

Module 3 : Mahatma Gandhi

Section 3 : Ideal Social Order (Sarvodaya)

When Gandhi appeared in the scene of our national life our country was under colonial rule and sick in many aspects of its social life. He found many ills and evils causing great suffering to the people. Observing human sorrow, suffering or predicament, Gandhi, a visionary, thought of an alternative system. He envisaged that the alternative system would be free from all man-perpetuated evils. His sense of concern for the suffering mankind motivated him to find out an alternative social order which would ameliorate human condition.

Gandhi was very critical of capitalism, communism and industrial civilization of his time. His initial reactions against these ideals were expressed in his book "Hindu Swaraj". He attacked capitalism which had given rise to colonialism resulting in poverty, exploitation, inequality etc. He criticized communism as it gave rise to violence, concentration of political power, lack of freedom, alienation etc. he was critical of industrial civilization world over for his idea was that it promoted exploitation, inequality, arms race, environmental pollution, ecological imbalance etc. He was also not in favour of modern technology as it gives rise to unemployment, pollution, exploitation etc.

Under these circumstances Gandhi thought of an alternative model of social reconstruction which he named as Sarvodaya. Sarvodaya literally means, 'Welfare of all'. Gandhi's concept of Sarvodaya was influenced by Ruskin's work "Unto This Last"⁶ which Gandhi himself has acknowledged. In Sarvodaya Gandhi's primary objective was to build a moral community of people. His model of Sarvodaya is an ideal society to be founded upon non-violence, equality and freedom. He gave primacy to justice which he considered to be synthesis of non-violence, equality and freedom.

Gandhi's vision of Sarvodaya was designed in the Indian scenario. He planned to change the social scenario by massive constructive programmes for rebuilding the villages. His immediate compulsion was to remove the evils through voluntary constructive programmes that included steps like abolition of untouchability, introduction of prohibition, emancipation of women, establishment of adult education centers for removal of illiteracy, establishing communal harmony among the people of various religious groups etc.

⁶Gandhi, M.K., Hind Swaraj, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad.

Any social transformation or reconstruction involves two important issues. The first is the strategic procedure to be implemented to change or replace one set of social systems by another set of systems. The second is the process of resolution of conflicts which are likely to crop up in this process of transformation. Gandhi gives his constructive programme so as to transform one set of social system into another. Gandhi believes that by massive voluntary constructive programme social system can be changed in a desirable way. Then he suggests his doctrine of satyagraha as a means to resolve any conflict in case it arises in the process. But the ultimate goal of Sarvodaya is to establish a classless and stateless model of interdependent, self-sufficient and autonomous village republics. So the ultimate purpose of Sarvodaya would be to achieve a form of anarchism. The whole scheme of rebuilding the social and political structure would pass through three stages. They are-

- i. The existing social order and its maladies would be removed by massive constructive programme.
- ii. There would be a liberal democratic republic replacing all political systems like colonialism, fascism, communism or western democracy.
- iii. An anarchist model of decentralized, self-dependent, mutually supporting village republics would be established withering away the state and its structural components.

In this way Gandhi articulated the blueprints of an ideal social order, what he calls sarvodaya. Of course he never predicted after what length of time it would practically be realized. Believing on a moral notion that means would always justify the end, he accepted that the measures to be adopted for the realization of the values of non-violence, equality and freedom will result in the gradual approximation to these ideals. It is true that society will never achieve perfection or once-for-all change, but there will be progressive march of the society in the direction of achieving the ideal republic by approximating these values in all spheres of public life.

It seems Gandhi's ultimate goal is the realization of a classless and stateless society founded on the principle of non-violence, equality and freedom. But his immediate need is to mould a non-violent, socialistic, democratic republic as a transition to that end. In this phase there will be some amount of political authority but it will govern the least. It would act like a link between the village reconstruction

and the ultimate goal of independent village republic. Ultimately Gandhi's ideal republic aims at politically and economically decentralized autonomous panchayats. They will be mutually supportive of each other and each will have its sovereignty which will add to its internal strength. Gandhi is opposed to any centralized political system or to a sovereign state as it is an instrument of power which is likely to be authoritarian or coercive.

Gandhi's ideal republic will be based on as already stated, non-violence, equality and freedom the values that characterize justice. Such a society will be different from the existing ones. The self-dependent panchayats will be bound voluntarily in a federation. Gandhi's ideal republic would be a stateless society. He wants to do away with the state and its structural components because he believes that the state is founded on organized violence. Moreover the state is likely to encroach upon individual freedom through its coercive institutions. So Gandhi prefers anarchism. Of course this does not mean that the state will immediately wither away and there will be perfect anarchism. But in the process of non-violent transformation of the society there will emerge a non-violent democratic state where social life of people will be self-regulated and people will be equal. In this process society would be so regulated and individuals would be so enlightened that there would be non-violence, equality and freedom in all spheres of public life. This situation would entail abolition of the state and its structural components like political parties, judiciary, army, police force etc.

An important aspect of Sarvodaya society or Gandhi's ideal republic is that it should be based on equality. How to bring economic equality without any coercive measure or encroaching upon individual liberty is a serious problem. Gandhi in his own way suggests measures to bring equitable economic order in the society. It is true that no society can be founded upon perfect equality for there is natural difference in intelligence, physical strength and talent of different individuals. So modest difference of income can fairly be accepted as legitimate. But when glaring inequality prevails or there is wide gap between the have-not millions and a limited land owners or capitalists, as has been the case in almost all the states, it is a matter of great concern.

Since economic equality is the basis of a just and non-violent society, Gandhi has innovated the concept of trusteeship as a practical solution to the problem. Further by economic equality Gandhi does not mean that everyone will have literally the same amount but a better realization of the principle "from each according to his ability to each according to his need". Equality here means that every individual should be capable to satisfy his natural needs.

Gandhi simply turns a serious economic problem to a moral problem. For, he differentiates between possession and possessiveness. One may possess physical capacity, mental talent, intelligence or artistic skill. But no individual however intelligent he may be can acquire wealth without the support of the society. So he believes that all wealth belongs to the society. Gandhi is against private accumulation or hereditary inheritance. If a person possesses wealth disproportionate to his actual need, then he should act as a trustee. The wealth in his possession be utilized in the service of others. Gandhi takes trusteeship as a non-violent alternative without any class struggle or coercive state action.

Freedom of the individual is another important feature of the ideal republic. Freedom is the moral striving for self-purification through social action. It is the voluntary choice of virtue in all social relationships. When in a society people feel free of any external control and regulate their lives by the dictates of conscience, society undergoes moral transformation. Gandhi's concept of freedom as an inward moral activity suits to his anarchist model of society. It is in tune with individualism, which takes freedom as the exercise of the personal moral responsibility.

Thus Gandhi's whole approach for rebuilding the socio-political structure aims at a moral elevation of the society. The very purpose of Sarvodaya is the gradual approximation to some cherished values like non-violence, equality and freedom. It is founded on a philosophy of altruism and emphasizes on quality of life.

About the efficacy of Gandhi's model of social engineering the question is: Can it have any universal merit? There are so many drawbacks and limitations inherent in Gandhi's model of ideal republic. But we can discuss a few of its drawbacks to point out its impracticalities. Gandhi's idea of autonomous village republic is basically applicable to an agrarian rural society but has nothing to do with developed or technologically advanced society. Only in a free and agrarian society the constructive programmes can be taken up. The constructive programme is a voluntary affair but not a government programme. Implementation of the constructive programme without government's support cannot achieve its goal. This is obvious from the failure of the Bhodan movement by Gandhi's ardent follower, Vinoba Bhave, who was a great advocate of Sarvodaya ideal. Even if government is not hostile and lends support to the voluntary work, still it has no universal merit. The constructive programme or Gandhi's model of social transformation cannot claim any merit without an agrarian liberal system. Needless to say that no society is at this level nor will a society prefer to go backward.

Further the idea of eliminating the state and its structural components like army, legislature, political parties, police etc. appears self-stultifying. It is because unless the state through the administrative measure checks all governmental control and legislates for its self-extinction, the state will not wither away. For sake of argument even if it is believed that the state through legislation squeezes all its powers and functions for the promotion of village republics. Still there is no certainty that the village republics would run well. For there may occur economic depression, natural calamity in some part or other, or there may arise caste or communal conflict between villages as these are very common in backward communities. In such situation without any state control things would turn bad to worse. In caste ridden society the village republic may turn arbitrary and suppress human right and dignity. In such situations human suffering will be enhanced but not ameliorated.

Gandhi believed that any social evil, violation of justice or adverse situation can be remedied by resorting to *satyagraha*. Satyagraha is considered to be the most formidable means of social control and the infallible technique to get rid of any injustice. The scope and dimension of satyagraha will be discussed separately. Here it can be pointed out that Gandhi's generalization that Satyagraha is the panacea to solve any social crisis is very simplistic. It has its own limitations. Human problems are so diverse and socially so much deep-rooted that it is not that easy to wipe out them by means of Satyagraha.

It is a fact that Gandhi lived in an age of colonialism and imperialism with abysmal poverty in India and in many other countries as well. He witnessed two world wars and he came across hungry millions who were deprived of basic needs of life. Under such historical compulsion he imagined a new socio-economic alternative. His primary concern was to build a non-violent, peaceful and moral community or decentralized village republics. An idea is relevant depending upon certain conditionals like time, place, situation, issue, people etc. His notion of decentralized village republics which appeared very fascinating to him in his time may not seem so in today's globalized world. The modern development in science, technology and communication has created hope to alleviate poverty and improve the standard of living of the millions. Global vision and international mind have helped to go beyond parochialism, sectarianism and communalism. Technological know-how has revolutionized the system of production. Standard of living along with quality of life has improved in many countries beyond what it was during the time of Gandhi. So the possibility of going back to industrial primitivism and self-dependent village republic has become an impractical proposition.

Besides all these limitations, something still remains in Gandhi's vision that will inspire humanity for generations to come. The very purpose of Gandhi was to establish a moral community free from violence, inequality and exploitation. The primacy of the moral plays a vital role than any immediate result or political mileage. Gandhi believes that a moral upsurge is more important than technological sophistication to improve the quality of life. His objective is sustainable development, eco-friendly technology and harmonious moral life for the individual and society. Gandhi still inspires against the veils of the present consumerist culture, environment-polluting technology leading to ecological imbalance and neo-colonialism in the guise of globalization. We may not want industrial primitivism or autonomous villages but we cannot remain completely indifferent to the moral life of humanity for which Gandhi was concerned.