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Ravindra Kumar

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Gandhi: Non-violence and Indian Democracy*

Ravindra Kumar**

Mahatma Gandhi had great faith in non-violence and was of the opinion that all man-made institutions were not free from risk. For instance and in particular he considered 'state-like' institutions, "... symbolic of centralized and organized violence." Therefore, it was regarded as an essential evil. In a state, democracy can never be developed entirely on the basis of non-violence, cannot be evolved into its true form until and unless it falls completely under the domain of non-violence.

Will there be any possibility of having the people's government imbued with non-violence now or in near future? Can we think of founding a stateless society after having eliminated the essential evil-'the state', at the earliest? Gandhi himself was not sure about it. He admitted, " I am making efforts in this direction." For him the right approach in this regard was gradually to improve the working of present day democracy and having fixed a goal, to advance further making sure that justice and freedom are made available equally to all. Then only the concept of true democracy will be fully materialized. This, as we know, was *Ramarajya* of his dreams.

Gandhi did not visualize *Ramarajya* for India only, nor can it be done so. It can be said without reservation that he wanted to demolish the institution called the state and to unite the societies all over the world assuring justice and freedom to all. For some specific reasons enumerated below, Gandhi wanted to start the work of giving shape to his concept of democracy or in other words of *Ramarajya* from India. The first of the specific reasons is that relatively speaking the attitude of Indians for non-violence in principle and practice has been significant and unique. The commitment that the Indians have for the application of non-violence in day-to-day life, even today, is hard to be found elsewhere in other countries. India is a country of diversity in unity or of unity in diversity. The people here have faith in various religious communities, sects, ideologies, traditions and customs. Not one or two, but many languages are spoken here. Probably, it is well-known that the population of India has touched the thousand million mark. But in spite of the vast population and diversity, democracy has been functioning in India for the last fifty-four years. India has the honor of being the biggest democracy and has set an example before

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all nations of the world. A scholar commenting on Indian democracy says, 'the most important phenomena of the post war era is the survival of the Indian democracy.' This has been possible only because a great majority of Indians is more or less committed to non-violence in practice. It is not surprising, that there may, now and then, occur some incidences of violence in such a big and diversified country. What matters most is that democracy has survived in India and with all probability will remain in future also.

Secondly, the history of democracy in India dates back to the ancient times. There are references of it in the earliest *Vedic* literature. If we throw a glance at the history of India of about 600 B.C., we find that Gautam Buddha's father Shuddhodana was a member of *Shakya's* republican system of government and in the same capacity was also proclaimed a king. Besides Shuddhodana, Bhaddiya and Dandapani were also the members of the republican government. If we study *Vinayapatika* and *Mazzhimanikaya*, the Buddhist treatises, we find them clearly mentioned therein. It has also been mentioned that Gautam Buddha's wife Yashodhara was the daughter of the king of *Koliyagana* and during that period it was also a republic. The same can be said about Vaishali.

Gautam Buddha himself was a great admirer and supporter of democracy. As has been stated above, he was born in a republic. Addressing the *Lichchhavi* rulers of Vaishali, he advised them always to sit together and take decisions collectively and having once arrived at a decision, they should dutifully act upon it in unison. He emphasized on observance of a system, law and order, modesty and freedom of women. Not only this, during the time of Buddha himself, i.e. 2500 years and more ago, a unique democratic order could be found in the assemblies of Buddhist, for which Marquess of Zetland had rightly pointed out that it could be compared to the parliamentary practice of the present day.¹

The great scholar Megasthenese, who came to India with the army of Alexander, has written about many self-governing communities and federations. Their leaders were elected. In *Mauryan* period, there were no kings who wielded power in many self-governing communities and federations. They were republics. It is also a fact that the system of administration in those republics was not the same. Nevertheless, the characteristic feature common to all of them was that there were no kings by inheritance. The head of the republic was either elected or nominated by the community, and it is notable that 'he could be removed from office if necessary'.² In *Cheevervastu*,³ there is a reference to the *Lichchhavi* Republic, one of the very

powerful republics then. It is mentioned therein that after the death of the leader of the Republic, the main condition laid down for the election of a new leader was that he should be a deserving person. The appointment of the candidate was announced with the condition that he would be liable to be removed from the office if he failed to get his decisions endorsed by the community. Moreover, the leader of the Republic had only executive powers, the constitutional powers were vested in the community. The community took all important decisions and they were binding on the people. If anyone dared violate them, he/she was subjected to punishment. The republic was a kind of general-body, the meeting of which was attended by all citizens who were capable of exerting their rights. This point was very important and the Republic of Vaishali in particular can be cited as an example. The important aspect of it was that the decisions had to be endorsed by the majority. It is evident that these states were republics and continued to remain so till 4-5 century A.D., upto *Gupta* period.

In short, the history of democracy in India goes back to distant past. It is another matter that so far as, the present day democratic system is concerned, the way it functions and the voting right incorporated therein, it may be different from the one that existed in the ancient past. It is generally assumed that democracy was first started in the city-states of Greece. But, if we study the history of India, we find that democracy did first start in the European Sphere about 2000 years ago. Anyway, the position of India is quite apparent on one point, in this context. The villages in India, which are the lowest units, enjoyed autonomy in ancient India. The villagers very often met together, exchanged views and solved many administrative problems. The village chiefs were elected. Although during the medieval period, some political changes took place and there were occasions for the centralization of power, even then the village Panchayats did function and played an important role at the lowest level of the administrative system. It is a clear indication that the common man did get the opportunity, though not tantamount to all, of participating in administration.

During the *Sultanate* period, there-after, or during the Imperial rule, whatever the form of power might be, whatever changes in the economic field, good or bad, might be, the villages in India had their own importance, and the traditions passed on to them since the ancient times, have left an indelible impression on the people. They have maintained the unity in diversity, have sustained non-violence, the everlasting system of values, and have not allowed the roots of democracy to die. This is another matter that it did not grow properly under adverse circumstances.

In a country, that has an environment conducive to diversity in unity and unity in diversity, the people of which have remained committed to the supreme values of non-violence in practice, and where the system of self-government lies deep rooted at the level of villages, no form of government other than democracy can be effective. That's why, Gandhi himself has said that 'it is most likely that even in democracy there may be misuse of power, the evils may appear just for the reason that it is a man-made system and not a God made institution. But it is not prudent to avoid democracy for fear of evils. It will not solve any problem. Democracy is essential, especially for a country like India. By eliminating chances of constant misuse of democracy it can be developed into real *Ramarajya*, or at least efforts can be made in this direction, and it should be done.' In this direction, Gandhi wanted to make a start from India and set an example before the other nations of the world.

2

Gandhi had full knowledge of the conditions that prevailed in the past as well as in contemporary times; and so while talking about the development of a democratic system, he gave preference to the economic sphere and considered it to be the foremost. He affirmed that "A non-violent system of government," that the real democracy, "is clearly an impossibility, so long as the wide gulf between the rich and the hungry millions persists."⁴ But he was totally against the use of violent methods to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor. He always favored the non-violent methods for this purpose. He was against class-wars also, for the simple reason that "the class-wars were against the basic nature of Indians...and also against the message that non-violence conveys. Those who consider class-war necessary have not understood the essential meaning of non-violence, or have got to know it superficially."⁵

Gandhi did not regard class-wars necessary, nor did he want to deviate from the path of non-violence. How, then, could the disparity between the rich and the poor be removed? Gandhi put forward the principle of Trusteeship for this purpose. It was within the scope of non-violence and in this context he has written in *Young India* of 26 March 1921, "By the non-violent method, we seek not to destroy the capitalists, we seek to destroy capitalism. We invite the capitalist to regard himself as a Trustee for those on whom he depends for the making, the retention and increase of the capital. No need the worker waits for his conversion. If capital is power, so is work. Either is dependent on the other...."

Gandhi held the same opinion for the land-owners. Continuing with what he had said earlier, he wrote in *Harijan* of 5 December, 1936 that "he did not want to destroy the land-owners... he wanted to change their hearts through *ahimsa*." Desirous of bringing a change, Gandhi was anxious of bringing the land-owners within the range of Trusteeship. In fact, he had a preference for the principle of Trusteeship to the ownership, and so he wrote in *Young India* on 26th November, 1931, "I am inviting those people who consider themselves as owner today to act as trustees, i.e. owners, not in their own right, but owners in the right of those whom they have exploited."

Through Trusteeship, Gandhi placed before the owners the proposal of 'Introspection and Self-Reform' as has been rightly indicated in 'Simple, Practical Trusteeship Formula' by Mashroowala and Parikh: "Trusteeship provides a mean of transforming the present capitalist order of society into an egalitarian one. It gives no quarter to capitalism, but gives the present owning class a chance of reforming itself. It is based on the faith that human nature is never beyond redemption."⁶ Although Gandhi's proposal was based on ethical values and moral conduct, it was not an easy task to convince the capitalists and the land-owners to come to terms with it and change ownership to Trusteeship. However, Gandhi's proposal was undoubtedly significant and commendable. It would have served India as well as other nations of the world as a guideline.

Gandhi gave the utmost emphasis on decentralization of power in order to develop real democracy in India. This decentralization was capable of assuring self-reliance at the lowest level, in the villages on one hand, and of ending dependence in the economic sphere on the capitalists and the land-owners on the other. It also resolved to participation of each and everyone in political control. In this regard, Gandhi wrote in *Harijan*, "India has had experience of... village republics, as they were called by Mayne. I fancy that they were unconsciously governed by non-violence... An effort has now to be made to revive them under a deliberate non-violent plan."⁷ So, Gandhi did begin the process of democratization from the villages. Giving it the name of 'Village-Swaraj', he says, "My idea of Village-Swaraj is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbors for its own vital wants and yet inter-dependent for many others in which dependence is necessary".⁸ In the same context, he further notes that: "Every village's 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 playground for adults and children. Then, if

there is more land available, it will grow useful money crops, thus excluding *ganja*, tobacco, opium and the like."⁹

I have already mentioned that Gandhi primarily talked about self-reliance at the lowest level, which would unburden the common man from economic dependence and at the same time ensure him good health. Continuing in this line of thought he has said, "The village will maintain a village theatre, school and public hall. It will have its own water-works ensuring clean water supply. This can be done through controlled wells and tanks."¹⁰ After elaborating the basic issues of economy and health, he comes to education and says, "Education will be compulsory up to the final basic course."¹¹

According to Gandhi conducting these activities "would be on the co-operative basis. There would be no castes... untouchability. Non-violence with its technique... would be the sanction of the village community. There would be a compulsory service of village guards who would be selected by rotation from the register maintained by the villages."¹²

Regarding village government Gandhi says, "The Government of the village will be conducted by the '*Panchayat*' of five persons, annually elected by the adult villagers, male and female... These will have 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...."¹³ Continuing further he writes, "I have not examined here the question of relations with the neighbouring villages and the centre if any. My purpose is to give 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 his 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 defiance of his village's honour..."¹⁴

The outline he has drawn above of the Village *Swaraj* is not inherently impossible and "to model such a village may be the work of a life-time. Any lover of real democracy and village-life can take up a village, treat it as his world and sole work, and he will find good result."¹⁵

In the framework of *Panchayat Raj* or Village *Swaraj*, the public opinion will be the foremost, the justice will be speedy and without cost, and in this way, the disputes will be settled within the sphere of non-violence and by co-operation. Naturally, in such a context, the police or army will not be required.

In fact, Gandhi must have realized the real democracy in the *Panchayat Raj* of his dreams. In his own words, "We would regard the humblest and lowest Indian as being equally the ruler of India with the tallest in the land."¹⁶ Everyone will develop higher moral values, forgetting all differences, equally love each other and thus contribute to the formation of a stateless, non-violent world i.e. true democracy. It was Gandhi's firm belief that India was capable of leading the world for the formation of true democracy, for it has been unique and exemplary in the practice of non-violence, as the democratic system has its roots deep rooted since long, and it has been a country of diversity in unity and unity in diversity.

3

Gandhi's aforesaid views on Indian democracy date back to the period of British rule or just after the independence of the country. As we know, after five and a half months of the independence of India, Gandhi was assassinated on 30 January, 1948. Afterwards, the people who took the reins of leadership paid more or less attention to Gandhian thoughts and ideologies. This is the reason that while drafting the Constitution of Indian Republic, they incorporated the parliamentary system at the Centre and also kept in mind the decentralization of political power as well. Under article 326 of the Constitution, they made provision of voting right for all adults, male or female, who attain the age of 21 years. This age limit was brought down to 18 years by the 61st amendment of the Constitution in 1988. Giving guidelines to the States, it has been mentioned under article 40 that "the State shall take steps to organize village *Panchayats* and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government." Accordingly, about seven lacs villages were brought under the three tier *Panchyat Raj* system. Not only this, the local bodies as the Blocs, District Boards, Municipalities and others were organized. They were gradually given more powers. This was done with the sole objective of taking general public in administration.

About 51 years have passed since the Constitution of India was introduced. The *Panchyat Raj* system has also been organized in all provinces. In principle, the

decentralization of power in India is of its own kind and of the type desired by Gandhi, but in practice, it is different. The basic problems that the country is faced with have effected the democratic system, as well as the *Panchayat Raj*. The system suffers from the ill-effects of castes, sub-castes, religious communities, sects and the various languages spoken in the country. It has also not remained unpolluted with *mafia* groups and other subversive elements. This is the reason that the worst incidents of violence have been observed during elections. Nevertheless, democracy has survived in such a vast country and that too stemmed from the lowest level. Very often, we have a glimpse of this ideal system at village level.

Whatever the drawbacks there might be, we cannot put the blame outrightly on Gandhi or on the system he suggested. Gandhi talked about the democracy founded on non-violence for the benefit of all Indians and to set an example before other countries. After Gandhi, it is now for the leaders and the people to tread on the right path. However, his views on non-violence and democracy and his suggestions are certainly precious and their importance can never be undermined. The democracy is necessary for India in view of the conditions prevailing in the country, its characteristics and the diversities. The all-round development can be achieved through it only. The closer it is brought to non-violence and Gandhian thoughts, the more pragmatic it would prove to be.

Footnotes

¹ Marquess of Zetland, a Former Indian Viceroy wrote in 'Legacy of India': "It is probable that the tendency towards self-government evidenced by these various forms of corporate activity received fresh impetus from the Buddhist rejection of the authority of the priesthood and further its doctrine of equality as exemplified by its repudiation of caste. It is indeed to the Buddhist books that we have to turn for an account of the manner in which the affairs of the early examples of representative self-governing institutions were conducted. It may come as a surprise to many to learn that in the assemblies of Buddhists in India 2500 years and more ago are to be found the rudiments of our own parliamentary practice of the present day."

"The dignity of the assembly was preserved by the appointment of a special officer-the embryo of 'Mr. Speaker' in our House of Commons. A second officer was appointed to see that, when necessary, a quorum was secured the prototype of the Parliamentary Chief Whip, in our own system. A member initiating business did so in the form of a motion, which was then opened to discussion. In some cases, this was done once only, in others, three times, thus anticipating the practice of Parliament in requiring that a bill be read a third time before it becomes law. If discussion disclosed a difference of opinion the matter was decided by the vote of the majority, the voting being done by ballot."

² History of India.

³ Buddhist treatises.

⁴ Constructive programme pp. 20-21.

⁵ Amrit Bazar Patrika, Calcutta, August 3, 1934

⁶ *Harijan*, 25 October, 1952

⁷ *Harijan*, 4 August, 1940.

⁸ *Harijan*, 26 July, 1942.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Harijan*, 26 July, 1942

¹¹ *Ibid*

¹² *Ibid*

¹³ *Ibid*

¹⁴ *Ibid*

¹⁵ *Harijan*, 26 July, 1942.

¹⁶ *Harijan*, 18 January, 1948.

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