

Contribution of Mahatma Gandhi to Democratic Theory: An Analytical Study

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Abstract

Highly critical of Western democracies, Gandhi propounded his own democratic theory that tries to bring the old system of village life in accordance with the democratic value of Self-government. He propounded not just a form of government, but something that relates to all walks of human life. Accepting the fact that individual lies at the heart of democracy, he argues that through continuous endeavour, democracy can be evolved. Among Gandhi's contributions to the democratic theory, non-violence and equality are the most important. Non-violence is actually the most original legacy of Gandhi to democratic theory.. This paper will try to analyse Gandhi's views about democracy and how it differs from some other western models of democracy. In pursuit of what Gandhi called an enlightened democracy, it cross examines Gandhi's reflections on the key principles of the Western liberal civilization.

Keywords: Gandhi, Democracy, Non-violence, Equality, Freedom etc.

Introduction

Democratic form of government is the most prevalent, popular and controversial form of government in today's world. Although the term has been used ambiguously and vaguely over time, its claim to uphold justice, equality, civilization, and true participation of people in public functions and in the decision making process is agreed upon by political theorists. Western liberal democracy emerged as a response against autocratic monarchy, feudal economy, and the powerful Church claiming superiority over society and the State. Liberal democracies in response advocated the separation of politics from religion. Also in the economic sphere, it advocated free market economy, with state adopting the policy of laissez-faire. For Liberal democracy, the primary focus is on individual rights, his freedom and liberty, which created problems of disharmony between individual freedom and the community interests. Carter and Stokes remark, "... liberal democracy does not take sufficient account of economic and social realities that inhibit individual fulfilment and the creation of a fully democratic society and polity" (Carter & Stokes, 2002: 3). Mahatma Gandhi who has consistently insisted the importance of Democracy in promoting a non-violent, free society which fosters tolerance and growth, is also wary of its dangers. He argues that there is no human institution without its dangers. Democracy is a great institution and therefore there are greater chances of abuse. How did then Gandhi visualise democracy? Being a well-known critic of western democracy, the question arises could he provide an alternative model? These issues deserve to be discussed.

Non-Violence as an Instrument of Democracy

“The science of non-violence can alone lead one to pure democracy” (Gandhi, 1927).

Turning Ahimsa (non-harm) into a democratic tool for mass resistance, Gandhi updated its old notion and made it more coherent and relevant to the urgent problems of democracy-building in the modern world. He clearly realised its vast possibility and accepted it as a basis of all life. Believing that the real purpose of Democracy is to provide equal opportunity to both the strongest and the weakest he emphasised that this can be achieved only through non-violence. For Gandhi, principle of non-violence is the fundamental basis of democracy and if democracy or any other form of govt. resorted to violence, it would lose its legitimacy. No perfect form of government is possible without perfect non-violence, behind it (Gandhi, 1947). Linking Non-violence or Ahimsa with democracy, Gandhi argued that it can prepare people to self-control, self-dependency and mutual cooperation to reduce the possibility of abuse. Gandhi criticised the institution of state and believed that it based on violence. Instead he visualises a stateless society in which the State ceases to exist by virtue of moral progress of men. Hence, scholars call him an anarchist. However, he qualifies his ideal as a state of enlightened anarchy in which everyone is his own ruler. However he realises that the ‘ideal is never fully realised in life’. Therefore, his ideal system is essentially non-violent that is “self-regulated where....there is no political power because there is no state” (CWMG, 1958).

Linking non-violence to India’s democratic struggle for freedom, Gandhi presented nonviolence not just as an instrument of political struggle and social emancipation but also as a moral imperative for democracy building. His non-violent democratic theory was both political and ethical. His nonviolent democratic theory in a way replaces the Hobbesian security paradigm of politics, in which the state is a political agent responsible for implementing the requirements of human security. He replaced it with his own paradigm of empathetic nonviolence and democratic self-government. He used his conception of ahimsa on a collective level to attain political, moral and social ends. Through non-violent action, Gandhi suggests an empathetic emancipation, and a democratic transformation of society, in order to create and secure a just and an ethical social order. Moreover, he believed that political equality was essential for any working democracy; however he recognised that inequalities were bound to exist even in an ideal society. The need was to limit the range of inequalities for which he provided a number of economic programmes. Gandhi not only offered institutional alternatives to representative democracy, he also offered alternative ways of thinking about politics in general and democracy in particular. He extends the meaning of democracy, to socio-economic spheres. But is pessimistic that this goal cannot be achieved by the State being a coercive power. Therefore, it needs a collective effort on the part of individuals. Herein Gandhi brings his concept of Hence brotherhood as an ingredient of his conception of democracy..

An Anti-Populist and Anti-Elitist Democracy

This section analyses, the anti-populist democratic discourse of M. K. Gandhi, in order to understand, how it undermines the populist upsurge with respect to liberal democracy and substitutes it with an intercultural democratisation theory. Being a modern political category, Populism emerged specifically in liberal democratic regimes, as it provides conditions for its emergence and acceptance. [Gandhi however rejected the notion of populism and put forward the concept of civilization as the alternate political concept.](#) He “preferred to speak of swadeshi spirit which captured the interrelated ideas of

collective pride, ancestral loyalty, mutual responsibility and intellectual and moral openness” (Parekh, 1989: 194), bypassing the characteristic nature and vocabulary of European nationalism. Strengthening the swadeshi movement as a form of social organisation and production that posed an alternative to capitalism and western state-centrism, Gandhi supported a model of individual duty and community cooperation, without the regulation of the market. Gandhi’s appeal to the citizens as the heart of self-governing politics is not based on the supreme will of the masses. He opposed the rule of mobs and populism when conducting politics and organising society in the name of democracy.

He argues, “Those who claim to lead the masses must resolutely refuse to be led by them” (Gandhi, 1927: 40). He went on to note that “it was not only not enough to protest one's own opinion while surrendering to the mass, but that ...in matters of vital importance, leaders must act contrary to the mass of opinion if it does not commend itself to their reason” (ibid). Gandhi regarded the concepts of self-transformation and civic maturity, as integral part of his democracy. He considered civic virtue as the basis of his philosophical and political quests for truth. For him, citizen governance, a product of mature citizens can never be inclined towards unexamined and obedient masses. In a sense, Gandhi’s view of democracy starts where party politics end. His democracy was the art of ethically organising society and not the technique of power making and party organizing. The ethical and the political are one and the same in nonviolent democratic theory.

Through his nonviolent democratic theory Gandhi endorsed an inclusive and dialogical idea of living together while disapproving national self-centredness and religious fanaticism in all forms. Gandhi presented not just an instrument of political struggle and social emancipation but also articulated an essentially moral imperative for democracy building. He also departed from the interest group pluralism which is clearly evident in Western model of Democracy. As an alternative to the pluralist societies that have diversified interests, Gandhi put emphasis on a small setting with small economy like a village where power was diffused and life was simpler. He came up with his conception of Participatory Democracy (Swaraj) along with Satyagraha combining politics and morality, with the aim of integrating economic equality with the political decentralisation.

Centralisation vs. Decentralisation: Gandhi’s Idea of Gram Swaraj

The foundational basis of Gandhi’s ideal polity was the decentralisation of political power called as Gram Swaraj where, every village would be a republic or panchayat having full powers (Chaturvedi & Rai, 2008). Through his scheme of democratic decentralisation, Gandhi wanted to build a socio-economic political order based on egalitarian framework. Every village would be self-sustained, managing its own affairs. About Gram Swaraj, Gandhi wrote to Loius Fischer in 1942:

“There are seven hundred thousand villages in India. Each would be organized according to the will of its citizens and all of them voting. Then there would be seven hundred thousand votes and not four hundred million. Each village, in other words, would have one vote. The villages would elect their district representatives and the district administrations would elect the provincial administration, and these in turn would elect a president who would be the national chief executive” (CWMG, 1958).

For Gandhi, centralisation of power distorts all values of democracy and is dangerous to its development. He was against the increase of power of state and therefore challenged the very notion of power.

“I look upon an increase in the power of the state with the greatest fear because, although while apparently doing good by minimising exploitation, it does the greatest harm to mankind by destroying individuality, which lies at the root of progress” (Gandhi, 1935)

So he believed that “possession of power makes men blind and deaf; they can’t see things which are under their very nose, and cannot hear things which invade their ears” (Gandhi, 1920, 1922). For him concentration of power represents violence, therefore he was against the Western interpretation of liberal and socialist democracies as both stood for power. He wanted state power to be reduced so that the roots of Democracy can be deepened. Because for him democracy is an impossible thing until power is not shared by all. For him, True democracy cannot be worked by twenty men sitting at the centre. It has to be worked from below by the people of every village. Through his conception of democratic decentralisation, Gandhi wanted to enhance the reciprocal responsibility. He insisted that decentralisation is an essential corollary to non-violence and endorsed that such decentralisation would be possible only in a predominately non-industrial society with the self-sufficient village as the primary unit of social organisation. Herein power flows from lower units to the higher ones. In such a society, Every adult enjoys opportunity to participate in the decision-making process. There is no party system and society will be free from the evil of the tyranny of the majority.

Conclusion

Gandhi stands as one of the most influential of non-western theorist of Democracy. He indeed was one of the most original and transformative thinkers who emphasised truth in politics, self-rule and came up with an idea of non-liberal democracy insisting upon spiritually empowered participatory democracy. Gandhi didn’t just suggest some institutional reforms, but rather wanted to accomplish bigger goals. Gandhi believed that emancipation of human beings could only be bought about by a non-violent, educative and mass based approach to democratisation. Gandhi sought to integrate the liberal understanding of democracy with ahimsa and satyagraha mode of politics and morality. Gandhi accepted democracy as a great institution and therefore liable to be greatly abused, so he laid more stress on decreasing the possibility of its misuse. Gandhi wanted the ethical revival of democracy through character building and enlightened citizenship. More research needs to be done to open up Gandhi’s legacy of Democratic thought and its relevance for today’s political work.

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