

Gandhi's Constructive Programme: An Appraisal

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Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi, the father of India, knitted the Indian community into a strong political force to liberate India from British bondage. Grounded in India's rich culture and heritage, Gandhi's philosophies delineated the social, political, economic, moral and spiritual aspects of personal and social transformation. His mission was to reconstruct India through truth, love, tolerance, non-violence, freedom and peace. Even after 72 years of Indian independence, Gandhian thoughts remain essentially significant in the contemporary social milieu where the whole world strives hard to deal with phenomena of unequal growth and economic processes, modernisation and its consequences, structural and economic inequalities, social injustice, corruption, marginalisation, exclusion racial discrimination and enormous social problems. Gandhi's development and empowerment strategies were far ahead of his time. The constructive programme, an example of such kind, was based on a philosophical and moral approach put into a pragmatic framework spanning across different target populations. The constructive programme was an integrative public work to make India attain Poorna Swaraj (complete independence), self-reliance, self-sufficiency, equality and sustainability. Through his 18 constructive works, he unravelled the psychology of non-violence achieved through self-discipline and self-determination. The paper is a critique of Gandhi's constructive programme and the interpretation of authors' views on personal and social transformation. The paper links these thoughts to the present day context to re-examine the social transformation witnessed by India over the years.

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Introduction

In the course of India's fight against British imperialism, the practice framework put forth by M.K. Gandhi based on his ideologies and philosophies for the realisation of Poorna Swaraj, has been the topic of development discourses and is noteworthy even today. When India experienced multi-sectorial growth over the past half a century, these strategic measures were subjected to the criticisms of many thinkers, philosophers and social scientists. Nevertheless, the vision and purpose with which it was formulated deserve attention. India's move towards neoliberal capitalism suffered its essence when the whole world came to a halt due to the global pandemic crisis. Essentials were not accessible when the societal processes came to a standstill.

Gandhi's political philosophy is centred on the concept of "Universal Uplift" or "Progress of All". Poverty was portrayed as the worst form of violence. The emancipation of Indians from poverty is realised through four pillars of Hind Swaraj - Swaraj, Non-violence, Swadeshi and Sarvodaya. These four pillars of nation-building have been formulated out of Gandhi's conviction that self-reliant and sustainable villages are the basis of equal social order. He wanted this to resonate in the ears of India's youth, common man and policymakers. The construction of Poorna Swaraj by truthful and non-violent means is relevant today as the world witnesses destructive pursuits in due course of its existence.

Constructive Programme:**An Overview**

Gandhi's constructive programme, according to him, is the truthful and non-violent way of winning Poorna Swaraj. There were proponents who support the view that Gandhi's constructive programme is not an end in itself; rather, it is the ways and means with which non-violence is practised. When it proclaims non-violence as its unified philosophy, there were criticisms posed on how Poorna Swaraj or complete independence is possible when it does not address structural and cultural violence and how complete non-violence can be ideally practised to combat structural

violence. The culture which Gandhi envisaged in Swarajya is symbolic of his religious, moral and philosophical doctrines that legitimize direct or structural violence (Dillion, 2016).

According to Gandhi, political independence would be complete and meaningful only by restructuring the society by bringing in a new social structure and order. British imperialism and colonialism had destroyed the nation, widening the power imbalances and social class conflicts. The constructive programme aimed at reconstructing India from micro level villages and communities to macro level political governance through a bottom up democratic, participatory and egalitarian approach. The major concerns Gandhi envisaged to address through his constructive programme were communal disharmony, untouchability, fear arising out of ignorance, economic disparities, decaying condition of our villages, the plight of tribals, farmers and the labourers and the status of women. Those who positively view the constructive programme as a means to practice non-violence perceive it not as a separate entity, but as one utilised in conjunction with the strategy of non-violence to liberate people from social injustices.

Satyagraha as Active Non-violence

Gandhi's constructive programme was a revolutionary move towards Indian independence. Sociologists have stated it as a positive form of non-violent action as against civil disobedience and non-cooperation, the latter being resistance strategies. Self-respect and dignity were embedded in his strategies of non-violence. The constructive programme had adopted the principles of non-violence in all its sub-themes. His perceptions of non-violence also have an association with his religious doctrines and learning. Until then, the perceived notion of non-violence was a passive acceptance of the violence. Gandhi uprooted that notion and argued that non-violence should deliberately oppose the passive acceptance of violence with a kind yet firm attitude. Gandhi put forward the concept of 'active non-violence' and coined the term Satyagraha to describe active non-violence as a force that is born out of truth as both 'truth' and 'non-violence' are inseparable.

Gandhi's constructive programme can be viewed as an evolution of Satyagraha in action to achieve India's economic and political

independence. Satyagraha, embedded in the conceptions of truth and functions through self-suffering, has been adopted as a non-violent strategy to attain freedom from bondage. This group of non-violent activities was to solve the problems Indian communities faced and to emancipate Indians from the bondages of poverty, oppression and slavery of British imperialism. Gandhi's community development approach was sustainable because he did not want to provide the people with solutions to their problems; instead, he facilitated the problem-solving process eliciting active participation from the communities. Though his ideologies are viewed with a tint of class hegemony, his value system was steadfast in the fundamentals of his religion and culture. Throughout his life he stood for truth with courage and conviction. Gandhi's exposure to the British culture and western societal values helped him to discern between his choices, values and actions. His constructive programme reflected his call for the nation's youth to withstand obstacles and deceptions with courage and conviction.

It is evident from the above discussions that his constructive programme is based on a philosophical and moral approach put into a pragmatic framework spanning different target populations of the nation. In the current context of India-China collisions and tensions, the on-going campaign against the purchase and use of Chinese made products can be called an adoptive strategy of non-violent defence initiated by Gandhi at that time.

Thus, the constructive programme is viewed as a positive force, the scaffolding that unifies diversity and builds community (Nagler, 2014). It encompasses five principles which include building continuity and community into society, using the creative force for good, providing the means by which people can meet their basic needs themselves, returning control to the people and training in non-violent living. A creative and constructive force will be proactive and sustaining as it caters to meeting one's needs through one's own work.

The Trajectory of Gandhi's Vision

The constructive programme is an epitome of Gandhi's conviction and will towards radical transformation. The word 'constructive' is interpretative in its essence of being relentlessly productive towards one's

goals and also towards nation-building. The programme corroborated the perspectives of Ruskin, Tolstoy and Thoreau in reiterating the significance of labour, a life worth living and his mission of social transformation (Dillon, 2016). Ubiquitous to all its components are specific forms of self-discipline that are to be instilled, nurtured and fostered among the citizens. Philosophers and sociologists have considered Gandhi's constructive programme as a national movement for social, economic and political development and transformation, for Gandhi believed that this would transcend and transform the entire nation from anything that undermines their well-being.

The evolution of Gandhi's constructive programme traversed two and a half decades from 1919 to 1945. The components and their purposes depicted in Gandhi's writing that was published in 1945 were (Gandhi, 1945):

1. Communal unity fostering comradeship, fraternity and solidarity among different religions.
2. Removal of untouchability as part of radical transformation.
3. Khadi production and usage to promote indigenous culture and products for economic self-sufficiency.
4. Other village industries as part of government support for localised products and services.
5. Women to strive for gender equity and equality.
6. Kisans to empower them from the bondages of feudalism.
7. Labour to live a life worth living and meaningful.
8. Adivasis to preserve indigenous culture, practices and knowledge.
9. Basic or new education as a primary measure to develop the nation.
10. Adult education to promote perpetual learning for self-sufficiency and resilience.
11. Students to mould the youth in service to others and for the nation.
12. Education in health and hygiene to promote healthy living and well-being.
13. Village sanitation to conscientise people on how their daily living practices impact their health.
14. Provincial languages to accept diversity among different regions.
15. National language to promote unity in diversity.

16. Prohibition to replace opium and alcohol addiction with healthy and inspiring alternatives.
17. Economic equality to decrease the gap between the rich and the poor.
18. Lepers to cater to the needs of those suffering from leprosy as a national responsibility.

A perusal of those subthemes which are specific to social and economic development would suffice the understanding of the manuscript's purpose.

Communal unity

Gandhi envisaged religious harmony among people belonging to different religions, divergent ideologies, social order and way of life. He had comprehended in-depth, varied religious views and their expected social roles and responsibilities. He had embraced these divergent views to bring a common order where people consented to communal harmony (Gandhi, 1945). This has significance today and is the dire need amidst the rising incidences of religious intolerances and political divisions. India's communal disharmonies cannot be viewed exclusively on religious grounds as they also had political inclinations. The controversy associated with Rama Janma Bhumi-Babri Masjid issue and the Gujarat riots are examples. Actors of the political system have their religious ideologies and sentiments, which often reflect in their policies and decision-making processes. India faced many development debacles in the name of communal riots, which jeopardised the country's social and spiritual existence.

Khadi and Other Village Industries

Self-rule with complete economic self-reliance was the motto behind Khadi. In fact, Khadi was the primary element Gandhi emphasised to be implemented across the country as it implied social, economic and political reformation. The commercial pursuits lodged in localised production, consumption and distribution had a long-standing vision of making the nation self-reliant. According to Gandhi, "A plea for the spinning-wheel is a plea for recognizing the dignity of labour" (Dillon, 2016: 27). He encouraged the masses to follow a life of self-discipline by adopting the practice of regular spinning and the use of charka (wheel). It also fostered constructive interdependence between man and his fellow beings and that of man with nature, both of which are essential for a peaceful co-existence

on this planet.

The production of Khadi was a community organisation and empowerment process wherein it capacitated the villages with local leadership, organising and problem-solving skills. The strength of the process was that it empowered the villagers to identify their needs and solutions for self-sustenance. Transcending this was the motto of Swadeshi when he stated that “middle-class people are already underfed and our babies are not getting enough milk for themselves”(Dillon, 2016). While claiming it as the exclusion of the more remote, he upheld the longer vision of establishing a market for Indian products. Swadeshi included other village industries that include hand-grinding, hand-pounding, soap-making, paper-making, match-making, tanning and oil-pressing that complete the village (Gandhi, 1945).

Untouchability

Gandhi was born into and moulded in a societal milieu where the caste system described the way of life of the people. Literature depicted that the societal structure and social order were determined by the caste, which assigned specific social roles to each class. According to Gandhi, although this caste-class divide did not disseminate notions of superiority-inferiority among the masses, it can be seen as a manifestation of passive acceptance of the culture and tradition. But Gandhi realised the need to uplift the masses from this persistent ignorance. It is also to be noted that, Gandhi's vision on the liberation of oppressed and deprived masses also had its roots in his experiences in South Africa where he himself witnessed racial discrimination (Gandhi, 1928). In his constructive programme written with the aim of accomplishing Poorna (complete) Swaraj irrespective of caste, creed or any kind of differences, Gandhi put forward the term ‘untouchability’ where he further stated that its existence in the society would become a hindrance to the creation of a nation with equality and sustainability. Gandhi held that untouchability is a blot and curse upon society and strived for its abolition in order to provide an ascribed status to those who were ostracised and discriminated against based on caste. Religion had a profound influence on Gandhi. Although the notion of untouchability stopped Hinduism from becoming a perfect religion, these imperfections did not estrange him from being its ardent follower (Dillion, 2016). His

defiance of untouchability was evident in his practice strategies, while his staunch belief in Hinduism was based on its congruence with its fundamental principles. Gandhi argued that the removal of untouchability was necessary to the very survival of his religion without which, according to him, this demeaning nature of Hinduism would damage India's social and political advancement.

Women

Women have always been the crux of development for Gandhi, the means and ends of the empowerment process. But, the nuances of Gandhi's views on women are paradoxical. To quote Gandhi, "To call woman the weaker sex is a libel; it is man's injustice to woman" (Gandhi, 1930: 121). Apparently, he visualises woman as man's companion, gifted with equal mental make-up and possessing the right to participate in every minute detail in the activities of man. According to him, women own the same rights of freedom and liberty and that revolution for women should begin from each and every house and that they should be honoured as a comrade in common service. But at the same time, he holds: "Man is supreme in the outward activities of a married pair and, therefore, it is in the fitness of things that should have a greater knowledge there of. On the other hand, home life is entirely in the sphere of the women and, therefore, in domestic affairs, in the upbringing and education of children, women ought to have more knowledge" (Patel, 1988:381). Though some writers attribute this to the acknowledgment of the gendered division of roles prevalent in society, it is the passive acceptance of our patriarchal social structure which gives women a subservient status even today.

Gandhi's concept of women empowerment is within the framework of patriarchy through the glorification of the traditional roles of motherhood, which is limited to the domestic sphere. The dichotomy is that women play an indispensable role in the development process, yet the participation of women in decision making, community processes, awareness of legal rights, access to and control of assets and resources and equality in domestic and care responsibilities are undervalued.

Nai Tali

Gandhi considered education as a key tool for social transformation. The

establishment of schools imparting basic adult education as well as higher learning programmes was the outcome of the realisation that lack of education is a barrier to the participatory development process. When the national education system became part of the non-violent movement for Indian independence, it was considered a systemic move in restructuring society. Rather than exemplifying the British educational system, Gandhi redefined the formal education system to suit the motto of 'progress for all'. The primary goal of each school was to impart the constructive programme, intellectually capacitating the masses to reach the goal of Poorna Swaraj. Social work education has imbibed a lot from the Gandhian ideology of praxis-learning nexus. Gandhian thoughts on education advocated experiential learning - the integration of knowledge and work. This model was tailor-made to suit the respective villagers' needs beyond individual learning. The process taught cooperation, mutual respect and reciprocity in the making. The constructive programme Gandhi envisioned and implemented is considered to be developing and fostering social capital, which is what we call today the strength of communities to be resilient in times of adversities.

Village Sanitation and Education in Health and Hygiene

Gandhi believed that the soul of India lives in its villages (Joshi, 2002). His analysis of the linkages between unprecedented population growth and its effects on health and sanitation called for the mission of implementing health and hygiene programmes across the villages of India. The lack of village sanitation has an impact on the environment and remains a threat to good health and sustainability. The persistence of open defecation due to the traditional mind-set and customs is still an impending concern. This low regard for sanitation not only impacts health but has drastic effects on education, social well-being and safety as well (Singh, 2019). Good health, clean water and sanitation services continue to be a priority for India. According to a study by Singh (2019), 70 per cent of India's rural people still defecate in open places. This highlights the need to educate the common people about health and hygiene. However, Gandhi's long-term vision on the country's health prospects had its realisation in the India Government's mass movement Swatchh Bharat Mission (SBM) through its flagship programme, 'Open Defecation Free'. India still strives for clean

and healthy communities and has a long way to go amidst strong cultural barriers and implementation deficits (Jain et al., 2020).

Adivasis as Indigenous Communities

Gandhi was a strong proponent of indigenous practices. His reformative strategies were aligned with developing and promoting indigenous knowledge and practices, which he believed will support a sustainable development model. Adivasis, as ethnic and indigenous communities, captured Gandhi's attention from time immemorial. Those minorities' ethnicity and culture have always been a point of consideration to Gandhi in his pursuit of bringing them into the mainstream. India in its due course of development was so very focused on preserving their culture and traditions and wilfully invested in their development and empowerment. It is quite ironical to note that development initiatives like the Narmada Hydro-Electric Power Project displaced tribal communities, leaving them with a complete loss of their habitat, livelihood, culture and way of life.

Aiming for complete independence should be acknowledging man's interdependence with the earth's flora and fauna, the unequal power relations and sustainability. Gandhi's constructive programme has, no doubt, focused on the sustainability aspect, which influenced the policy decisions of advancing India socially, economically and politically. Sustainability and local self-reliance serve as strengths in development models. Sustainable development strategies adopted in the later years have these principles underpinning it. When India's economic development approach favoured a capitalist economy, this brings to our notice the lessons we learned from the pandemic crisis where we were running short of essentials, not because they were not available, but because they were not accessible. Global economies are not always an all-round solution to the nation's economic problems. The State's support in making communities sustainable is imperative and so should not be disregarded.

Conclusion

In a country like India where political education and advancement are among the primary concerns, Gandhi's mass mobilisation and social action strategies deserve attention. For any revolution to be successful, people should be a natural corollary of the process. For that to materialise, people

should take it into their heart, mind and soul. Gandhi's mass campaigns were aimed at radical social transformation, personal transformation being its primary step. Moreover, it had impacted policy decisions and legislation. His empowerment strategies including mass mobilisation through civil society organisations (Harijan Seva Sangh formed in 1932) and the use of language, speech, writing and print media (*Harijan* – Newspaper) as powerful platforms to raise critical consciousness among the masses are in vogue even today.

Gandhi approached development with multiple dimensions through his constructive programme. He believed that the country's social and economic transformation is required to attain the goals of welfare, independence, development and empowerment. The constructive programme was not an end in itself; rather, it was a means of developing individuals and communities' internal and external strengths for the nation's prosperity and sustainability. Built on the four pillars of Gandhian ideology – Swaraj, Non-violence, Sarvodaya and Swadeshi – the constructive programme was aimed at building a self-reliant nation and self-sufficient generation. In the present era of the global pandemic crisis and the country's ever-changing challenges due to the new developments in the geopolitical scenario, a revisit to the Gandhian constructive programme's perspectives is pertinent in this context.

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