

A Comparative Study of Gandhian Literature on Democracy and Status of Autonomous District Council in Manipur.

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Abstract:

This article is a comparative study of Gandhi's philosophy on democracy and the existing District Council in Manipur. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhiji loved for non-violence, self-sufficient and grass root democracy by way of democratic decentralization starting from down below. The khadi and village industry, unity and equality of all were the basis of his strength. For Gandhi, democracy is a tool in the service of the common good of all citizens. For him, individual freedom alone can make a man voluntarily surrender himself completely to the service of society. Thus, Gandhian ideal society was based on the concept of 'Panchayati Raj' and democratic 'Decentralisation' which stands for self-sufficient of food, clothing, shelter etc. As per Gandhian democracy and the 73rd Amendment Act of the constitution of India, the democratic 'Decentralisation or Panchayat Raj Institutions should be properly empowered for development and welfare of the villages. Looking at the nature of the existing powers and functions of the District councils in Manipur, it has never been functioning up to the aspiration of the tribal people as the councils are fully controlled by the state government. As such, it is found that the standard of the prevailing district council in Manipur is far behind the ideal dream of Gandhi on democracy as Ram Rajya.. The article is written in ethnographic and descriptive methods.

Keywords: Democracy, Decentralization, Non-Violence, Village, Panchayat, Grass-Root, District Council, Autonomous, Empowerment, Self- Sufficient, Powers.

INTRODUCTION:

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born on 2nd October, 1860 at Porbandhar, Gujarat. He passed his matriculation from Bombay University in 1887. He sailed for England in 1888 to study law. Gandhi returned to India in 1891 having qualified for a barrister. In 1893 he sailed for South Africa to take up a law suit of the company called Dadda Abdullah and he continued to stay there for about twenty years and returned to India in 1915. He launched the first Satyagraha at Champaran in 1917. He edited Young India and Navjivan. He framed the constitution for the Indian National Congress. He adopted Khadi for his dress and started spinning himself. He worked for Hindu-Muslim unity, for the welfare of women, for the removal of untouchability, for the propagation of education, for the removal of poverty, etc. He started Civil Disobedience and Quit India Movement against the British. He was arrested and put to jail several times. India got her independence on 15 August, 1947 under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. He was shot dead by Nathuram Godse on 30 January, 1948.

Books and People which or who influenced Gandhi:

He read the books, Plea for Vegetarianism, Howard William's The Ethics of Diet, Dr. Anna Kingsford's The Perfect Way in Diet, The Bhagavad Gita, Buddhist and Jain texts, Sir Edward Arnold's The Light of Asia, Madame Blavatsky's Key to Theosophy, The Bible particularly the Sermon on the Mount, Thomas Carlyle's Heroes and Hero Worship, Mrs. Beasant's How I Became A Theosophist, Tolstoy's The Kingdom is Within You, Ruskin's Unto This Last, Thoreau's essay, 'Civil Disobedience'. 'Truth' and 'Non-violence' he inherited from his father, Karamchand alias Kaba Gandhi and mother, Putlibhai. Endurance from his wife, Kasturba Gandhi and 'Fearlessness' from the family servant, Rambha.

Gandhian principles and Novels written idealising Gandhian philosophy:

Gandhi believed in 'Non-Violence', 'Satyagraha', 'Freedom', 'Equality', 'Trusteeship', 'Ramrajya', 'Sarvodaya', 'Decentralisation of power', etc. The paper talks about Gandhi's concept of 'Democracy' and 'Decentralisation of power' or 'Panchayati Raj' or 'Ramrajya'. R.K. Narayan, Waiting for the Mahatma, Kanthapura, The Vendor of Sweets; Mulk Raj Anand, Untouchable; Prof. Chamanahal, The Crown and the Loin Cloth; etc. In the novel, Kanthapura, Kanthapura is an imaginary village, the protagonists, Murthy is compared as Hanuman, Gandhi is compared as Rama and Sita, Mother India. With all these, we can see if his theories can be applicable to the working system of 'The Manipur Hill Areas Autonomous District Council'.

Gandhi's Definition of Democracy:

Gandhi defined democracy 'as the art and science of mobilising the entire physical, economic and spiritual resources of all the various sections of people in the service of the common good of all. Further he described the nature in working of democracy as there will be complete freedom of opinion and action without interfering into the affairs and rights of others in order to enjoy equal freedom of opinion and action. He also laid a qualification for a true believer of democratic principle. Democracy comes naturally to him who is habituated normally to yield willing obedience to all laws, human or divine. Gandhi said, that he claimed to be democrat both by instinct and training. Let those who are ambitious to serve democracy qualify themselves by satisfying this acid test of democracy first. For him, a democrat must be utterly selfless. He must think and dream not in terms of self or party but only of democracy. Only then does he acquire the right of civil obedience. I do not want anybody to give up his convictions or to suppress himself. I do not believe that a healthy and honest difference of opinion will injure our cause. If you must dissent, you should take care that your opinions voice and your innermost convictions are not intended merely as a convenient party cry. I value individual freedom but you must not forget that a man is essentially a social being. He has risen to his present status by learning to his individualism to the requirements of social progress. Unrestricted individualism is the law of the beast of the jungle. We have to learn to strike the mean between individual freedom and social restraint.

Majority and Minority:

Gandhi also talked about 'Majority and Minority' and defined thus: 'Claiming the right of free opinion and free action as we do, we must extend the same to others. The rule of majority when it becomes coercive, is as intolerable. We must patiently try to bring round the minority to our view by gentle persuasion and argument.' He said that the rule of majority has narrow application. To him Democracy is not a state in which people act like sheep. Under democracy, individual liberty and action is highly

guarded. He said, as “I, therefore, believe that the minority has a perfect right to act differently from the majority’ (Young India, 2-3-’32) and ‘If the individual ceases to count, what is left of society? Individual freedom alone can make a man voluntarily surrender himself completely to the service of society. In such a way he believed that If individual freedom wrested from him, he becomes automation and society is ruined. No society can possibly be built on a denial of individual freedom.

Gandhi’s Concept of Panchayati Raj or Decentralisation of power:

Gandhi felt that democracy was not to come from above but to start from down below. Therefore, he wanted to establish an ideal society based on the concept of ‘Panchayati Raj’ and democratic ‘Decentralisation’. In his reply to the question put forward by Louis Fischer (A Week with Gandhi) about his picture of the new order, Gandhi said ‘You see the centre of power now is in New Delhi, or in Calcutta and in Bombay, in big cities, I would have it distributed among the seven hundred thousand villages of India.’ And he said about his idea of village government (gram-raj), ‘My imaginary village consists of 1000 souls. Jay Prakash Narayan explained Gandhi’s village “was to be a self-governing autonomous community, he considered it necessary that it should be self-sufficient in matter of its ‘vital necessities’ – food, clothing, shelter... Secondly, Gandhi’s village was not an agricultural community; there had to be a balance between agriculture and village industries. Had he been alive now, he might have called it an agro-industrial community.” Gandhi’s description of village self-government in his own words run thus: “My idea of village swaraj (self-government) is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its vital wants, and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is a necessity. Thus every village’s first concern to grow will be 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... It will have its own water works ensuring clean water supply... As far as possible every activity will be conducted on a co-operative basis... Non-violence with its technique of Satyagraha (non-violence resistance) and non-co-operation will be the sanction of the village community. There will be a compulsory service of village-guards, who will be selected by rotation from the register maintained by the village. The government of the village will be conducted by the Panchayat annually elected by the adult villagers.

The Manipur (Hill Areas) District Council Act 1971:

The Manipur (Hill Areas) District Council Act, 1971 was passed by the Parliament to provide for establishment of Autonomous District Councils in the Hill Areas in the then Union Territory of Manipur, but after the attainment of statehood in the year 1972, the Government of Manipur immediately adopted this Central Act by issuing the Manipur (Adaptation of Laws) Order, 1972 and in exercise of the power vested in him under Section 3 of the Act, the then Governor of Manipur vide Notification dated 14.02.1972 initially constituted 6 (six) Autonomous District for the purpose of constitution of Autonomous District Councils (ADC in brief) under the aforesaid Act of 1971, namely (1) Manipur North ADC now Senapati ADC, (2) Sadar Hills ADC, (3) Manipur East ADC now Ukhrul ADC, (4) Tengnoupal ADC now Chandel ADC, (5) Manipur South ADC now Churachandpur ADC and (6) Manipur West ADC now Tamenglong ADC. As per this Act, the District Councils have been empowered the following Powers;

1. The maintenance and management of such property, movable and immovable.
2. The construction, repair and maintenance of such of the roads, bridges, canals and buildings as may

- be transferred to the Council by the Administrator;
3. The establishment, maintenance and management of primary schools.
 4. The establishment, maintenance and management of dispensaries;
 5. The establishment and management of cattle pounds buildings.
 6. The establishment, maintenance and management of markets and fairs.
 7. The supply, storage, and prevention from pollution of water for drinking, cooking and bathing purposes;
 8. The irrigation and supply of water for agricultural purposes;
 9. The prevention and reclamation of soil;
 10. The preservation, protection and prevention of animal diseases;
 11. Public health and sanitation;
 12. The initiation, inspection and control of relief works;
 13. The allotment and management of land.
 14. The management of any forest no being a reserved forest;
 15. The regulation of jhum or shifting cultivation; and
 16. Any other matter which the Administrator may, in consultation with the Areas Committee, entrust to the District Council.

The first ADC election took place in 1973. However, the ADC was not empowered to generate its own revenue but made it dependent on grant-in-aid from the state government. It is, therefore, evident that no elected ADC under this the Act, 1971 could function effectively worked to the satisfaction of the Hills people right from the beginning. Further, the state government dissolved the entire ADC within 1988 and 1993 in Manipur, and thereby the ADC brought completely under the control of the State Government for about 20 years till 2010.

The Manipur Hill Areas District Council Second Amendment Act, 2006:

The Government of Manipur amended the Act, of 1971 by Manipur Hill Areas District Council Second Amendment Act, 2006 to the extent of inserting sub-Section (1A) in Section 29 (1) thereby conferring power on the ADC to notify any areas in the District Council as Urban Areas for the purpose of formulation of development plan and inserted Section 44A in the Act of 1971 providing therein that no land situated within the ADC shall be allotted, transferred, leased by the Deputy Commissioner, other than for public purpose except with a resolution passed by the ADC at its meeting by a majority of not less than 2/3 of its members.

Immediately, the State Government of Manipur finally brought Manipur (Hill Areas) District Council (Third Amendment) Act, 2008 into existence vide Notification dated 27th October, 2008. But on perusing the said amendment it appears beyond reasonable doubt that this Third Amendment Act, 2008 also did not bring major changes in the parent Act of 1971. There are few minor amendments like the strength of the members of the ADC has been increased from 18 to 24, administrative functions has been increased from the existing 17 to 26 by inserting a few more functions like fisheries, co-operative, sports & youth affairs, adult & non formal education, horticulture and floriculture, rural housing scheme, village and cottage industries, small scale industries, non-conventional energy sources, library and culture activities and power to recommend to the State for recognition of villages subject to resolution passed by a simple majority of the Council. The currently functioning ADC is only a statutory body created under the Act of 1971 unlike the ADC created under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. The

present ADC in Manipur is absolutely under the extensive control of the State Government. In actuality, the ADC constituted under the Sixth Schedule is neither absolutely under the control of the State Government nor it is a part of the State, but it is 'a state within a state' under the Constitution.

Conclusion:

In the light of the above cited records, one may say that Gandhi calls for development not from above but from below and his advocacy of 'decentralisation of power' or 'Ramarajya' does apply in the tribal areas of Manipur as the present ADC election system is taken by the tribal people a farce as it is not 'Autonomous' and does not have financial, judicial and administrative powers in the Council and the councillors are also at the mercy of the Deputy Commissioners of the Districts to implement any developmental schemes meant for the development of tribal people in the villages. Besides, the Deputy Commissioner of a District is empowered to give a District Council all directions as he may consider necessary in respect of subjects, curricula, textbook and standard of teaching in schools vested wholly or partly in the Council and in schools wholly or partly maintained by the grants payable from the Council fund and the Council shall comply with such directions. Knowing full well the weaknesses of the ADC under the 1971 Act, from 1980s onwards, the tribal people had been raising their voices to do away with the then existing ADC system altogether and demand for greater autonomy and since then the Sixth Scheduled Demand Committee, Manipur (SDCM) had been spearheading the demand for the extension of the Sixth Schedule in the hill areas of Manipur which, in their opinion was the only viable form of democratic form of governance to bring development to the backward tribal people of the hills. Over the years many blockades and bandhs had been called by the SDCM and student Organisation for extension of the so called Sixth Schedule in the hill areas of Manipur but not materialised. However, the ADC election of 2010 was held. The powers incorporated in the Act by the Third Amendment Act of 2008 are merely administrative powers to be exercised by the elected MDC.

The demand for extension of the Sixth Schedule in the hill areas of Manipur is constitutional. At this juncture, if the tribal people of Manipur want to get the so called extension of the Sixth Schedule in the hill areas of Manipur, the only method to be applied in the course of its demand is Gandhi's 'Non-violence' method, and the weapon to be used is 'Satyagraha'. Since, for his 'notion of democracy, the weakest should have the same opportunity as the strongest. That can never happen except through non-violence.' and as he said 'Satyagraha' is the weapon not of the weak but of the strong peoples.

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