

Gandhi's View on Philosophy of Construction: A Study

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Abstract

The philosophy of Constructive Programme was addressed to the members of the Indian National Congress time and again. It also discusses some of the concrete steps by which that philosophy may be implemented. The Constructive programme may more fittingly be called construction of Poorna Swaraj or Complete Independence by truthful and non-violent means.

Key Words: Philosophy, Implemented, Ascendency, Embodied

We have in "Hind Swaraj" the general outline of Gandhi's political philosophy. The philosophy of Constructive programme was addressed to the members of the Indian National Congress time and again. It also discusses some of the concrete steps by which that philosophy may be implemented.¹

The constrictive programme may more fittingly be called construction of Poorna Swaraj or complete independence by truthful and non-violent means. Efforts for construction of independence through violent and, therefore, necessarily untruthful means was not wanted. Complete independence through truth and non-violence means meant the independence of every unit, be it the humblest of the nation, without distinction of race, colour or creed. This independence would be never exclusive. It would, therefore, be wholly compatible with interdependence within and without.

There would be no such thing as an imaginary or even perfect definition of independence through violence. For it presuppose would only ascendancy of that party of the nation which would make the most effective use of violence. His philosophy of construction embodied the following item which gets outlined in

Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG) Vol. 75, pp. 146-66), See page 70 (1-14).

Communal unity:

He held that everybody was agreed about the necessity of communal unity. But everybody did not know that unity did not mean only political unity, which might be imposed. It meant an unbreakable unity of heart. The first thing essential for achieving such unity was for every Congressman, whatever his religion may be, to cultivate personal friendship with persons representing faiths others than his own. He should have the same regard for the other faiths as he had for his own.²

Removal of untouchability:

It was unnecessary to dilate the necessary of removal of this blot and curse upon Hinduism. Congressmen had certainly done much in that matter. But he was sorry to say that many Congressmen had looked upon that item as a mere political necessity and not something indispensable so far as the Hindus were concerned, for the very existence of Hinduism. If every Hindu should make common cause with them and befriend them in their awful isolation such isolation as perhaps the world had never seen in the monstrous immensity one

witnessed in India. He knew from experience how difficult the task was but it was necessary part of the task of building the edifice of Swaraj. And the road to Swaraj was steep and narrow. There were many slippery ascents and many deep chasms. They had all to be negotiated with unfaltering step before we could reach the summit and breathe the fresh air of freedom

Prohibition:

Although like communal unity and removal of untouchability prohibition had been on the Congress programme since 1920, Congressmen had not taken the interest they should have taken in this very vital social and moral reform. If people were to reach their goal through non-violent effort, they should not leave to the future government the fate of lakhs of men and women who were laboring under the curse of intoxicants and narcotics.

Khadi:

Khadi was a controversial subject. Many people thought that in advocating Khadi he was sailing against a headwind and was sure to sink the ship of Swaraj and that he was taking the country to the dark ages. Mahatma Gandhi wanted to show what every congressmen, and for that matter every Indian, could do to advance the cause of Khadi. It would be the beginning of economic freedom and equality of all in the country. The proof of the pudding was in the eating. Let everyone try, and he or she would find out for himself or herself the truth of what he was saying. Khadi must be taken with all its implications. It means a wholesale swadeshi mentality, a determination to find all the necessities of life in India and that too through the labour and intellect of the villagers. That meant the reversal of the existing process.

Other village industries:

These would involve not much scope for voluntary labor in them. Each industry would take the labor of only a certain number of hands. Those industries would come in as a handmaid to Khadi. They would not exist without Khadi, and Khadi would be robbed of its dignity without them. Village economy would not be complete without the essential village industries such as hand - grinding, hand - pounding, soap - making, paper - making, match - making, tanning, oil - pressing, etc. When one became village - minded, one would not want imitations of the West or machine - made products, but one would develop a true national taste in keeping with the vision of a new India in which pauperism, starvation and idleness would be unknown.³

Education in health and hygiene:

The art of keeping one's health and the knowledge of hygiene, he said, was by itself a separate subject of study and related practice. In a well - ordered society the citizens knew and observed the laws of health and hygiene. "It is established beyond doubt that ignorance and neglect of the laws of health and hygiene are responsible for the majority of diseases to which mankind is heir."⁴

Economic equality:

This was thought to be the master - key to non - violent independence. Working for economic equality means abolishing the eternal conflict between capital and labor. It meant the leveling down of the few rich in whose hands was concentrated the bulk of the nation's wealth on one hand, and leveling up of the semi-starved naked millions on the other. A nonviolent system of government was clearly an impossibility so long as the wide gulf between the rich and the hungry millions persisted.

Kisans (peasantry):

Swaraj was a mighty structure. Those who would know any method of organizing kisans might profitably study the movement in Champaran when satyagraha was tried for the first time in India with the results all India knew. It became a mass movement which remained wholly non-violent from start to finish. It affected over twenty lakhs of kisans. The struggle centered round one specific grievance which was a century old. There had been several violent revolts to get rid of the grievance. The kisans were suppressed. The non-violent remedy succeeded in full in six months. The kisans of Champaran became politically conscious without any direct effort.

Labour:

To him Ahmedabad Labour Union was a model for all India to copy. Its basis was nonviolence, pure and simple, it had never had a set-back in its career. It had gone on from strength to strength without fuss and without show. It had its hospital. Its school for the children of mill-hands, its classes for adults. Its own printing press and khadi depot, and its own residential quarters. Almost all the hands were voters and decided the fate of elections. They came on the voters list at the instance of the Provincial Congress Committee. The organization had never taken part in party politics of the Congress. It influenced the municipal policy of the city. It had to its credit very successful strikes which were wholly nonviolent. Mill-owners and labor had governed their relations largely through voluntary arbitration. Gandhi's intention was that he would regulate all the labor organizations of India, after the Ahmedabad model.⁵

Adivasis:

In this section Gandhi advocated working with Adivasis in order to promote in them the spirit of self-help and national consciousness.⁶

Lepers:

In this section Gandhi paid special attention to the plight of those afflicted by leprosy, and thanked the missionaries for their pioneering work in this regard.

Students:

Gandhi advised students to abstain from party politics and to integrate the theory of non-violence with their academic studies.⁷ Students were advised to be the torch-bearers for spreading national consciousness through Truth and Ahimsa.

Place of civil disobedience:

Gandhiji had his opinion that civil disobedience was not absolutely necessary to win freedom through purely non-violent effort, if the co-operation of the whole nation was secured in the constructive programme. But such good luck rarely favored nations or individuals. Therefore, it was necessary to know the place of Civil Disobedience in a nationwide non-violent effort.

According to Gandhiji:

"It has three definite functions.

It can be effectively offered for the redress of a local wrong done to the people.

It can be offered without regard to effect, though aimed at a particular wrong or evil, by way of self-immolation in order.

If rural reconstruction were not to include rural sanitation, our villages would remain the muck-heaps that they are today. Village sanitation is a vital part of village life and is as difficult as it is important. It

needs a heroic effort to eradicate age - long insanitation. The village worker who is ignorant of the science of village sanitation, who is not a successful scavenger, cannot fit himself for village service.

The whole of this program will, however, be a structure on sand if it is not built on the solid foundation of economic equality. Economic equality must never be supposed to mean possession of an equal amount of worldly goods by everyone. It does mean, however, that everyone will have a proper house to live in, sufficient and balanced food to eat, and sufficient production of Khadi to cover themselves. It also means that the cruel inequality that obtains today will be removed by purely non-violent means. This question, however, requires to be separately dealt with.⁸

His philosophy of construction would not involve underground activities of any sort, "I say unhesitatingly, that underground activities, even though utterly innocent in themselves, should have no place in the technique of non - violence."⁹

But he was sad that his philosophy of construction was properly adhered to. "Unfortunately the workers have not developed faith in that programme the living faith which I have. I can't re-emphasize the importance of that program. And, if the whole of India could be converted to take to that program, 126 we should reach our goal in the quickest manner possible"

Gandhiji Concluded:

"Swaraj has to come through our own strength. We might get help from other quarters. It would be welcome. But we should understand that freedom could never come as a gift from outside. We bore no enmity towards the British." We want the British rulers to quit in a friendly spirit. If

they do that, it will augur well for them, for India and the world.¹⁰

Khadi was the center point of his philosophy of construction. It was the very foundation of Indian Swaraj and economic uplift of the poor. He had always linked Khadi with Swaraj from the beginning. The more Khadi Indians produced, the nearer we would be to Swaraj. Spinning was manual labor par excellences. It enabled even poor people to lead independent lives. Explaining the symbolism of the charkha, Gandhiji said that it stood for ahimsa. "Let them not get lost in minor controversies but concentrate on the work of spinning and production of Khadi, the most important part of the constructive programme.

His philosophy of construction also included samagra "gramseva of which he remarked," A samagra gramsevak must know everybody living in the village and render them such service as he can. That does not mean, that the worker will be able to do everything single handed, He will show them the way of helping themselves and procure for them such help and materials as they require. He will train up his own helpers.

He further said that whether the poor earned their livelihood through Khadi or adopted it as a means of Swaraj, both the things could go hand in hand. He realized that real freedom could be attained only in the way. Therefore he placed before the Congress the idea of Khadi. The Congress accepted Khadi in 1920.

He had made Khadi or the spinning - wheel the symbol of ahimsa. The spinning - wheel was the life of constructive work. If one took away that, all the other items of construction would become a lifeless corpse. If are wished to achieve Swaraj for the crores of women, it would be done only

through the spinning - wheel. And, without the spinning - wheel, the constructive programme become a mere cipher.¹¹

Asked about the comparative importance of Khadi industry and agriculture farming as answered that Khadi industry could serve as a means of achieving (Swaraj). Farming would not take that place. Millions of men, women and children could not take part in farming as spinning.¹² He knew that India was a slave country and to remove that slavery he thought of the spinning - wheel as the means.¹³

"Why did he not prefer agriculture? He explained:

"First of all I do not possess full knowledge about agriculture. But the simple thing is that we cannot progress much without the help of the government, canals will have to be constructed, some trees will have to be cut down. We will have to use the new engineering devices. At every step, the Government's help will be required."¹⁴

He was again questioning that as an Indian villager spent about 80 per cent on food grains and 12 per cent on cloth, did it not follow that agriculture held the most important place in our village uplift scheme? Would it not be proper to give to agriculture instead of to Khadi the place of the sun in the solar system (of the constructive programme)?

To this he answered that even if all that was correct, Farming would not take the place of the spinning - wheel. It is a great thing to become industrious through the spinning - wheel and give up lethargy. The key to Swaraj lay in it. If India understood the value of the spinning - wheel, Swaraj could be certainly attained through it. To some extent there was program of the spinning - wheel in the cities. It was welcome. But the villagers had to adopt the

spinning - wheel. In order to link it with agriculture, the villagers had better adopt it.¹⁵

What would be the place of nationalization of land in his philosophy of construction of Indian Swaraj? He made it perfectly clear that kisans, the tillers of the land, should be the owners. Constructive workers should educate Kisans on their rights and duties, and tell them how they should develop self confidence and courage to assert their just rights. Satyagraha might have to be resorted to in the process of assuming ownership of the land, and the zamindars were not rakshasas to oppress them, for it would not be to their benefit to do so.¹⁶

What should be done when an unsympathetic India state placed obstacles in the way of the constructive programs?

Gandhiji said that the result depended entirely on the works themselves and the extent to which they were prepared to suffer for the cause.

Gandhiji was asked as to what extent students could engage them in political work. Mahatmaji said that there was quite enough work for students to the alongside of their studies. They could, for instance, do a great deal in connection with removal of illiteracy. But he was not in favor of students associating themselves with party politics or controversies as they could not do justice to such work, remaining as students. If some of them felt like leaving schools and colleges with a view to engage themselves in national work, they were free to do so.¹⁷

His philosophy of construction also entailed the building up of national character. No revolution was possible till "we build our character."¹⁸

Explaining the slow progress towards constructive works he said that though Indians had faith in constructive work, but the faith" was not deep or enlightened enough to illumine our intellect."¹⁹ This was his analysis of the situation. There was no rapport between the constructive workers and the institution. "We must first purify ourselves. The Congress has always had the constructive programme. Now it has the power. Why is it then that our work is not progressing? It may be that we have no heart. If we were endowed with a heart we would have been sensitive to the pain of others. Moreover, a person may be in sympathy with one in distress and still may not be of any help to him. But our minds have not opened. Many eminent people who are in politics have had this experience. I have had a hand in the formation of all these

various institutions, and I can say that things are in such a state because our hearts are not pure."²⁰ One must not do it for the sake of popularity, nor hanker after political power, even in their dreams. The objective of the constructive works organizations was to generate political power. But if one held that political power having come, it must be ours as price for our labors; it would degrade us and spell our ruin.²¹ He was pained to see that his philosophy of construction was polluted by corrupted form of politics. "Anybody who goes into politics gets contaminated. Let us keep out of it altogether. The greater our inner purity, the greater shall be our hold on the people, without any effort on our part",²² this was the very essence of his philosophy of construction.

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