

Saarth E-Journal

Saarth E-Journal of Research

E-mail : sarthejournal@gmail.com
www.sarthejournal.com

ISSN NO : 2395-339X
Peer Reviewed
Vol.3 No.12

Impact Factor
Quarterly
Apr-May-Jun 2018

The Ideological Roots of Nationalism in the GANDHI ERA

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The arrival of Mahatma Gandhiji in 1915 from South Africa to India inaugurated a new and optimistic phase of political and social efforts for development and progress. Before his coming to India Gandhiji had struggled for the rights of Indians in South Africa and had been successful. The ethical base of his method of struggling, through Satyagraha had resulted in an unprecedented struggle. He had personally experienced the inhuman treatment of the white Government of S. Africa towards non-whites. He had here gathered his treasure of experiment and experience in Truth and Nonviolence as two weapons of struggle in his own country.

It was quite natural that these events affect the people of India too. The impact of the life and work of Gandhiji can be seen variously on the Indians, including the people of Gujarat. The Even literary field had not escaped this impact. Gandhiji emphasized on simple and colloquial Gujarati language in order to let his thoughts reach the poor and illiterate general public. The Gujarati poets also understood his aim and began to write compositions that reflected the nationalism of his style. During all the innumerable struggles that Gandhiji began, the poets composed poems that suited the occasion at hand. This could not remain without affecting the scholars as well as ordinary people. Thus, from 1915 to 1947 when we try to understand the poetry composed to express the nationalist sentiment, we first must understand Gandhi and Gandhi era. In this Chapter therefore we have explained certain typical elements of the time here.

Characteristics of Gandhian Thought:

Kakasaheb Kalelkar is truly pointing out the thoughts of Gandhiji on education that 'To Gandhiji, nationalist education that he was, education was not a classroom activity, but being only connected with Life. Education did not mean reading books, get information about different subjects, and reply to the question-papers in examinations to get a job. This was indeed the ordinary understanding of 'education'. But to Gandhiji education meant, 'living at

home and outside to acquire experiences of life, develop skills, imbibe good qualities of character and acquire a qualification for service and live a life of service thereafter.”ⁱ

As in education, even in the field of social reform Gandhiji had ideological viewpoint. But he also used to be very practical when such ideals were to be implemented. He had firm faith in the basic principles of Truth and Nonviolence. And he used to put these ideals into practice too. Also, his method of taking decisions or steps for struggle also was not an extremist; there was always a possibility of change for the better. From the basic ideals of Gandhian thought whatever method emerged also had space for improvement in keeping with the times, circumstances and place. According to Narayan Desai, there were 3 basic elements in his ideals:

These were –Sadhan Shuddhi or Purity of Means, Satyagraha and EkadashVrat or Eleven Principles of Behavior.ⁱⁱ Let us briefly discuss them here.

Purity of Means:

Gandhiji put emphasis equally on the purity of purpose and achievement, as well as on the purity of means to achieve it.ⁱⁱⁱ From his search of Truth he discovered Ahimsa or non-violence, and due to this belief, he puts clear emphasis on this issue too in his autobiography. Truth and nonviolence were basic foundation principles of Gandhiji’s life. In each and all of his thoughts, speech and action we find their presence. He used to say that there is no dividing wall between means and achievement.” The impact of this philosophy also was felt to some extent by the Indian people and in Gujarati poetry also we find the same ideals reflected.

Satyagraha:

Another element of Gandhian thought was Satyagraha. He found the Ahimsa in his search for Truth, and also, he developed the insistence on Truth or Satyagraha with it on principle. Worship of Truth and use of Ahimsa for the betterment of social field - this was Satyagraha.

Ekadash Vrata:(Eleven Vows):

Gandhiji had decided that Eleven Vows were very necessary in private as well as public life. These were certain principles that should guide one’s actions. They were Truth, nonviolence, non-stealing, non-possession, abstinence, fearlessness, non-indulgence in taste, physical labor, svadeshi, sparshbhavna, and respect for all religions. Gandhiji believed these Eleven Vows as basic for life and nation building too. Most of these have been accepted by nearly all the great religions of the world. So we may call them as principles unconfined to national borders. Mahavir as well as the Buddha also taught these principles as basic to the virtuous life. Thus, Gandhiji may be called a torch bearer for the traditional values in Indian culture.

Gandhiji and Social Activities:

To Gandhiji national freedom and national life were no different from each other. That is why he gave as much importance to social and constructive activities as he gave to the struggle against the British rule over India. During these struggles, due to his sharp intelligence, he had realized that there were several evil practices prevailing among the society and people of India and Gujarat. The worst among these was that of untouchability. Instead of using any western way of arguing against these evils, Gandhiji employed Indian ways and thoughts to remove such evils. He said that Hindu religion has no base of confirming untouchability as a social practice. He added, “On the day when someone will

prove that Hindu holy books support this practice, I shall not hesitate in abandoning the holy books!”^{iv}

Besides the issue of untouchability, Gandhiji also took up other activities to improve conditions of villages (Gramoddhar), welfare of labor (Majoor Kalyan), Prohibition and improvement in the status of women among many others. He also began propagation for Khadi which he considered as a first principle for obtaining self-rule or Swarajya. To his mind khadi was a symbol of our economic independence, economic equality and self-reliance. He also believed that it can ignite confidence and self-dependence among the poor people of the villages and it can solve the questions of poverty as well as unemployment. During the freedom struggle crores of people of India used to live in villages and even today most of them continue to live in villages. Prior to 1947 AD the British rule was imposed on India and from England cloth was imported into India in such a huge amount that crores of rupees were spent for it that stuffed the British treasuries. In order to put a stop to such a drain of our wealth Gandhiji began this campaign of Khadi and prepared the people of India as well as Gujarat for it.^v We shall note in a chapter ahead that many poems had been composed during the freedom struggle that gave voice to the significance of Charkha (rentio) and Khadi as a part of nationalist sentiment.

Along with the activity of Khadi, Gandhiji also began activity for the welfare of workers or labor. In 1918 AD he organized a huge strike of the workers against the Mill owners of Ahmadabad, which was a most notable event. Even during the strike, he kept sweet relations with the Mill owners like Ambalal Sarabhai, Mangaldas Girdhardas and Lalabhai Damodardas etc. Mahadev Desai has given us a graphic account of this strike in his book and shows that Gandhiji did not want any conflicts between classes but in fact endorsed cooperation between them.^{vi}

As noted earlier, Gandhiji gave special emphasis on the ethical aspect of freedom struggle. “I firmly believe that so long as the Indian people will not accept a high ethical standard they will not be qualifying for real freedom.” He considered the liquor shop as a ‘Door to Evil’ and also believed that liquor and alcohol ruined not only an individual’s social and economic life but even ruined his ethical and spiritual life. Let us see how he has put this thought in his own words. He writes, Alcohol deprives man of not just his money but takes away his intellect too. It degrades not only the one who consumes it and also the one who makes it his business. In a state of intoxication, a man forgets even the difference among a sister, mother or wife, and the difference between right and wrong. He indulges in such crimes that he has to be ashamed of when his intoxication has worn off. I have seen intoxicated barristers wallowing in gutters.”^{vii}

Under the leadership of Gandhiji Indian National Congress had put Prohibition as a priority in its political and social reform program. When in 1921 AD its session met in early April, it recommended that Prohibition be given priority as a part of Congress activities. During the freedom struggle thousands of men and women had performed picketing activities, as is quite well known. In the foregoing Chapters we have mentioned that the impact of prohibition was quite high among the Gujarati writers, and especially the poets made their creations as the medium for this issue.

Gandhiji and Political Struggles:

Gandhiji undertook boundless efforts for achieving freedom for India and the way in which he based these struggles on the principles of Truth and Nonviolence was a part of a vast contemporary literature that we have now. Indulal Yagnik, Shankarlal Banker, Dr. Sumant Mehta, Kishorlal Mashruwala and Gandhiji himself have shown it to us in great light.^{viii}

Gandhiji initiated a large number of public movements against the British rule and shook its foundations. However, the key movements were of the farmers. Gandhiji had realized that it was the farmer who provided life to those who created wealth and allowed people to live, even when they could remain hungry. Of course, the Indian moneyed class and landowners exploited the farmers; but Gandhiji aimed to obtain cooperation of all classes of people for his main aim to get freedom from foreign bond. Therefore, he did not target the moneyed or landowner class for their deeds against the farmers.^{ix} Instead, for his struggles he targeted the basic cause of the British exploitation and its imperialist policies that were responsible for this situation. The Kheda and Bardoli Satyagraha movements were based on these ideas. The Gujarati poets have caught this method very well in their poetry, as we have noted in the earlier Chapters.

In 1915 AD when Gandhiji arrived on the Indian political scene, he had already developed his own concept of Ahimsa. He had struggled for the rights of Indians in the South Africa against its government by 'passive resistance' and had put it in a quandary. Gandhiji himself learnt a lot from this struggle and had been more trained in the weapon he planned to use. The principle of Satyagraha for him meant now that each and every detail must be first examined closely, and also to test if the cause of the struggle is justifiable or not. Instead of being drawn up in a force of emotions, it should be a plan that may last long; and if one is fully convinced that the cause is justified, then in order to achieve the target one has to be prepared also for suffering a great deal during it. Even the non-violent protests of poor farmers can arouse the Government to take very strict, and even inhuman, steps to stop or fail it was not unknown to Gandhiji. He also knew that the farmers had differences and classifications among them. However, there was no space for class struggle in his plans. In fact, his plans were to get the classes cooperate with each other, share the responsibilities and thereby create a just economy. He was insistent on this point. This may be an 'imagined' possibility, but it was undoubted as a strategy for changing freedom struggle into a people's movement.^x

During the Gandhian era thus the farmer movements turned into peoples' movements due to the philosophy of Gandhiji in this matter. He asked the people to develop ethical character and beseeched them to be ready to sacrifice anything for achieving their aim. In the 19th century, it was a child's play for the British to crush any protest of farmers that was violent and without any economic strategy. But Gandhian protests could not easily resort to weapons or violence. To make the movement simple Gandhiji collected all the proofs from the farmers of unjust steps of the Government and if he found that the complaints lodged by the farmers were highly exaggerated, he would drop them. The method of collecting proofs was also important to him, for it was like educating the urban and intellectual classes, in addition to the farmers and villagers in political and ethical fields.

Gandhiji was fortunate regarding the time he came on the political scene. Due to the impacts of the British rule the intellectual class had developed considerably, and had been acting against the British domination through constitutional and radical methods for achieving political rights for India already. Thus, it seemed that the urban base had been prepared as if to be ready to guide the farmers' movements.^{xi} The poets of Gujarat came from the intellectual class. In their compositions they expressed this anger against the wild exploitation of farmers, and thus provided a voice to it. Thus, the Gujarati poetry brought to the forefront the farmers, Khadi, spinning wheel, prohibition, removal of untouchability and issues of women and her status in society.

Gandhiji and His Economic Thoughts:

Unlike the economic thoughts of eminent persons like Dadabhai Naoroji, Romesh Chandra Dutt and M. G. Ranade, Gandhiji's economic principles were very different.^{xii} In

his work 'Hind Swaraj' he had expressed them. They show clearly that he was a great opponent of heavy industry and industrialization as such. His appeal was to rejuvenate the industries that were dying in the villages.^{xiii}

Unlike the above-mentioned intellectuals, Gandhiji had not studied the European economic history or 'political economy' in classical sense. Also, his knowledge on Indian or European history also was not based on any classical knowledge. However, Gandhiji gave a deep thought to human life and especially the problems of human relations as faced by the colonial India of the time. He had considered these in connection with his thinking and came out with a unique economic philosophy of his own. This philosophy had emerged not only from his thought processes, but also from the basic values that had emerged from his personal experiences. These values aimed to preserve the dignity of an individual and still achieve social welfare. These days his thinking is called 'Gandhian Economics' in not only our country, but in other countries too.^{xiv}

Gandhiji did not view economics as a separate field. He considered the economics and economic activities as a part of ethical and spiritual aims of human life. To him economics did not mean a matter of principle; it meant to him a study that created practical methods and relations that could increase the welfare of a country, an individual and the entire world society. The most important part to him was the practice of principles of economics. He did not consider Man as a mere 'economic entity'.

Gandhiji had written profusely on industrialization, urbanization, capital, labor, population and employment, agriculture and trade, industrialist and labor relations, agricultural relations, mechanization and the form of British rule in India. At the same time he also undertook some unprecedented struggles and movements in order to stop the exploitation of Indian labor and farmers. No one of earlier economic thinkers or leaders had actually begun any such movements. The techniques of Satyagraha and Passive Resistance were absolutely stunning and amazing. Such unprecedented methods had come from the values of non-violent and ethical base – that our weapons also must be as pure as our aims.

The colonized India continued to experience growing urbanization and industrialization. Gandhiji perceived the slavish mind of Indians in these phenomena. Like Dadabhai, Dutt and Ranade, he too had realized that due to British rule the villages, its institutions and cottage industries were almost dead. The way in which the cities were growing made the labor and workers live in poverty and filth. It has to be specially noted here that all those who preceded Gandhiji in this field suggested an increase in the urbanization and industrialization processes and to connect them with rural economy as a step for betterment. They argued that by adopting higher mechanization and developing industrial towns, we can reduce the cost of production and increase the rate of production. By joining this meaningfully with the rural economy we shall also find growth in agriculture. This was their firm belief and they recommended new machinery and chemical fertilizers for greater agricultural produce.

Gandhiji was dead against this belief. He emphasized that so long as villages will not become self-reliant in industrial sense, the cities and urban culture also will not survive. He held a different viewpoint from his predecessors about Industry and Industrialization. Instead of huge capital and heavy industries in urban areas, he recommended developing village-oriented, and labor-intensive cottage industries. He also suggested that village cooperatives be formed to increase village industrial produce.

The purpose behind such theory was that he wanted the society to be free of exploitation. The manner in which the labor was being exploited in the urban industries was right before his eyes. Such a situation had occurred because India did not develop industrialization as yet. If industrialization was to take place in a free India, as had happened in Europe and America, the results would be even worse and the workers in urban and rural

areas would be put off further, he firmly believed. That is why he has written piercingly that may be the huge machineries were considered useful in Europe, but in a country like India with a huge population and with different cultural values than Europe, that policy will drag India towards the annihilation of ethics. He protested spiritedly against capitalism thus:

“Railway increases villainy...machines have made Europe desolate, and its winds are in India. I can see clearly that machines are symbols of modern reforms and are great sins to my mind...I cannot remember any virtue of a machine, but I can write pages and pages about its defects and wrongs.” He added, “My aim is not just to develop machines, but to earmark the limitations of machines.”^{xv}

Gandhiji recommended such machinery as would not prove to be a burden on mankind. Instead of fulfilling the needs of the wealthy and of luxury, he gave greater importance to basic and inevitable needs of ordinary persons. To him motorcars were not needed as much as the bicycle and sewing machines were needed. To save labor and yet increase production he recommended improvement in methods and machines of cottage industries. In order to remove the increasing poverty and unemployment of colonial India, he recommended development of labor intensive and village-oriented industries, their management to be done by village cooperatives that would make villages support the Indian cities. To Gandhi cities were parasitic, but he wanted them to become support of village economy instead. He used to say that if Indian farmers and artisans are supported within the village itself through village industries, where is the question of the run towards cities that we see now? Thus, Gandhiji recommended division of the economy and politics for India. He wrote with a firm belief:

“The labor is being ‘saved’ until thousands of people become jobless and hungry hordes roam the streets of the cities. I want to save not just for the smallest of small section, but for the entire humanity time and labor. Today machines help ride over the backs of lakhs of people. But the inspiration behind it, not equal to save labor, it is avarice, greed. I am struggling with all my might against the construction of this kind of world...When our villages have developed fully there will not be any dearth of people of high skill and artistic ability, and village artists, situations and linguists and researchers will be produced in plenty.”^{xvi}

SUMMARY:

The discussion above leads us to conclude that the life and work of Gandhiji widely affected nearly all fields of life in Gujarat. Before Gandhiji came to India, in Gujarati language and literature we see the domination of Pandit Yug or highly ‘Sanskritized’ version. But after this, the importance of simple and colloquial language that could be easily understood by common persons began to increase. Gujarati poets used emotional words and phrases in their poems to present before people such poems that would reinforce their love of Swadeshi, patriotism, even spread of Gandhian thought among them. Sneharashmi, Umashankar Joshi, Jyotsnaben Shukla and Zaverchand Meghani were among many scholarly poets who absorbed Gandhi philosophy and wrote poems full of nationalist sentiments.

Historians and other scholars generally believe that in the Indian national freedom struggle the highest contribution came from main leaders. But the fact is that along with those big leaders, thousands of ordinary men and women, farmers, Adivasis, Harijans and other illiterate joined – all due to the periodicals that propagated this sentiment. This must be duly noted. The Contributions of the groups that performed dramas, singers of Bhajans and Duhas, Manbhatts, and Kirtankars who spread these messages and sentiment were no less important. The main point here is that the ordinary public became prepared to take part in the struggle due to the work of the above social traditional agencies.

Here also the contribution of Gujarati poets is significant and foremost. Between 1915 to 1947 AD through their compositions, these poets shaped the public opinion regarding Khadi, Removal of Untouchability, Women's issues, problems of Farmers and Adivasis, Prohibition and intoxicating substances, education and several such issues. Also, they also composed poems in keeping with the spirit of such important events of freedom struggle as Kheda Satyagraha, Mill workers' Strike of Ahmadabad, Bardoli Satyagraha, Borsad Satyagraha, the 'Quit India' movement of 1942 AD, etc. They also shaped sentiments, love, bravery and sacrifice for the nation and thus helped the public life continue to keep throbbing with these sentiments and ideals. We shall discuss in the next chapter how the poets nourished the nationalist sentiment during the Gandhian era among people.

FOOTNOTES

ⁱKakasaheb Kalelkar, Gujarat ma Gandhiyug- Aitihāsik ane Sahityik Avalokan (Mumbai, 1967) p. 23-24

ⁱⁱNarayan Desai, Gandhi Vicharo Junvani Thai Gaya Chhe (Mumbai, 1967) p. 6.

ⁱⁱⁱM.K. Gandhi, Satyana Prayogo athva Atmakatha, 12th ed. (Ahmedabad, 1969)

^{iv}Anjana Shah, Samaj Sudharana ma Gandhijinu Pradan (Ahmedabad, 1981) p. 36-7

^vVinoba Bhavé, Khadi Darshan (Vadodara, 1972)

^{vi}Mahadevbhai Desai, Ek Dharmayuddha (Ahmedabad, 1938)

^{vii}M.K. Gandhi, Darubandhi Koi pan Bhoge (Ahmedabad, 1961)

^{viii}For more details, see Indulal Yagnik, Atmakatha vol. 1-5 (Ahmedabad, 1955-1967); Shankarlal Banker, Gandhiji ane Rashtriya Pravrutti (Ahmedabad, 1967); Sumant Mehta, Atmakatha ed. Bhogilal Gandhi (Ahmedabad, 1971); Kishorlal Mashruwala, Gandhi Vichar Dohan 4th ed. (Ahmedabad, 1967); M.K. Gandhi, op. cit.

^{ix}Akshaykumar R. Desai (ed.) Peasant Struggles in India (Bombay, 1973)

^xR.R. Nanda, Mahatma Gandhi: A Biography (London, 1961)

^{xi}For more details, see David Hardiman, Peasant Nationalists of Gujarat: Kheda District 1917 - 1934. (Bombay, 1981); Shirin Mehta, The Peasantry and Nationalism: A Study of Bardoli Satyagraha (Delhi, 1984).

^{xii}Dadabhai Naoroji, Poverty and British Rule in India (London, 1901), M.G. Ranade, Revenue Manual of the British Empire in India (Bombay, 1887); R.C. Dutt, Economic History of India in the Victorian Age (Bombay, 1904).

^{xiii}M.K. Gandhi, Hind Swaraj, 2nd ed. (Ahmedabad, 1967).

^{xiv}For more details, see Shrimannarayan, Gandhivadi Arthashastrani Sangata, ed. Ramesh M. Bhatt (Ahmedabad, 1972).

^{xv}Ibid, p. 7

^{xvi}Ibid, p. 7