

Gandhian Gram Swaraj: An Analysis

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Abstract

India has a long history of ruralism. For centuries, Indian villages acted as self-ruling republics, the Local self government looking after the basic social, political and economic requirements of the community. Gandhiji was the great leader of Indian independence movement against British rule. Gandhiji led nationwide campaigns for various social causes and for achieving Swaraj or self-rule. The Gandhian political order gets the shape of a direct, participatory democracy, operating in different tiers structure from the bottom village-level tier upward through the district and state levels to the national level. His idea to construct Indian villages wealthy and progressive and it is possible only through economic route. In his idea of gram Swaraj, he tries to provide plenty opportunities for a large number of rural people to take authentic and effectual participation in the development and democratic decision-making process and to infuse in the minds of the rural people a spirit of self help, self dependence and self-sufficiency and to gain the experience in the art of local self-government. To prevent immense concentrations of political power in the hands of only some; rather, to allocate it in the hands of various. Local self institutions have been playing an essential role in order to supervise these rural development programmed. The present research highlights the status of Gandhian idea of Gram Swaraj in present era and tries to compile the ideas of Gandhiji on village republic. So, the main focus of this research paper is to analyzing the present political scenario of village republic through the Gandhian perception.

Keywords: Gandhi, Gram Swaraj, Village Republic, Ramrajya, Self-Sufficiency.

Introduction

Gandhiji has played a key role in accomplishing the national freedom. He edified to his compatriot countrymen a novel idea of 'Gram Swaraj'. He credited all the evils of modern civilization to the dual practice of industrialization and urbanization.¹ He said that India lived in its villages and appealed for the sharing of power among rural masses in India, he believed in the supremacy of the people and insisted in the people's democracy and sovereignty at the grass roots level, which he called panchayats raj; for Gandhiji, panchayats raj was a sort of commonwealth of reformed and modernize rural communities. The aim to be attained was human happiness with jam-packed psychological, moral and spiritual development. He wanted to set up such a society where all human being got maximum freedom and chance to develop his personality and character to the total extent. He considered that devolution was necessary for ideal democracy; here everyone can contribute in the decision-making and implementation process. His notion of decentralization implies the basic principle of self-sufficiency in respect of the basic wants of men and the absence of exploitation. In his dream village was a center in the Indian polity and future of India depended upon the future of its villages.² He further said, "To serve our villages is to establish Swaraj. Everything else is but an idle dream." The Gandhian ideas of Gram Swaraj and Panchayat Raj system can become vehicles for ushering in the much needed social and political transform by including all the stakeholders in the practice of decision-making and public policy formulation. As Gandhi said, "Panchayat Raj represents true democracy realized. We would regard the humblest and the lowest Indian as being equally the ruler of India with the tallest in the land"³ Mahatma Gandhi advocated Panchayat Raj, a decentralized form of Government where every village is liable for its own affairs, as the base of India's political system.⁴ According to Mahatma Gandhi; the word 'Swaraj' was a Vedic word which meant self-rule or the rule which self-exercises over itself. To quote him, "The word 'Swaraj' is a sacred word, a Vedic word, meaning self-rule and self-restraint." It was the right ordering of the various powers of the self and embodied the search for self-

improvement. Explaining the meaning of *Swaraj* he said, "The root meaning of *Swaraj* is self-rule "*Swaraj*" may, therefore, be rendered as disciplined rule from within."⁵The fundamental principles of *Gram-Swaraj* as laid down by Gandhi were supremacy of man, the best utilization of the whole man power of India, bread labour, equal opportunity, trusteeship, decentralization, swadeshi, self-sufficiency, cooperation, satyagraha, equality of all religion and village governance by panchayats.⁶

Objectives of the Study

The objective of the research paper is to understand the concept of '**Gram Swaraj**' advocated by Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi ji, throughout his life experimented with Truth and he further put stress on the necessity to make the villages self-reliant and endorse the well being of these villages. The village as a social unit and entity of society has passed through several passages of human development. In which, various dimensions relating to economy and cultural has changed. However, in the changed world scenario villages and their existence is further questioned and often in gloomy attitude it is believed that they will lose their entity with changing times. However, such speculations are exact or could lead to fading of the perception such as '**model village**' or '**Gram Swaraj**'.

Review of Literature

Literature review is necessary to know the issues that are highlighted by various scholars on particular issues and which are sidelined or left out in their analysis. For the Purpose of the study, the following books have been consulted and reviewed.

S.L Goel and Shalini Rajneesh (2003) in their book *Panchayati raj in India: Theory and Practice*, discussed all aspects of Panchayati Raj System as the genesis, growth, diversification of PRI System in India, People's participation, women empowerment, planning for PRIs etc. All the above said aspects have been analyzed critically to come out with concrete suggestions for improvement. It suggests methods to strengthen Gram Sabha, which is the body to ensure people's participation.

N.G.S. Kini in *Gandhian Contribution to the Theory of Politics* (1983) says that almost all the Gandhian concepts like non-co-operation Ahimsa, Sarvodaya, Satyagraha, Gram-raj, Trusteeship, Ramrajya etc. are concepts by perception. Even when Gandhi accepted certain concepts from Western prophets or thinkers like Christ, Tolstoy, Thoreau or Ruskin, he changes them to their equivalents in terms of concept by their own perception to fit them within his system. This has acutely misled the Students of Gandhian thought. In the *Harijan* dated 7th April 1946, Gandhi ji point to his idea of self-determination: it should initiate at the bottom. So, all villages have to be self-sustained and able of running its affairs even to the extent of defending itself against the whole world. In this structure, composed of numerous villages, "there will be ever-widening, never-ascending circles; life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. But it will be oceanic circle whose centers will be the individuals.

V.T. Patil and A.S. Anikivi in their work *An Enquiry into the Gandhian Model of Democracy* (1983) state that in respect of the principle of representation, Gandhi ji was of the view that, instead of direct election, indirect elections would serve the purpose more fruitfully. Only at the base level the villagers would elect their Gram Panchayats through direct election, but consequently, at all higher levels, the elections would be indirect in form and substance. The Gram Panchayats would elect the District Panchayat; the District Panchayat in turn would elect the State Panchayat and so on up to the national apex level.

Rangarajan (1997) in his concept of free India Gram Swaraj- a Gandhian Perspective, discusses the depth of the Gandhian perspective of Gram Swaraj, in which the author articulate that the present-day scenario is far removed from the Mahatma's complete idea of a non-violent society based on truth and the power of love without surrendering to the love for power. The material progress and unbalanced prosperity have not contributed to link the gap between the rich and the poor. Gandhiji wants India to pursue a different model of holistic development that was not dominated by big machines and big businesses. His scheme of rural rebuilding was motivated by an essential approach to life. Lamenting that after Gandhi ji's exit, his dream of Gram Swaraj was reduced to a mere four-line Directive Principle in the Constitution, he indicates that even the three-tier Panchayat institutions ushered in by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act was not clothed with any power of self-government in the actual sense.

In Gandhian Politics, democracy developed into the rule of the common people and depends ultimately upon the power of the people and not upon the power of the police or military. Therefore, the functioning of democracy and violence is not possible in the system of politics. So Gandhi implores for the moralization of needs and voluntary action as the basis of democratic life and culture. The importance of diminishing coercion entails the closest possible estimate to a decentralized polity. Voluntary cooperation demanded a federation of village communities.⁷

He expected dynamic participation of the people in this form of government. He argued that true democracy could not be worked by twenty men sitting at the centre. It had to be worked from below by the people of every village.⁸

Gandhian decentralization means the creation of parallel politics in which people's power is institutionalized to counter the centralizing and alienating forces of the modern state. According to Mahatma Gandhi, utilization of the local resources is quite fundamental to the development of the Panchayat Raj system. The Panchayats with the Gram Sabhas should be so organized as to identify the resources locally available for development in the agricultural and industrial sectors. Gandhiji wrote, "Democracy becomes an impossible thing until power is shared by all, but let not democracy degenerate into mobocracy".⁹ Gandhiji appealed for

decentralization of political and economic power through the organization of village panchayats. He held the view that by serving the villages, Swaraj could be established. He categorically stated that we have to formulate a choice between India of the villages and India of the cities which are a creation of foreign domination. He was optimistic when he stated that, the dream of Panchayat Raj come into true, the humble and the lowest Indian could be equally the ruler of India with the tallest in the country. The polity of the Panchayat Raj is altogether different from the polity of the mass scale. It is for this reason that Gandhiji could not accept the parliamentary democracy which he called "the tyranny of the majority"¹⁰ Gandhi was concerned about villages not only because majority of people in India lived in villages and they led a pitiable life but also because village life alone would save humanity from decay and disaster. As he argued, "If the village perishes India will perish too. It will be no more India. Her own mission in the world will get lost."¹¹

Gandhi argued that the power would be decentralized in such a way that even the smallest man could enjoy freedom, without any social, political or economic disability. He believed that for the attainment of Swaraj, decentralization of power was important and it was possible only by the proper functioning of Gram-Swaraj. Gram meant a village and Swaraj meant freedom, independence and self-rule. Thus, it would mean freedom, liberty, independence, self-rule of villages. Gram-Swaraj literally, meant village self-government but its actual meaning was far deeper. It meant a total transformation of villages from dung heaps as they were in Gandhi's time or ecologically ruined as they are today into vibrant communities not only in economics but also in social and cultural senses. It also meant developing human personality marked with self-reliance, self-control and self-esteem, which was not influenced by things and ideas that are sensually attractive. It meant self-governance and self-management of village communities wherein the dignity of the individuals was ensured, all was implicated in creative activities and not anything was done that disturbed the ecological balance in the village. He further said, "Indian independence must begin at the bottom. Thus every village will be a republic or panchayat, having full powers. If follows, therefore, that every village has to be self-sustained and capable of managing its affairs, even to the extent of defending itself against the whole world ... But this does not exclude dependence on the willing help from neighbors or from the world."¹²

Every village will be a self-sufficient, self-sustaining and self-administered republic. In Gandhi's own words, "In this structure composed of innumerable villages there will be ever widening, never ascending circles. Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. But it will be an oceanic circle whose center will be the individual always ready to perish for the village, the latter ready to perish for the circle of the villages, till at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals, never aggressive in their arrogance but ever humble

sharing the majesty of oceanic circle of which they are integral units."¹³ His concept of village panchayat could not take actual shape till India got freedom. One such concept which is often quoted is given below: "My idea of village Swaraj is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbors for its vital wants and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is a necessity. Thus every village's first concern will be to grow its own food-crops and cotton for its cloth. It should have a reserve for its cattle, recreation and play-grounds for its adults and children."¹⁴ In Gandhi's concept of village Swaraj each village must be free to manage its own affairs without external intervention. Gandhiji held the view that the government of each village will be conducted by the Panchayat. The Panchayat of every village is a key unit for decentralization of legislative, executive and judicial powers. It represents the values of a true democracy in which power and authority are shared and exercised by different functionaries. The individual in such a set up will have full freedom and will be mostly regulated by the spirit of non-violence, self-sacrifice and patriotism. Thus, in the village republic as envisaged by Gandhiji there is perfect democracy based on individual freedom.¹⁵

According to the idea of Gram Swaraj, each village should be basically self-reliant, making provisions for all the requirements of life, food, clothing, clean water, sanitation, housing, education and so on, including government and self defence and all socially useful amenities required by a community.¹⁶ Gandhiji was always fond of the concept of 'Gram Swaraj' and 'Gram vikas' and strongly advocated the establishment of a village set up based on these doctrines.¹⁷ His dream of independent India was not that of a nation state, but a confederation of self-governing, self-reliant, self-employed people living in village communities, getting their right livelihood from the products of their homesteads. Maximum economic and political power- including the power to make a decision what could be imported into or exported from the village- would remain in the hands of the village assemblies.¹⁸

In Gandhi's view, village panchayat plays a crucial role in managing the affairs. Sarvodaya centers on the small republic where the mass of people handles their affairs without depending upon the state. People have a casual arrangement for the management of their affairs. Village republics are part of India's traditions. Many indigenous institutions of Indian society must be used for strengthening democracy. Western democracy can suit India only by adopting to the Indian conditions. He says, "In the domain of politics, I should make use of the indigenous institutions and serve them by curing them of their proved defects." Gandhi was aware of the historical fact that British colonialism had smashed the essential institutions of a village society. Revitalization of these institutions in a true spirit may strengthen democracy. Moreover, political institutions at the grass root level may be able to restrict the power of state. Gandhi's concept of state is that of a limited state which does not hold up in the day-to-day activities of the people. As Indian society consists of

large number of villages, the village republic can be a heart of a democratic institution.¹⁹ Panchayat has deep faith in democracy in which the common man in the rural area has massive ability to have a good living for himself and the community under the healthy environment that the State creates. If a common man appears to be indifferent to the elevated economic growth, it is because he is devoid of the normal national development and has not been offered equivalent chance to take part in activities for his own betterment. The objectives of a panchayat include organizing common men in the practice of developing themselves through their own efforts on a continuing basis, at the same time, enhancing their ability and self-reliance. This starts only on with people's participation in political system at local level.²⁰ According to him, "the greater power of the panchayat, the better for the people" as true democracy "has to be worked from below by the people of every village."²¹

As Gandhi said, "Panchayat Raj represents true democracy realized. We would regard the humblest and the lowest Indian as being equally the ruler of India with the tallest in the land."²² Gandhi argued that it is probable to secure "perfect democracy ...based upon individual freedom. The individual is the architect of his own government. The law of non-violence rules him and his government. For the law governing every village is that he will suffer death in the defence of his village's ..."²³ Gandhi preferred the term 'Swaraj' to describe what he called true democracy. This democracy is based upon freedom. Individual freedom in Gandhi's view, could be maintained only in autonomous, self-reliant communities that offer chances to the people for complete involvement.²⁴ To him, Perfect democracy is possible only by perfect peacefulness because no true democracy can prevail in an atmosphere of violence. Democracy and violence can ill go together. Gandhiji became extremely critical of western democracy for it lacks the real spirit of democracy. Gandhiji said, Democracy in the west is only 'supposed'. If India has to develop the true form of democracy then there should be no conciliation with violence or falsehood. Peaceful democracy has its root in self-sufficient village Republics. In the true democracy of India the unit is the village. True democracy cannot be worked by twenty men sitting at the centre. Quite the opposite it has to be worked from below by the people of every village.²⁵

The panchayat raj system attained bigger importance in the non-cooperation movement. It presented a substitute to the British system of judiciary trying at the replacement of courts by the panchayats for clearing up inter-personal disputes. The panchayats function as settlement courts to dispense rapid justice to the parties. The village panchayat has fully functional and financial autonomy which in a way offer financial help to the undeveloped sections of the society.²⁶

Gandhiji was extremely particular of the inclusion of the topic of the village panchayat in the Constitution as they reflect the people's voice. Gandhi wrote, "I must confess that I have not been able to

follow the proceedings of the Constituent Assembly.... there is no mention or direction about village panchayats and decentralization in the foreshadowed constitution. It is certainly an omission calling for immediate attention if our independence is to reflect the people's voice, the greater power of the panchayats, and the better for the people."²⁷

Further he insists that without decentralization it is impractical to ensure individual self-determination and the moral well being of man. It is uniformly crucial for the realization of the democratic ideals and also for people's involvement in the decision making process and its execution. Decentralization does not purely mean decentralization of power only. But it is a system by which functions and responsibilities have been shifted from a centre authority to the institutions at the lower level. In Panchayat Raj, Gandhiji visualized will give power to the powerless irrespective of caste, sex, creed and religion and in which, "the humblest and the lowest Indian could be equally the ruler of India with the tallest in the country". Villagism and village republicanism were noteworthy landmarks in the onward march towards the realization of democratic decentralization.²⁸ Swaraj, a non-violent state and Ramrajya are significant milestone in Gandhi's concept of decentralization in its comprehensive form. Gram Swaraj is another essential aspect of his concept of decentralization. The term Swaraj owes its origin to ancient Hindu philosophy. Swaraj means 'self-rule'. Gandhi in a consistent and articulate fashion appealed for gram Swaraj. It meant that all villages must be a free and self-contained unit in itself. He was influenced that "the small communities can certainly act as forces for the stabilization of personality by creating a nucleus of organic socio-psychological density. An intense civic and social participation is possible."²⁹

The achievement of political decentralization in twist depends on economic decentralization. Decentralization in the economic field implies the fundamental principle of self-sufficiency. It is not complete self-sufficiency but confined to the necessary requirements of the people such as food, clothing and shelter. What he wanted was that people should be independent as regards the satisfaction of the basic requirements.³⁰ Gandhiji pleaded for Swaraj, elucidated the concept of 'trusteeship' for the welfare of all, opposed big industries to save cottage and village industries and urged swadeshi and khadi. All these concepts, directly or indirectly, flow from the theme decentralization.³¹ As Gandhi was against the massive attention of economic power amid a handful of individuals, in his economic model he favours economic decentralization and hence villages become the basic economic units. His idea of Gram Swaraj aims at developing villages in a way which keeps and strengthens those components of the village ethos, which deserve to be retained and strengthened.³² His own experiments are in the establishment of Ashrams in South Africa and India had persuaded him that "it is only the village which can become the nurseries for rearing a new humanity in the practice of self-reliant, non-exploitative, truthful and healthy living. Gandhiji

was so clear about the importance of villages that he declared "If the villages perish, India will perish too."³³ Mahatma Gandhi and others insisted that the concept of 'Gram Swaraj' should become a part of the constitution of India.³⁴ Mahatma Gandhi for the first time has mentioned the panchayats on February 14, 1946, in a Madras Missionary conference: "following the swadeshi spirit, I observe, the indigenous institutions and the village panchayats hold me." Congress concern for Swaraj and the non-enforcement of Decentralization commission's recommendations relegated the panchayats to the background for sometime.³⁵ In the immediate post independence period, during the debates on the drafting of India's constitution, sharply discrepant views on panchayats were expressed. In the Constituent Assembly on November 4, 1948, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, chairman of the Drafting Committee, called village community "a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness, and communalism". Panchayats did not discover a place in the first draft of India's constitution.³⁶ After the death of the Gandhiji, however there was a clause added to the 'Directive Principles' to the effect that the state should take steps to establish village panchayats as 'units of self-government', the constitution of India cannot be called Gandhian in any respect. Nor are the village panchayats, established later, even a pale reflection to Gandhi's 'Gram Raj'.³⁷ At the insistence of a few Gandhian namely Alladi KrishnaswamiAiyar, N G Ranga, K Santhanam, Shibbanlal Saxena and others, a compromise was arrived at, and panchayats were incorporated only in the non-justifiable part of the constitution, under Directive Principles of State Policy, as Article 40, which reads, "*The state shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government.*" Without any reference to panchayats, the term local government also crept into item five of the State List in the constitution. These provisions are, at best, only discretionary. Gandhi's concept of decentralization does not stand in seclusion but it is shaped by other concepts and ideas. Gandhi's multifaceted and vibrant personality was made up of an original mind that included the whole collection of issues and problems in human affairs. He fought for freedom and equality for the poor, opposed state control over individuals, pleaded for Swaraj, explained the concept of trusteeship for the welfare of all, opposed big industries to save cottage and village industries and preached swadeshi and Khadi. All these concepts, directly or indirectly, flow from the theme of decentralization. It is also our purpose to establish a clear-cut linkage between these concepts and the theme of decentralization.

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