

Lecture 28: Gandhian Theory

Slide 1

GANDHIAN THEORY

There are certain practical difficulties in discussing Gandhian theory of population. First of all, Gandhi was not a social scientist. He was a practical idealist who had no time nor the aptitude for constructing systematic theories (Iyer, 1986). Therefore, his ideas are open to several interpretations. One way of looking at his social theory is to assume that: (a) his theory of society is rooted in his own understanding of mystical tradition of India that provides a common framework of moral action in the midst of a number of religious and moral philosophies existing in the country for a long time; (b) it needs to be constructed partly from his own writings, speeches, notes, etc. and partly from his social experiments; and (c) it evolved with time, sometimes contradicting the earlier position in some respects, without ever negating its mystical and moral substratum.

Gandhi had expressed a deep concern for population control on several occasions. The main source of his ideas on population are his autobiography and the report of the summit meeting on birth control in 1935, in which he had held lengthy discussions with Margaret Sanger of the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF). It may be noted that at that time there were not many people to support birth control: the world had not seen the phenomenon of population explosion. The writings of Paul R. Ehrlich or Garrett James Hardin were did not exist. Margaret Sanger had undergone a jail term for 30 days (in her country) for holding views favourable to birth control.

Slide 2

Gandhi courageously spoke in favour of population control. Yet his argument in favour of population control was not the usual Malthusian fear of over-population. As early as 1925, he had written in *Young India* that if suitable improvements could be made in the laws relating to land and the state of agriculture, and an allied occupation could be provided, India could support twice its population. Gandhi said:

This little globe of ours is not a toy of yesterday. It has not suffered from the weight of over-population through its age of countless millions. How can it be that the truth has suddenly dawned upon some people that it is in danger of perishing of shortage of food unless birth rate is checked through the use of contraception?

This and other ideas of Gandhi on birth control are well presented in Chapter LVI: Birth Control in *India of My Dreams*. The population of India at that time was about 262 millions. Today, as per the 2001 Census, it stands at 1029 million. Therefore, today, there is all the more reason to control the population, particularly since the perception of the ecological crisis is more vivid than it was in Gandhi's time. His support for birth control was related to the "political" situation prevailing in the country. He said that there could be no two opinions on the necessity for limiting births (Suman, 1969). But, like Marx, he rejected the idea of a universal theory of population. To him, in some circumstances it may be considered quite rational to encourage reproduction but in many others it may be considered irrational. According to Gandhi, in his days, religion favoured a small family and birth control had become a political duty. Some of his committed supporters found his involvement with birth control a little embarrassing, but for Gandhi, the political situation at that time demanded that people avoid any kind of wastage of the vital force (Desai, 1973) and take up the task of ending colonization and poverty more seriously. Thus, politics had become a religious activity.

Gandhi made two observations (Margaret, 1969):

Slide 3

- (a) The burden of large families falls on the middle class; as far as fertility is concerned, it is greater among the middle than the lower classes. If that were not true one would not have the low average of five children per family in India.
- (b) Women do not want many children but they cannot resist their husbands. If they could do so without causing bitterness, birth control would be possible in 99 per cent of the cases.

Gandhi was the first person in India to make an observation on the correlation between family size and class. Later, empirical data collected through research studies confirmed the theoretical validity of his observations. In the pre-transitional stage too fertility in India was certainly nowhere near the biological maxima (Bongaarts, 1975). Culture must have been a major fertility depressing factor in India. Research has also shown that in India development and modernization caused a rise in fertility in the early years of the post-Independence period (Srinivasan, 1986).

In observation (a) above, the term middle class requires some clarification. In the Gandhian framework, middle class is not an income category. It is a class of people who have begun to westernize their life style and serve as go-betweens. They are most influenced by Westernization and they controlled the consciousness of masses. Behavioural changes among the members of this class have ensued as a result of both modernization and Westernization. Modernization may lead to a short term increase in fertility through its effects on coitus frequency, separation between spouses caused by cultural and familial reasons and intrauterine deaths. In the West, this rise was arrested by a simultaneous change in social mobility aspirations which motivated couples to control family size. This fertility-depressing effect of modernization did not operate among the middle classes during the early phases of development.

It is true that empowerment of women, or a lack of it, is associated with fertility. Demographic surveys have shown that women have lower fertility desires than men but due to force of patriarchy they were not in a position to act as per their desires. Education among women has now paved the way for fertility decline and fertility among the educated women has already declined to the below replacement fertility.

Slide 4

Gandhi rejected artificial birth control methods and this is the most controversial aspect of his theory of population. In this respect, he is closer to Malthus than to Marx. Interestingly Malthus was a clergyman and Gandhi too strongly believed in religion. Except for a brief period during his stay in England as a student, Gandhi was always against using *external* family planning methods. His commitment to *brahmacharya* (celibacy) was basic. Initially, he used it for the limited purpose of restricting family size but as his thoughts matured, he advocated it essentially for Truth realization. To follow *brahmacharya* completely is to realize Truth, said Gandhi. He claimed to have found it experientially and continuously, step-by-step (Gandhi, 1957) and subsequently confirmed it with statements enshrined in religious literature. It may be said that for Gandhi *brahmacharya* in itself, was not a means but a value. According to him, the sole purpose of the reproductive organs was to produce offspring (of high quality); it was wrong to use them for gratification.

Gandhi was not addressing the *sanyasins*: he was proposing *brahmacharya* to ordinary householders. He said that a householder can also lead a life of *brahmacharya* if he controls his semen, except on the occasion of cohabitation for the purpose of childbirth. If he does so he is as good as an avowed *brahmachari*. He said that in the life of a healthy and virile man or woman, there may be only one such occasion. One may argue that a man or a woman may want more than one child. In that case, among ordinary householders, sex for the purpose of childbirth (once or more) may not lead to violation of the vow of celibacy, but sex for pleasure does.

Socio-economic consequences of celibacy are obvious. It may look difficult or even impossible to practice celibacy but if practiced, it would lead to replacement level or even lower levels of fertility quite fast. Many Western countries have limited family size using natural methods at a time when state and religion were not supportive of birth control at all. But Gandhi was not looking for solution to population problem only. For Gandhi the root meaning of celibacy or *brahmacharya* was different: it is a conduct which puts one in touch with God. “The conduct consists in the fullest control over all the senses. This is the true and relevant meaning of the word” (Gandhi, 1954).

Slide 5

Control over the organ of generation is impossible without proper control over all the senses. “My experience says that one who has not won palate cannot win sexual desire”, said Gandhi (1999). A householder lives for his household creating a boundary wall around their love. In order to rise to the height of universal love one would have to remain unmarried or live with his wife as brother and sister.

EVALUATION OF GANDHIAN THEORY OF POPULATION

For those who believe in Gandhian values of good life, Gandhian theory of population presents a fresh approach to population control that goes beyond the birth control and raises the issue of constructing a good society. The question is: a population can achieve a low growth rate using birth control but can it achieve the moral values required to establish an egalitarian and non-violent order? Such questions cannot be answered on empirical basis. Gandhi provided a critique of modernity, and presented a practical alternative to it, which is neither traditional nor from within the modernity. Can Gandhi be called postmodern? One thing is clear that he was one of those early thinkers who could connect population growth with gender, political power, voluntarism, religion and social values. It requires serious thinking.