

## **Module 3 : Mahatma Gandhi**

### **Section 6 : Trusteeship**

Trusteeship is another novel and innovative idea of Gandhi. It is an ethico-economic concept. Gandhi believes that economic equality is a basic requirement of a just and non-violent society. Economic equality is opposed to monopolization or concentration of wealth. He takes economic equality or equitable distribution of wealth as a great ideal. But the problem is: how to materialize this ideal into practice. In other words to bring economic equality without any coercive measure or encroaching upon individual freedom is a great challenge. Trusteeship seems to provide a possible solution to this problem.

It is a fact that in Indian society or in any society for that matter great economic disparities exist between a few haves, the privileged, and many have-nots, the unprivileged. The presence of glaring inequalities is not a healthy sign for a society for it contributes to the cause of social tension, class conflict and disharmony. Gandhi was very serious about this problem and gave serious thought to establish equality in society. Of course no society can be founded upon perfect equality. Natural difference will be there among different individuals. Modest difference of income can fairly be accepted as legitimate. But when glaring inequalities exist and there is a wide gap between the hungry millions and a limited land owners or capitalists, it causes concern for any social revolutionary who wants to promote equality and justice in society. Gandhi was confronted with such a reality when he was working for India's freedom and social reconstruction. Under such compelling situation he formulated his concept of trusteeship. It is a theoretical formulation for an economic order based on equitable distribution. So equality and trusteeship are to be taken as integrally interlinked.

By economic equality Gandhi does not mean that everyone will have literally the same wealth. The real meaning of equality implies the principle "from each according to his ability to each according to his need". Every individual in a society must contribute something to the social life and in return would be able to live a decent life. Each person should get what he/she really requires provided such needs are natural. But in practice it is found that man's craving for material goods has no limits. This craving for unnatural things and comforts gives rise to competitive acquisitiveness. In this process there is concentration of wealth in the hands of a few individual. They manipulate to acquire wealth disproportionate to their actual needs. Exploitation gives rise to accumulation. When a few people who are in an advantageous situation go on accumulating wealth, majority of the people go unprivileged. Gandhi finds that the deprivation of the millions is due to the capitalistic system of economy and rapid industrialization. The capitalistic system is responsible for the wide economic gap between the people in the society. In his system majority of the people are deprived of the basic needs of life whereas a minority group lives very exuberantly multiplying their wants beyond their natural needs. Rapid industrialization has helped the capitalistic system to create great economic disparities in the society. It has also given rise to unemployment and ecological imbalance. Gandhi was thoroughly dissatisfied with capitalistic system, industrialization and possessiveness which mean accumulation of wealth with a selfish motive.

Gandhi's formulation of trusteeship is based on his basic pre-suppositions. He firmly believes that by birth all men are equal and that all wealth belongs to the society. Because of this assumption he holds that the daily wages of all people in the society should be equalized. If there is some difference with regard to talent, intelligence, physical strength etc., there can be modest difference in the wages, but that will not give rise to a big gap in the society. Further people should utilize their talent for the welfare of the society. Since men are born equal they have a right to equal opportunity. If a person has more than his proportionate need, he becomes a trustee of that so as to utilize it for common good and not for his selfish interest. Since Gandhi believes that all wealth belongs to the society, he is against private accumulation or hereditary inheritance. Trusteeship ensures the transfer of wealth from the privileged class to the unprivileged class. The privileged class can be impressed upon with the idea that they should act as trustees and the wealth in their possession should be utilized in a constructive way to ameliorate the conditions of all. Anybody who has the wealth or talent can be appealed to act as a trustee. Thus Gandhi holds that what belongs to an individual is actually the wealth of the community for every person is an integral part of the society. A person's relationship to his material possession is like that of a trustee. He has to manage it without any selfish attachment. The material possession of an individual is not a personal possession but can be used in the service of others who are less privileged. Similarly a scientist, a scholar, a technocrat, a doctor, a lawyer etc., the elite class of the society, should use their talent to alleviate and help people in society which has nourished them to develop their ability and talent. So talents should not be used for exploiting others or accumulating property for personal benefit. Talents should be recognized and utilized for social betterment. So, people having surplus wealth or some talent should act as trustees of the society.

By promoting trusteeship society can undergo a moral transformation. Society can turn egalitarian and become nonviolent. Every individual will have the scope for a decent living and all disparities and discriminations will be annihilated.

This economic model envisaged by Gandhi through trusteeship is supposed to be a new model going beyond the conflicting economic models of his time. Capitalism founded on private enterprise leads to unjustified disparities of wealth. This capitalistic model as found in the west has given rise to colonialism, cut-throat competition and conflicts. The Marxist model of equality is founded on violence and tyranny. Gandhi rejects both the models as unsuitable as while the former promotes inequality and exploitation the latter promotes violence and loss of freedom. The Gandhian model of trusteeship makes a rich person a trustee so that he will use what he reasonably requires for his personal use and the rest for the use for the society. In this economic model there will be no scope for class conflict and a harmonious relation will develop. It will create anew awakening and all exploitations will stop.

The whole approach is based on some philosophy of life. Gandhi believes that everyone despite his education or social position should earn his livelihood by the sweat of his brow. Everyone should do some manual work to earn a living. He calls it bread labour. The needs of the body must be supplied by the body. Since minority of the people, the toiling masses, live on bread labour, the remaining minority group should not hesitate to earn their living by physical work. One may be an intellectual or elite but as long as he is, like any another person, physically fit he should do some manual work. Gandhi was a great champion of the idea of dignity of labour.

Further Gandhi's trusteeship is founded on his belief of innate goodness of human nature. He has had the conviction that any human problem –be it social, economic or political- is basically a moral problem at the root. So to have economic equality or an equitable order, there should be mutual love and trust but not class struggle. The rich or the privileged people are not necessarily heartless. If they are impressed upon with a philosophy and won over by love they will realize that the wealth in their possession is the fruit of the labour of the toiling men. So they should utilize the surplus wealth for the good of others as trustees. If the rich do not work as trustees others can resort to non-cooperation and satyagraha to bring moral change in them. For Gandhi believes that no person is that bad as to be beyond redemption. This way of a non-violent conversion can achieve the desirable goal to establish an equitable order.

Thus trusteeship is a means to change the unjust economic order to an egalitarian one by avoiding class struggle or coercive state action. It is a non-violent alternative to usher in economic change. That is trusteeship, which is in agreement with other Gandhian ideals, would bring economic change on the basis of the change in the mental attitude of the people. Once there is change in the moral ethos, it will solve one of the greatest problems of society. Then equitable distribution of wealth would be an automatic process and would enhance economic justice. Economic justice is a basic prerequisite for a social justice. Once it is achieved though the non-violent method of trusteeship one of the greatest crises facing human society would be over.

To bring economic equality Gandhi, it seems, does not ascribe any significant role to the state. He is opposed to the state because state is antithetical to non-violence and individual freedom. To bring economic change he prefers non-violent mass action and non-cooperation in case the privileged group do not voluntarily agree to act as trustees. Along with it or in addition to it he will suggest state power within a democratic political framework so long as state is there as a political organization. For a practical solution to the problem Gandhi will combine non-violent mass action and legal steps within the democratic policy of the state. But his vision of ideal republic does not give any importance to the state; rather he believes that the state will wither away in the long run.

Trusteeship seems to present an ethical solution to the economic problem of the society. But his solution appears to be very much simplistic having considerable difficulties. The entire analysis and the presuppositions seem to overestimate man's moral response. It is not correct to say that man is innately good to respond to every moral appeal. Human nature is also governed by psychological impulses like greed, selfishness, acquisitiveness etc. it is not that easy to bring a fundamental change in the economic sphere by just appealing to the moral ethos of the privileged people. Again the transformation of a feudal and traditional society is not that simple as Gandhi thinks it to be. Particularly the economic system is the product of many complex social, cultural and political factors. To think of simply a moral solution to the economic problem is to miss the gravity of the problem. Again Gandhi always emphasizes simple living with the minimum requirements for satisfying the basic needs. Simple living appears to be a relative notion. The present day civilization with so much of progress in the field of science, technology and modern amenities seem to sway over people's life style. It is impossible to think that society would go backward and accept industrial primitivism. Further possession of wealth does carry power, social prestige and recognition. It is impossible that human nature would change and everyone will confine his wants to the basic minimum or think himself to be trustee. Trusteeship seems to be an ascetic ideal rather than a pragmatic one. Satyagraha is not that panacea or remedy to solve

the deep rooted problem as Gandhi thinks it to be. Gandhi's approach to every social problem from a moral perspective makes his solution static. A simplistic solution fails to present the real magnitude to the problem. It appears more utopian than realistic.