political action.¹²

In Gandhi's version of democracy then individual was the important unit, yet at the same time it did not exclude dependence on and willing help from neighbours or from the world. Gandhi felt that then liberal democratic scheme of securing social order through the amoral, impersonal machinery of government not only curtailed individual freedom but also failed to bring about any authentic social harmony. It needs also to be articulated here that Gandhi's theory and practice of democracy was based on a realistic, integral conception of human nature, which while not denying the selfish nature in a man also acknowledged the potential for rationality and goodness. The essence of the democratic ethos in Gandhi was based on the need to abandon the liberal conception of abstract unencumbered individuals and to forge a new conception of humanity. For Gandhi, evolution of democracy is not possible if there is

⁹ Ibid, p. 4-5.

¹⁰ Mantena, Karuna. 2012. "On Gandhi's critique of the state: sources, contexts and conjunctures." *Modern Intellectual History* 535-563, p. 555

¹¹ M.K. Gandhi. 1961. *Democracy: Real and Deceptive*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan., p. 73-74.

¹² Mantena, Karuna. 2012. "On Gandhi's critique of the state: sources, contexts and conjunctures." *Modern Intellectual History* 535-563, p. 557.

no engagement with the 'other' and in this sense a satyagrahi fundamentally emphasizes on the need for tolerance and engagement so as to widen the scope of democracy.

Gandhi articulated his idea of democracy for a wider audience and sought to delineate a path different from the modern, technocratic, over-organized and centralized paradigm of politics. According to him human emancipation could only be bought about through an alternative, non-violent, educative, mass based approach to democratization. The Gandhian praxis of an engaged democracy in totality shook the foundations of the pluralist-elitist democratic variants of the modern government. What was especially radical here was not the mere rejection of all forms of authority, rather the democratic polity as envisaged by Gandhi would denote non-hierarchical forms of authority and disciplined form of cooperation. The evolution to 'perfect democracy' based upon 'the rule of unadulterated non-violence'¹³ required an alternative decentralized order and critical transformations in the idea of authority. For Gandhi, true freedom could only be attained by a radical disciplining of the self, wherein a society would be composed in which the individual would be the architect of his own government and the village would become a perfect democracy based upon individual freedom.¹⁴

¹³ CWMG., Vol. 79, p. 293.

¹⁴Mantena, Karuna. 2012. "On Gandhi's critique of the state: sources, contexts and conjunctures." *Modern Intellectual History* 535-563, p. 563.

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