

Understanding Separateness and Collective Human Welfare : Rethinking Gandhi

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Abstract

The Indian mind, throughout the history of this civilization, was predominantly occupied with the pursuit of aesthetics, values and realization of the Self. The values attached to objects of the world give us a sense of aesthetics, whereas the value attached to acts gives us a feeling of ethics or morals. The Truth is characterized as Satyam, Shivam and Sundaram. Aesthetic consciousness is represented by the word sundaram, whereas absolute Truth is meant by Satyam. The moral Self is what is indicative of shivam. Though quest for spiritual perfection retains its prime importance in Indian thought, it does not forget to give equal importance to aesthetic Self and the moral Self.

Vedic ethics is generally criticized as not showing real interest in social welfare. Hindu philosophy is generally understood to advise an individual to work for his own liberation. Doesn't this teach about an individual freedom at the cost of social welfare? Does classical Indian philosophy show interest in talking about collective human welfare or does it only talk about moksha or liberation? As we have already discussed ethical theories are theories about how an individual should act. The question is between individually selfish actions versus actions that result in collective welfare, not just human but along with plant life and animal world.

Key Words: *Separateness, Self, Social Transformation, Sarvodaya, Hindu Philosophy.*

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Part-I

Dharma as a defining feature of Social Contact

Social contact defines the religious life-world in India. Working for individual liberation is the aim of the *Upaniṣads*, but not at the expense of the suffering millions, therefore, we see in modern times the likes of Swami Vivekananda and Swami Shivananda establishing Ramakrishna Mission and Divine Life Society respectively to serve the less fortunate, downtrodden of India. The motto in both the cases is -*AatmanoMoksardham, Jagat Hitāya ca*—Liberation of the individual Soul and welfare of the world around. *AnushtānaVedānta* or what came to be known as practical Vedanta has had shown this kind of reorienting Advaita philosophy to social needs. Not that classical Vedanta was silent on social concern but it was predominantly occupied with ontological and metaphysical questions. There is no blind renunciation of the world and escape to the Himalayas. May be for the microscopic minority that is a feasible option, but for the majority it is through social service that the doors of the heavens open.

Collective Human Welfare as ‘Applied Dharma’

Nation-wide rural re-construction, social reforms and constructive programme are part of a true religion. Any religion, which wants to separate religious life from secular, does great harm to the society. One cannot be blind to the problems confronting the people around and work out one’s own salvation. Selfless service of the weak is at the heart of true religion. We are reminded of the Upanishadic statement to renounce and enjoy the world. Happiness consists in giving and serving others. But, it is never easy to employ oneself in the service of humanity. There is that individuality, self-identity which wants to amass wealth, acquire fame and positions. There is interest to be separate, not to unite with the ocean of life. It’s important that we understand this impulse in the humans, rather than ask them to sacrifice selfish interest. Why is it that we want to preserve our separateness? that’s an important philosophical question.

Gandhi demonstrated with his life and works that one’s daily social contact signifies the bearing of religion on social life. There is no escape from social service. Realization of Truth is the goal of religion and that is not possible without identifying with the ocean of life. To be true to such

religion one has to lose oneself in continuous and continuing service of all. Escaping from such social responsibility and retiring to Himalayas is not the heart of Hinduism.

Understanding Separateness, Individuality, Self:

The problem is not getting rid of separateness, but why is it that each one of us try to attach so much importance to our individual selves? All our talk about welfare of 'the other' falls on deaf ears, and we assert our uniqueness even while working for common goals. What I would do is instead of focusing on collective good, let us try and understand what breeds separateness. The problem of separateness cannot be destroyed by identifying with humanity or suppressing identity.

Each one of us through all our acts give great importance to separateness. Those who want to establish classless society, by their power, acts and violence are already breeding division. Each ideology brings with it division. The separateness of 'I' from the other is clear and present all the time. We have this inescapable feeling of separateness, of identity may be because of wealth, family, race, name etc. To avoid the dangers of this separatism, we talk about collective welfare. In spite of the efforts of several leading world leaders, we could not create genuine feeling for the welfare of humanity. Nationalism equally breeds separateness. It will be 'vaccine nationalism' in these Corona times. Each country trying to get the doses of vaccine for the people of their own country. Each individual trying to survive not looking at others.

The question as I already stated, is not about collective welfare, but why is it that we want cling to the feeling of separateness? Life as a world citizen and private life have different sensations, and memory which clash and create conflict. The memory with its bundles of sensations creates a strong sense of 'I', the Ego. This does not want to give space to others. We want to get all the attention, name, fame, positions etc. there is tremendous conflict out there in our psychic world. There is a need to pay attention to all this. Unless one understands the workings of one's own self, the whole field of consciousness, there is no way that we can create a collective consciousness.

Any amount of writing and lecturing is not going to create a sense

of belonging to the universe. The separateness always is within us. We can pay attention to it, without condemning is the position held by Indian philosophers. If we can understand the whole movement of separateness within us which is brought about by memory, probably it may end. We need not then talk about collective welfare. It would come into our life without inviting.

I, me and mine are facts of our life. They do not go anywhere. What is needed is to understand the workings of these factors that cause separateness, to understand life as a whole process rather than as a bundle of sensations slowly but surely leads to the ending or minimalization of individual identity. This in turn opens up the doors of feeling about the good of humanity. Without understanding the workings of inner self, if one ventures on common good, there won't be lasting welfare. Temporarily one may look to contribute to the welfare of others, but this is not going to last long.

Separateness is a fact of life. We have not created it. It is out there, it is part of our very existence. If we can stay with this idea, then we may start working without 'me' and 'mine'. It is then that there is some real work. Expansion of self that embraces the ocean of life is the goal of any philosophy in India. It is this identification with vast suffering humanity that lead people like Gandhi to work for a sarvodaya society.

Doctrinal Basis: Oneness of Life and Non-Possession

'Advaita Philosophy' provides doctrinal basis for Sarvodaya ethics—welfare-of-all as against happiness of greatest number (utilitarianism). Advaita of Sankara says, based on Vedic authority, that all that exists and has it's being is Reality. This school believes that there is oneness of life and that the same energy principle appears in different forms (animate and inanimate). The Upaniœadic statement such as '*tad Ekam*' or '*Ekam Sat*', all point to the existence of one intelligent principle. Vedantic philosophy is based on this idea of 'oneness of life' which gets expressed in the ideas on ahimsa, truth and sarvodaya. 'The greatest -good- of -all principle' is based on this Vedantic maxim. The other principle that inspires us from Iúâvâsya Upaniúad is 'non-possession' which took the form of 'trusteeship' in relation to economic life. 'Non-possession' is allied to non-stealing. A thing not originally stolen

must nevertheless be classified as stolen property if we possess it without needing it. We understand that the rich have superfluous store of things, which they do not need, and which are, therefore, neglected and wasted; while millions starve to death for want of subsistence. If each retained possession only of what he needed, no one would be in want and all would live in contentment. Only very few can think of and reach this ideal. For majority this is a distant dream. However, knowledge or spiritual insight is considered as primary than any moral code of conduct. It is understood that without being rooted in righteousness, one cannot expect to enter into the portals of Vedanta.

Orderliness in the Universe

That there is an inbuilt order in the cosmos is understandable based on our observation of the planetary motion. There is also an order built in human life as well. Reason is hard wired into human brain. I need not stress on the point that reason brings order into human life and into society as well. Reason in human life equally contributes to orderliness. Chaos is not a norm, it is only a distortion of reality. Chaos also in the end has to lead to an order.

The Vedic word used for cosmic order is Rta. That there is an inbuilt orderliness about the way our planets move about, the seasons operate, the sunrise and the sunset all point to such orderliness. The same orderliness when expressed in society seems to translate into dharma. Dharma is sustained in an individual's life by the practice of karma. Obviously, dharma depends on the human action and not on preaching. When protected it develops a potency to protect not only one person but the entire society.

Mimâsâ defines dharma as that which holds people together—*dhârâñât dharma ityâhuhu, prajânâmbhârayatiitidharmab*. The root word of dharma is 'dhru' which indicates togetherness, or holding all. An action in the life of a Hindu is determined whether or not it holds society together. The question of criticizing classical thought as selfish does not hold ground. Those of the few can retire to the Himalayas and spend time in contemplative meditation who are dispassionate and pure at heart. Not all can retire to forests. Individuals have to work for collective welfare, for the heart to become pure and lead to self-knowledge which is the goal of Vedanta philosophy.

Whereas utility as criteria for human action depends on whether an action can bring highest pleasure to the highest number. Sarvodaya ethics does not talk about greatest happiness of greatest number, but stresses on the welfare of all. *Shreyas* in Hindu philosophy and life stands for welfare that at once brings material welfare and spiritual fulfillment.

Part – II

The ever expanding global markets have necessitated the movement of finance, goods and services. Capitalist tendencies increased and seem to be ever expanding and consolidating their base. There is a necessity to revisit the ‘methodology of social transformation’ from the stand point of socialists, traditional communists and Gandhians, in the light of global markets and wealth on the one hand and the widespread unrest, disorder and suffering on the other. De-regulated, unstable global economy had come a cropper in the recent times and different countries are still reeling under its impact making slow recovery. Some economies have shown some resilience due to the safeguards they have adopted and the way they selectively opened-up their economies to global forces. In the light of this rapidly changing global scenario, it is worth re-visiting the Gandhian ideals of understanding the Self, social service and human welfare.

Self-regeneration, leveling up, down:

On closer examination, we come across subtle differences in the methodology adopted by socialists, traditional communists and Gandhians in bringing social perfection. There is no denying the fact that the ideal more or less remains the same, however, the means vary, and methodology varies. By Gandhians, I mean Gandhi and the later socio-political thinkers and activists who engaged themselves in bringing about perfection in polity, economy, morality and theology based on the twin principles of truth and non-violence. Theological bent of mind that Gandhi exhibited contained firm faith in cosmic order (rta) and the moral ruler of the universe. He puts forth ethical preconditions wherein the distinction between two species of human beings, those who need socio-economic reform and those who advocate but do not practice, is not acceptable.

“Gandhi expressed it in Euclidean terms; the ideal society is not a closed circle, but an open one in which all its citizens work toward extending

the horizons of human perfectibility, knowing that they can always do much better. This powerful realization came from a penetrating insight into the complexities of human nature and social structures. Gandhi uncompromisingly insisted that those who would be responsible leaders of a socialist society must lead the way in making tangible sacrifices. Failure to do this voided all claims to wisdom, insight and credibility”¹ (Raghavan Iyer, ed. 2006.p.17).

The question that arises due to this predicament is: should a society depend upon State authority for social reformation? Is it desirable to look at the State as the chief instrument for furthering the socialist ideal? Or should we look at the morally enlightened to uplift the masses with their exemplary leadership? On this question Raghavan Iyer observes, “when Gandhi advocated non-violent socialism as a wider political and social ideal, rooted in the philosophy of sacrificial action, non-possession, global trusteeship and collective welfare, with a primary emphasis upon the emancipation of the least favored in society, he could never look to the State as the chief instrument for furthering the socialist ideal”² (Raghavan Iyer, 2006, p.10).

Gandhi felt that an inspired and morally committed individual would motivate millions without words or gestures. He had a firm belief based on his experience that non-violent revolution has to come from bottom up. “I shall bring about economic equality through non-violence, by converting the people to my point of view by harnessing the forces of love against hatred. I will not wait till I have converted the whole society to my view, but straight away make the beginning with myself”³. Gandhi felt that the intellectuals needed to identify themselves with the masses and merge themselves with the downtrodden for bringing substantial reform. Here he differed from many who held the view that intellectuals conveniently lead the proletariat from revolutionary cloisters and then be drawn along by the current generated by the masses. Constructive programmes need to be initiated by all those who wish to regenerate the society. A change in social institutions or political setup is not going to alter the fate of the masses. Intellectuals need to identify with masses and work out slowly toward social perfection.

Gandhi never endorsed a class war, since he had immovable faith in ahimsa and unshakable conviction in theory that unethical means can never justify ends. Social reform of Gandhi included a) reform of capitalist as well as worker b) voluntary inclusion and not coerced c) distinction between necessary inequities that remain while ending inequalities.

Political power too needs to be understood in a new light. He never attached great importance to political setup. A lofty ideal has been the focus of debate among thinkers who speak about enlightened anarchy. This phrase basically scans for that form of society where in the State governs the least. It is too distant an ideal to be realized, still it never lost its significance. "In an ideal State there will be no political institution and therefore no political power. That is why Thoreau has said in his classic statement that "that government is the best, which governs the least"⁴ (M.K.Gandhi, 1939, P.402). Social reform was acceptable if it was by all means non-violent. On this principle of non-violence that he differed from many socialists and communists as they did not share his idea.

Religion and Social service

Nation wide rural reconstruction, social reforms and constructive programme are part of true religion. Any religion which wants to separate religious life from secular does great harm to the society. One cannot be blind to the problems confronting the people around and work out one's salvation. Selfless service of the weak is at the heart of true religion. Gandhi often invoked Upanishadic statement to renounce and enjoy the world. "Happiness consists in giving and serving others. He that would be great among you, said Christ, let him serve"⁵(Henry Drummond, 1983, P.71).

Dr. S. Radhakrishnan had once asked Gandhi to answer the question: what is the bearing of religion on social life? To this Question Gandhi replied that one's daily social contact signifies the bearing of religion on social life. "There is no escape from social service"⁶. Realization of Truth is the goal of religion and that is not possible without identifying with the ocean of life. "To be true to such religion one has to lose oneself in continuous and continuing service of all"⁷(S. Radhakrishnan, 1935, P. 21).

My effort in this paper has been to look at the methodology adopted by the many socialists and traditional communists who spoke about total

revolution brought about by the handful intellectuals, who lead the proletariat on the one hand and a Gandhian model on the other, which believes in the capacity of the masses and reduces the place of an intellectual to that of the masses. Reformers need the reform that they are talking about. The morally committed with their exemplary life would inspire the millions toward undertaking constructive programme. The other aspect that I discussed in this paper has been the role of the State in furthering socialist ideal. What role does a State play in bringing social transformation? As I have repeatedly observed, the principle of non-violence is a distinguishing feature in Gandhi's thought. In the changing global scenario how far this ethical pre-condition holds ground is a million dollar question. We can still have some hope as the experiments with this methodology conducted by the likes of Martin Luther King Jr, Nelson Mandela and many others have met with considerable success. Hope survives and fusing of timeless principles with new evolving strategies to work toward collective human welfare would bring lasting social good.

Gandhi and Indian cultural Ethos

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, while always controversial during his lifetime and the source of continuing extreme controversy in India and the contemporary world, is certainly the best-known Indian of the twentieth century. In India, he and Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, are frequently identified as the two greatest moral and spiritual figures in the history of India. Surveys not only in India, but also throughout the world, usually list Gandhi at or near the top of the most admired human beings of the modern world.

Gandhi writes: "I am endeavouring to see God through the service of humanity, for I know that God is neither in heaven nor down, but in everyone" (*Young India*, IX, 30: 244) "I am a part and parcel of the whole, and I cannot find Him apart from the rest of humanity....And I worship the God that is Truth or Truth which is God through the service of these millions" (*Harijan*, VII, 5: 44).

As previously indicated, Gandhi does emphasize permanence, oneness, and unity, but this is a unity with a deep respect for differences. The relational other, as integral to the self, is not devalued or transcended. Acting to serve the needs of the bodily and mentally and spiritually unfree

other, who is impoverished, oppressed, exploited, unjustly treated, and suffering, necessarily means active, selfless engagement in the world of relative truth.

Two Grades of Truth

Consistent with the theory of two truths, we should not confuse or conflate the two levels of analysis expressing two radically different levels of truth and reality. When Gandhi is discussing individual selves, individual consciousness, social selves, inner voices, separate diverse perspectives, and limited relative contextualized economic and political and cultural variables, his approach functions on the limited conditioned level of empirical, worldly, relative truth. When Gandhi is discussing Truth, Brahman (*Nirguna Brahman*), *Atman*, Self, (absolute) God, and Non-violence, his approach functions on the deepest, ultimate, spiritual level of unconditioned, non-causal, non-empirical, transcendent Absolute Truth. Tension only results when we confuse these two levels of analysis by not distinguishing relative truth and reality from the Absolute Truth and Reality.

Raghavan Iyer observes that relative truth is not simple, empirical, worldly, apparent illusory truth. Even Gandhi's relative truths have a non-empirical, ahistorical, spiritual dimension. This is why many of Gandhi's claims about relative truth, seemingly arising from his empirical worldly experiments with truth, often prove so frustrating to scientists, philosophers, and other scholars attempting to subject them to a process of strict empirical, rational, social, political, historical verification.

Second, unlike many traditional Vedantins, Gandhi maintains that there is an integral necessary relation between relative truths and Absolute Truth. A traditional Advaita Vedanta philosopher may claim that on the level of Absolute Truth, when we experience the true or real self as the pure spiritual *Atman* and we experience the complete non dual identity of *Atman-Brahman*, we reject and transcend, the illusory world of relative truths. The world of relative truth is sublated and negated as constituted by false, karmic, mayic, human constructions devoid of Truth and Reality. Such empirical, social, political, cultural, historical, contextualized, relative truths may have limited epistemic status, but they have no ultimate ontological Truth and Reality,

This is not Gandhi's approach. For Gandhi, relative truth is our only limited access to Absolute Truth. We can only gain access to the ideals of pure Self, Truth, and the Absolute, through the imperfect, limited, relative perspectives of relative self, truth, and reality. At no point can we speak of transcending moral, social, economic, political, religious, educational, environmental, and other relative dichotomies, including self-other relations, and transcending the world of relative truth.

Equitable Distribution and Sarvodaya Society

Gandhi envisages a new world order in which there is all-round development of every individual and not some sections of the society. This progress consists of material, ethical and spiritual spheres. Social work education as I understand also need to have such a goal since this education also aims at a welfare society. The major difference between present day social work education and Gandhi's sarvodaya society is that the latter is based on religion, on spirituality, which may not be the case with present day secular education system. Social work educators can reformulate their ideas on social work by closely observing Gandhi's life and thought.

Gandhi's vision of new social order is aptly described by Jayaprakash Narayan that the new social order and a future Indian sarvodaya society would be—different from the capitalist, socialist, communist orders of society. A non-violent society, a society based on love and human values, a decentralized, self-governing, non-exploitative, co-operative society. Gandhi gave that society the name of sarvodaya—literally, the rise of all, i.e., a society in which the good of all is achieved.

Jayaprakash Narayan's summary of what precisely sarvodaya or welfare society is tells us that it aims at equitable distribution of money, sound moral principles and swaraj or freedom as the core of its being. For Gandhi non-violence is an absolute value or what can be called a creed. It is not a policy for him, only to be discarded at convenient time. Therefore, it is not surprising that a welfare society is constructed on the strong foundations of ahimsa. Since one has to be non-violent and yet achieve a welfare society, one has to take shelter in the doctrine of global trusteeship.

Equitable distribution of wealth is to be achieved by not eliminating physically the capitalist, but by the capitalist himself acting as the trustee

for the wealth he possesses. Recognizing that this wealth is the result of labour of millions, the money thus created is used for the good of all.

There is a classical flavour to Gandhi's thinking. He derived his inspiration from classical texts of ancient India. The ideas that are discussed in this paper all have their basis in and inspiration from classical texts. 'The rise of all' is possible only in a self-governing decentralized society. That government is the best which governs the least. Therefore, decentralization and development of a village as a self-sufficient unit was the core of Gandhi's political thought. These ideas show Gandhi's profound thinking and his understanding of human nature and its perfectibility. Man essentially is a moral and spiritual agent and is expected to act for the material as well as spiritual welfare of all.

VinobhaBhave feels that removal of suffering and poverty of millions across the globe and establishing a world order in which there is equality and divinity are the goals of sarvodaya. Social work education lacks this aspect. Bringing in the moral principles and spiritual content of a human into social work education is a step in the right direction. Man in this scheme is not a self-centered parasite but an essential part of the society working for its progress. A dynamic change would come about in the whole social structure should there be a considerable change in the people's thoughts. Equitable distribution of land and of wealth becomes a reality only if people understand the spirit of sarvodaya, i.e., making an individual unselfish. Sarvodaya with its objective of everybody's welfare is entirely a new ideal which can guide the world today. Social work education based on such an ideal would revolutionize our understanding of a new world order.

The introduction of truth as the basis of society and by insisting on non-violence as the only method of bringing about a change, the sarvodaya concept poses a challenge to all the social systems in the world...to a world weary of violence and exploitation, it comes as a soothing balm. Human values, individual development, lifting of whole human society to a higher level of existence. this sums up sarvodaya society.

Moral Economic basis of Social Work

True economics according to Gandhi, "stands for social justice; it promotes the good of all equally, including the weakest and is indispensable

for decent life”. Let us look at the main features of economic order in a welfare society. Decentralization is essential in a non-violent democracy. Gandhi felt that in “an undeveloped country like India concentration of economic power in the hands of the few provides them with the great deal of privilege in the socio-political and economic milieu of the country” (M.K. Gandhi, *Young India*, 1931). Self-governing self-sufficient village units would lessen the conflict between capital and labour. Production takes place in the houses of millions. ‘My idea of self-sufficiency’, says Gandhi, ‘is that village must be self-sufficient in regard to food, cloth and other basic necessities’ (M.K. Gandhi, *Young India*, 1939). Every individual and every village needs to be self-dependent and this removes exploitation. The removal of conflict between labour and capital is achieved in a sarvodaya society by the formula of global trusteeship where in the wealthy act as trustees for the wealth they possess. Welfare of all is not possible without economic equality. By equality it does not mean that everybody would have same amount. He clarifies, ‘economic equality in my conception does not mean that everyone would literally have the same amount. It simply means that everybody shall have enough for his or her needs’ (M.K. Gandhi, *Young India*, 1946).

The ideas discussed above regarding a welfare society that gives opportunities for every individual to manifest his or her inner potential help us in our understanding of Gandhian perspective on a new social order. A new world order that is at once distinct from capitalist, communist, socialist orders of societies. A world order that has self-sufficient and self-governing villages. An order that boasts of economic equality and co-operation. Needless to say that such a society would be non-exploitative. Invariably this kind of a society is built on the basis of strong moral principles. The Mahatma’s vision of a new social order is the only ideal that needs to be actualized for a society weary of increasing violence, exploitation and gross negligence of moral laws. Creating such a new world order is the best tribute we can pay to Gandhi during his 150th Jayanti celebrations this year.

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⁷ *ibid.*,p.21.