

Spiritualizing Economics: A Gandhian Way

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Paper Received on: 12/02/2012

Paper Reviewed on: 27/02/2012

Paper Accepted on: 23/03/2012

Abstract

Influenced by Ruskin's 'Unto This Last' Gandhi revealed a pragmatic and rational approach to various problems confronting developing countries. To Gandhi man was the highest consideration and anything which ran counter to the moral values of life was an anathema to him. He had often asserted that "politics without religion is mere dirt". Similarly he believed that "true economics" never militates against the highest ethical standards, just as all true ethics, to be worth its name, must at the same time be also good economics". "True Economics", said he, "stands for social justice; it promotes the good of all equally, including the weakest, and is indispensable for decent life". "Gandhi's philosophy has a meaning and significance far beyond the confines of his country or of his time". And Professor Einstein recognised the Mahatma as "the miracle of a man". According to him, "generations to come would scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth".

Keywords: *Spiritualizing Economics, Gandhian, Way.*

Introduction

Gandhi's approach to various problems was eminently rational and scientific. He did not study the economics academically and not presented his economic ideas systematically at one place. His excellence in this field was more spiritual and moral than intellectual.

According to **Acharaya J.B. Kriplani**, "**If ever there was a planner without elaborate blueprints Gandhi was one.**" Gandhi formulated his economic ideas and principles in the context of his design, of an ideal social order, a non-violent, non-exploitative, humanistic and egalitarian society. He approached all facets of his social order-its economics, its politics from the philosophical premises-truth and non-violence that governed his entire life. It was therefore impossible for him to produce an economics that would be ethically neutral. When

economics is related to this way of life it becomes “meta-economics”. True economics, Gandhi said, never militates against the highest ethical standard, just as all true ethics to be worth its name must at the same time be also good economics.

Economics that enable the strong to amass wealth at the expense of the weak is a false and dismal science, it spells death. True economics stands for social justice; it promotes the good of all equally including the weakest and is indispensable for decent life.

He did not draw any sharp distinction between economics and ethics.”I must confess that I do not draw any sharp or any distinction between economics and ethics. Economics that hurt the moral well-being of an individual or a nation are sinful. Thus the economics that permit one country to prey upon another are immoral”. “That economics is untrue which ignores or disregards moral value. The extension of the law of non-violence in economics means nothing less than the introduction of moral values as a factor to be considered in regulating international commerce”. The fullest statement of his views about ultimate criterion in the economic sphere is to be found in his 1916 speech at Muir college, Allahabad. In that speech he declared, “I venture to think that the scriptures of the world are far safer and sounder treatises on laws of economics than many modern textbooks.....He (Jesus) is himself the “greatest economics of his time”. Conventional economics is always neutral towards the value judgements. This is merely the science of getting rich.

The Mahatma does not ignore the divinity of man which epitomised in the great maxim that ‘a jiva is always shiva’, a man is by and large, divine. And in this respect, it is difficult to distinguish between a man and a man. It is from this deep feeling of spirituality and divinity of man that Gandhi derived his ethico-economics theory of trusteeship and inheritance.

He wrote, “Everything belonged to God and was from God, therefore it was His people as a whole not for a particular individual. When an individual has more than his proportionate portion, he becomes a trustee of that portion for God’s people”.

That is why he talked of equality of distribution of national wealth. Trusteeship was not just an economic expedient for Gandhi. It was no make-shift for him. It was a way of life. In his own words, “My theory of trusteeship is no make-shift, certainly no camouflage. I am confident that it will survive all other theories. It has the sanction of Philosophy and religion behind it”. Indian Philosophy, religion and morals are replete with this.

The concept of trusteeship should be viewed in the context of the values it stood for. The doctrine is as old as the ages. But it was the Mahatma who tried to apply this

philosophical teaching to the concrete realities of life for the solution of the existing economic problem.

According to Pyarelal, 'Gandhi based his trusteeship doctrine on a celebrated verse in the ancient Hindu philosophical scripture "Ishopanishad", which says, "all that is in the universe is pervaded by God, renounce first, therefore in order to enjoy, coveted not anybody's riches".

Gandhi realized that the principles of non-possession and renunciation of one's property or possession or assets as advocated in the Gita can be given effect to by way of trusteeship whereby the propertied people while retaining their property in form of trust for the real beneficiaries.

Gandhi maintained that all property is trust. All forms of property and human accomplishment are either gift of nature or the product of social living. As such they belong not to the individual but to the society and therefore should be used for the good of all.

In his own words,

"Everything belonged to God and was from God, and therefore it was for his people and not for a particular individual. When an individual have more than his proportionate portion, he becomes trustee of that portion for Gods people".

Possession itself gives a sense of satisfaction and security and people normally are hesitant to part with it. The solution according to Gandhi, therefore lies in shedding possessiveness, if not possessions and greed for wealth if not wealth itself. The owners of wealth may still hold their wealth but consider their superfluous wealth as the property of the community and themselves as trustees of such wealth to be utilized for the benefit of the community. He had ample faith in the selfless and self-sacrificing nature of man.

Basic principles of Gandhi's spiritual economics

Study of man

Adam Smith defined Economics "as an enquiry into the nature and causes of wealth of nations". He paid his attention exclusively to wealth, little attention was paid to man for whom wealth is really meant.

Ruskin condemned this Mammon worship. They accused economics of selfishness and meanness and called it a dismal science.

According to Dr. Alfred Marshall 'Economics is a study of man's action in the ordinary business of life, it enquires how he gets his income and how he uses it. Thus it is on

one hand a study of wealth and on the other and more important side, a part of the study of man”.

It is for man’s sake and for the sake of welfare that wealth is studied. Thus it becomes a study of material welfare.

Robbins offered a more acceptable definition of economics “economics study human behaviour as a relationship between end and scarce means which have alternative uses”. He raised three fundamental issues.

1. Human wants are unlimited.
2. Means to satisfy them are limited.
3. Means have alternative uses.

The centre of Gandhi’s economic thought is man and not the material prosperity or scarcity. He aimed at the development, upliftment and enrichment of human life rather than a higher standard of living with scant respect for human and social values.

He wanted to elevate modern economic philosophy from its materialistic base to a higher spiritual plane where human actions were motivated by social objective rather than individualistic and selfish consideration. But it does not mean that he did not give any importance to the economic conditions of man. He was of the confirmed view that economic development must precede other developments. That is why he gave due importance to the economic activities of an individual.

The main purpose to study economics should be the whole happiness of man. Material advancement is only one ingredient in this. Along with it other elements such as moral, spiritual. Psychological etc. Should also be taken into consideration. Then and only then a man can be truly happy which can lead to a perfect development of his personality.

Emphasis on wantlessness

Gandhi advocated wantlessness. He was of the opinion that wants are the source of pain. Instead of adding to the sum total of human happiness wants subtract from it to a good deal. In fact he thinks that maximisation of satisfaction is rather completely inconsistent with the maximisation of human wants. A want is a painful experience. Removal of want is removal of pain and procurement of pleasure. This pleasure is something as satisfaction or utility.

Prof. J. k. Mehta, a distinguished economist further elaborated this concept that to satisfy a want is to yield to it. Instead of obeying the orders of want we can ourselves order the want to quit. When we satisfy a want we make it quiet for the time being. When we order

it to quit we do not merely make it quiet we kill it as it were. The process of killing of wants has been called elimination of wants. But wants can be killed by wants. That is why Prof. Mehta suggests that stronger wants must be employed to kill the weaker wants. When such a battle is fought all the inferior wants get ultimately killed and one is left with superior wants only. Thus by the process of killing or eliminating wants we ultimately reach the state of wantlessness-a stage in which perfect happiness is experienced.

Gandhi's approach was "we should not receive any single thing that we do not need". He wrote in "from Yerawada Mandir"

"We are not always aware of our real needs and most of us improperly multiply our wants and thus unconsciously make thieves of ourselves. If we devote some thought to the subject, we shall find that we can get rid of quiet a number of our wants. One who follows the observance of non-stealing will bring about a progressive reduction of his own wants. Much of the distressing poverty in this world has arisen out of breaches of the principle of non-stealing.

Truth upon which this observance is based is that God never creates more than that what is strictly needed for the moment. Therefore whoever appropriates more than the minimum that is really necessary for him is guilty of theft.

Accumulation by a few amounts to the dispossession of the many. Thus the alternative lies in renunciation. To him renunciation is life. Accumulation spells death, but he clarified, "this does not mean that if one has wealth, it should be thrown away and the wife and children should be turned out of doors. It simply means that one must give up attachment to these things and dedicate one's all to God and make use of His gifts to serve Him only".

To Gandhi, it is an economic issue as well as a moral issue, To him, ethics and economics are inseparable. "I must confess that I do not draw a sharp or any distinction between ethics and economics. The economics that hurt the moral well being of an individual or a nation are immoral and therefore sinful. But he realised that the perfect ideal of wantlessness is unattainable because it demands total renunciation, a movement towards it through the process of gradual reduction of wants and minimisation of consumption.

Thus Gandhi put utmost reliance on the individual and his moral awakening to bring these radical changes in the distribution of income and wealth in the society through wantlessness.

Critique of Industrial Civilization

Gandhi was trenchantly hostile to machines in the 'Hind Swaraj' and considered them to be a snake pit. "Machinery is like a snake-hole which may contain from one to a hundred

snakes”. But even in that classic work he did not advocate the destruction of machines. But certainly he categorically denied that the machine could produce any good. It led to the slavery of labour both male and female because it took away from them (the labourers) their traditional means of subsistence. It deprived them of the source of livelihood. It also led to the private monopoly because it resulted in the concentration of wealth in the hands of a small section of population.

In reply to a question as to whether he was against all machinery, he said, “what I object to is the craze for machinery, not machines as such. The craze is for what they call labour saving machines. Men go on saving labour till thousands are without work and thrown on the open streets to die of starvation. I want to save time and labour, not for a fraction of mankind but for all, I want concentration of wealth not in hands of a few but in the hands of all. Today machinery merely helps a few to ride on the back of millions. The impetus behind it all is not the philanthropy to save labour, but greed. It is against this constitution of things that I am fighting with all my might.”

Gandhi did not sacrifice his ideal position. In a conversation with Ramachandran he clarified, “ideally however I would rule out all machinery, even as I would reject this very body, which is not helpful to salvation and seek the absolute liberation of the body and soul. From this point of view, I would reject all machinery, but machines will remain because like the body, they are inevitable.”

The dynamic balance between man and machine which the Mahatma had intuitively sensed as necessary is now accepted by most thinkers as the only possible approach for a really productive effort.

Bread Labour

Bread labour was both philosophy and economics to Gandhi. It means ‘that to live man must work’ the work is to be done with Physique not by mind. Gandhi would have restricted the meaning of bread labour only to agricultural labour but being conscious of the impracticability probably due to scarcity of primary factors of production-land he allowed for undertaking other works as well.

According to Gandhi violation of the bread labour is the root cause of present economic disequilibrium. He considers it to be the natural law and therefore enjoins even Rabindra and Raman to do some manual labour. “It is a tragedy of the first magnitude”, he remarks, “that millions have ceased to use their hands as hands. Nature is revenging herself upon us with terrible effect for this criminal waste of the gift she was bestowed upon us as

human beings”. Also we are destroying the matchless living machines i.e. our own bodies, by leaving them to rest and trying to substitute lifeless machinery for them.”

Under my system it is labour which current coin, not metal is. Any person who can use his labour has that coin is wealthy. He regarded manual labour to be the yajna prescribed in the Bhagvadgita and while explaining the dignity of labour he used to quote several verses from Gita in support of himself.

Sarvodaya

John Ruskin contends in ‘unto this last’ that man can be happy only if they obey the moral law. Gandhi was so much fascinated by ‘unto this last’ of John Ruskin that he paraphrased it and later translated this paraphrase into Gujrati and named it ‘Sarvodaya’.

Sarvodaya stands for the emancipation the upliftment and elevation of all and that all living beings are participants in or portions of a super material reality. Hence the good of all living beings which necessarily implies the good of all humanity has to be positively fostered. It repudiates therefore the limited gospel of the greatest good of the greatest number.

The fundamental notion in the Sarvodaya philosophy is the primacy and ultimate of the spirit. Gandhi’s dominated concern was the realization of God as all pervasive truth. His political, economic and social endeavours and programmes were oriented towards progressive enlargement of the moral consciousness through the service of the Daridranarayan and the consequent intimate and intuitive realization of the primordial divine spirit. Theory of Sarvodaya does negate the importance of material commodities. It would refuse however to regard them as the dominant goal of all human endeavour.

Thus, there are three focal points of Gandhian Economic order:

1. Establishment of a non-exploitative economy
2. Decentralisation
3. Integrated rural development

Gandhi formulated his economic order in the context of his design, of an ideal social order: a non-violent, non-exploitative, humanistic and egalitarian society. His approach to economics is through the avenue of truth and non-violence. Its goal is not pure material benefit but the advancement of humanity on its road to progress by strengthening the character and the individual development of personality of every single person engaged in such activity. No one’s gain should be anybody’s loss-financial, physical, moral, or spiritual. If there is to be a choice, the preference should fall on the eternal constituents of man rather

than on the material. It is the first brick upon which the edifice of his entire economic philosophy stands.

The very idea of non-exploitative economy paves the way for decentralisation. A non-violent system such as he wished to see established in India was to him impossibility so long as there was a wide gulf between the rich and poor. As a humanitarian it was the conditions of poverty prevailing in the country and the moral and material degradation that they spelt which claimed his attention when, from beyond India's shores, he preached the gospel of self-sufficiency.

Integrated rural development is the next focal point of his economic order. Gandhi had sought to build India from the bottom. Those are from the poorest and weakest and have followed the centrality of village. Gandhi felt that a strengthened and economically sound rural economy would revitalize Indian economy. He preached, hence the 'gospel of rural mindedness. A rural economy of self-contained villages alone could be the basis of a non-violent economy.

Referring to the economic conditions of India, in a paper on 'the human dimension of economic growth: challenges of stagnation in under developed countries' presented by him at Asia-assembly in New Delhi in 1973 **Professor Gunnar Myrdal said:**

"Gandhi was certainly a planner and a rationalistic planner but his planning was all embracing and laid main stress on sanitation and health, the raising of nutritional levels by mere intensive agriculture, a redirection and not only an expression of education so that it becomes basic and not merely literary and academic and a redistribution of land wealth to create greater equality."

My submission is that the Gandhian path is not an alternative path of reaching the same goal of economic development which the country is pursuing. It is a path leading to an alternative goal of human life and existence. The Gandhian alternative is Sarvodaya a classless society based on destruction of the class but not on the destruction of the individuals who constitute the classes, a system of production that does not fail to make use of science and technology for creating an economy of abundance but does not in the process either kill individual initiative or freedom for development nor create a psychology of ceaseless striving for more and more of material goods, a system of distribution that will ensure a reasonable minimum income for all.

Gandhi's solution rested on the application of unadulterated non-violence to all aspects of life.

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