
UNIT 4 VOLUNTARISM IN GANDHI

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4.1 INTRODUCTION

The distinctiveness of Gandhi lay in the fact that he desired social and political transformation through non violent means. He consistently reminded of the corruption that centralised power results in and underlines the need for devolution of power to the grass roots. Rejecting modern civilisation and its stress on industries and technology as highly unequal and violent, Gandhi offers an alternative that maximises self reliance and self sufficiency of ordinary persons. He stressed on devolution of power as the key to a better and fuller democracy. He also provided a vision of his ideal and at the same time accepted alterations to this ideal on grounds of feasibility, given the fact that Gandhi was a practical idealist. The activist theoretician that Gandhi was, he is categorical that it is futile to theorise about the future and expects his ongoing movements to yield the desired end, constantly reminding of the intimate relationship between ends and means.

Gandhi's vision had its critics. A major critic was Rabindranath Tagore who pointed out that a civilisation which is predominantly based on villages cannot advance the cause of individuals as the village-centric life revolves around the community. Offering an alternative to what Tagore offers, Gandhi argues from the standpoint of a philosophic anarchist, a defence of the freedom of the individual against the authority of the state and social tyranny which is why he focuses on decentralisation. He clarified that the "outermost circumference will not wield power to crush the inner circle, but will give strength to all within and will derive its own strength from it". Gandhi reminds of the mutual dependence of the individual and the next larger group on a voluntary basis stating that no individual is an island and that the individual is the social self. His consistent emphasis on the individual, and not the state, with the moral authority to question and judge injustice and repression and to bring the desired changes through non violent means is the framework within which he defends the supremacy of the individual.

Aims and Objectives

After reading this Unit, you would be able to understand

- Gandhi's advocacy of the individual as the supreme
- Swaraj as self reliance and self government
- His conception of the constructive programme.

4.2 INDIVIDUAL AS SUPREME

The individual, for Gandhi, is the basis of the society that would be self regulating and self governing. He is suspicious of the modern state apparatus and denies the need for an all powerful state leviathan. This is most evident in his statement written in 1924 to which he remains steadfast in his belief that the ‘individual is the one supreme consideration’.

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. If it is wrested from him, he becomes an automaton and society is ruined. No society can possibly be built on a denial of individual freedom. It is contrary to the very nature of man. Just as a man will not grow horns or a tail, so will he not exist as a man if he has no mind of his own. In reality even those who do not believe in the liberty of the individual believe in their own.

This individual is no Robinson Crusoe but a social being as he is critical of unbridled individualism as being unsuitable for social progress. Gandhi’s individualism is similar to the individualism of late nineteenth century British Idealist, T.H. Green. Within this framework he analyses freedom as not being left alone or to abdicate moral obligation towards others who are equally entitled to freedom for themselves. A free person can choose to enter into any association with others but cannot simply cut off from others. This is true of nations also. Gandhi’s equation of freedom with self rule is to underline the intrinsic link between freedom and obligation to others and to oneself, without abandoning the voluntary basis of freedom. Self rule means voluntary internalization of one’s obligations towards others and that a free person and a nation cannot be selfish and isolationist.

Unrestricted individualism is the law of the beast of the jungle. We have learnt to strike the mean between individual freedom and social restraint. Willing submission to social restraint for the sake of the well being of the whole society, enriches both the individual and the society of which he is a member.

For Gandhi, society is an aggregate of individuals and is incomplete if it ignores the self development of individuals. The individual, for him, is not only a social person but also a moral one. Individual initiative enhances human dignity and also provides for a mechanism for resolving conflicts in a non violent manner. He underlines the importance of common good without denying the pivotal role for the individual. He considers the individual as the bearer of moral authority vested with the moral law and duty (*dharma*) to judge the state and its laws, by the standards of truth (*satya*) and non violence (*ahimsa*). His faith in the individual as the basis of a modern society is strengthened by his notion of relative truth based on human needs.

The more mature Gandhi, observes Dalton, establishes the link between non violence and the preservation of liberty seeing the former as the bedrock of freedom. Yet in his commitment to non violence he does not sacrifice the social and political freedom of the individual: “...to make mistakes as a freeman... is better than being in bondage in order to avoid them (for) the mind of a man who remains good under compulsion cannot improve, in fact it worsens. And when compulsion is removed, all the defects well up to the surface with even greater force” (Harijan, 29th September, 1946).

4.3 AUTONOMY OF THE INDIVIDUAL

Gandhi's individualism is embedded in his notion of autonomy and is derived from his extensive view of power which he locates in the state, economy and society and in each individual. Within this framework he insists that everyone can and should take charge of his life. Accepting human dignity and worth as intrinsic goods, he is severe in his indictment of colonialism and untouchability and interestingly, sees the seeds of degeneration that undermines and suppresses human dignity within Indian traditions. He emphasises that India got subjugated because of its moribund and repressive practices and stresses on the need for reforming the Indian society and in particular, Hinduism, by highlighting some of its inequities and discriminatory practices towards women, the lower castes and the untouchables. According to Gandhi individuals make and remake their lives through their choices and action. The highest duty for Gandhi is to act morally, regardless of the consequences. The moral way to proceed is through non violence. Since each person knows best about his moral project and the means to realise it in action each one ought to be free from both domination and violence.

Gandhi's autonomous person is also a social person, never apart from the community to which he belongs and therefore he expects everyone to be concerned not only about their self governance but also the autonomy of others. This, in a nutshell is the meaning of '*swaraj*' or self rule, a vision of India ruled by Indians with concern for the poorest, the destitute and the most vulnerable. Self rule not only means end of British colonialism but also an end of other forms of domination such as untouchability and modernization. *Swaraj* for Gandhi is when Indians learn to rule themselves, individually and collectively. It means self control and self rule. Like Green, he seeks to "make life morally meaningful for all people and both viewed the community as held together not by compulsion but by the sense of a common interest or good" (Bondurant, 1967, p.12). The individual has a soul while the state is a soulless machine "which can never be weaned from violence to which it owes its existence". The individual has the moral authority as he consistently pursues *satya* and *ahimsa* and hence his description of the individual as possessing a soul while the state is soulless. He accepts the state if it uses minimum of violence but the fear is always that the state may use too much violence against those who differ from it. His concern with the consequences of excessive centralisation of power makes him concede only a minimal role to the state. Decentralisation of power ensures greater chance for the collective pursuit of *satya* and *ahimsa*. He admits that state ownership is preferable to private ownership involving the exploitation of the masses, but in general he considers the violence of private ownership as less injurious than the violence of the state. In an enlightened anarchy 'everyone is his own ruler'. In an ideal state there is no political power because there is no state. As this ideal is not realisable, he prefers a minimal state, like Thoreau, namely that government is best which governs the least. Gandhi limits the ambit of the state and focuses on the civil society and the role of the individual within it.

I look upon an increase in the power of the state with the greatest fear, because, although while apparently doing good by minimizing exploitation, it does the greatest harm to mankind by destroying individuality, which lies at the root of all progress

The individual is the votary of *satya* and *ahimsa* and has the moral authority to judge and if necessary, oppose the authority of the state, as all states violate *satya* and *ahimsa*. For Gandhi, *ahimsa* or non coercion is essential in order to accord respect to the human

person and that minimal coercion is a necessary evil to secure the larger good thus establishing superiority of *ahimsa* over *himsa*. Gandhi insists on the need for more and more people to affirm the value of *ahimsa* not as an elusive ideal or a pious hope but as a widely relevant principle of social action. Fear breeds force but if more people become fearless then force would become redundant. Gandhi points out it because of this commitment to *ahimsa* that has made us question retributive theory of punishment and forms of *himsa* like capital punishment, duelling, slavery, torture, collective retaliation or revenge, acts of aggression by states, preventive wars, cruelty to animals, flogging and corporal punishment, which were seen as respectable at one time. Gandhi's attitude towards *ahimsa* was that of an absolutist as he declares "a votary of *ahimsa* cannot subscribe to the utilitarian formula. He will strive for the greatest good of all and die in the attempt to realise the ideal. He will therefore be willing to die so that others may live.... The absolutist's sphere of destruction will always be the narrowest possible. The utilitarian's has no limit". Gandhi was convinced that masses could be trained in the acts of non violence and he consistently insists that *ahimsa* is the power of the stronger and not of the weak; that it requires greater physical and mental courage to be non violent. Strength comes from indomitable will and not physical power. *Ahimsa* needs the cultivation of self control. For the success of non violent mass action Gandhi relied on a small band of committed, intelligent and honest persons who have abiding faith in non violence as they would ensure the non violent atmosphere required for the working of civil disobedience in accord with *ahimsa*.

Gandhi defends the action of the individual citizen who challenges the might of the centralised bureaucratic state on the basis of *dharma*, *satya* and *ahimsa*. The state, for Gandhi, represents violence in a concentrated and organised form and is described as a 'soulless machine'; it can never be weaned away from violence and force as these are the bases of its existence. The individual has a soul. People normally take for granted the legalised coercion of the state as the state has too much violence which it could use against those who differ from it. Gandhi's fear of the centralised state makes him emphasise on a minimal role for the state. He admits that state ownership is preferable to individual ownership but concedes that the latter's violence is less injurious than that of the state. However, he supports minimal state ownership on unavoidable grounds.

4.4 SWARAJ AS SELF RELIANCE AND SELF GOVERNMENT

Swaraj is attained when the individual, through voluntary self sacrifice and suffering, achieves self-control, in other words self-discipline. In Indian context, *swaraj* is attained when there is social unity in three major areas of the Indian society: among the untouchables and the various castes, between the Hindus and Muslims and narrowing the gap between the city and villages, the former urban, westernised and educated and the latter rural and illiterate. To be of service for the betterment of the ordinary people, an idea that Gandhi derived from Vivekananda, Tolstoy, Sermon on the Mount and numerous texts and saints of the Indian tradition, is the quintessence of *swaraj*. *Swaraj* means "all around awakening-social, educational, moral, economic and political" (*Young India*, 26 August 1926, II, p.1231). Merely replacing British rulers with their Indian counterparts is Englishstan and not Hindustan, an "English rule without the Englishman, the tiger's nature, but not the tiger" (1997, ch. IV).

By *Swaraj* I mean the government of India by the consent of the people as ascertained

by the largest number of adult population, male or female, native born or domiciled, who have contributed by manual labour to the services of the state and who have taken the trouble of having registered their names as voters.... Real *Swaraj* will come not by the acquisition of authority by a few but by the acquisition of the capacity by all to resist authority when it is abused. In other words, *swaraj* is to be obtained by educating the masses to a sense of their capacity to regulate and control authority (Gandhi 1947, p.14).

In the *Hind Swaraj* (1909) through the Italian example, Gandhi points out that for Victor Emanuel, Cavour and Garibaldi 'Italy meant the king of Italy and his henchmen' whereas for Mazzini, it meant the whole of the Italian people, that is, its agriculturalists. Mazzini's ideal remained unrealized and that Italy still remained in a 'state of slavery'. Gandhi makes welfare of the masses, with fulfilment of their basic needs as basis of economic freedom, thus reflecting the inspiration that he derives from Ruskin. The India of my dreams, observes Gandhi is the *swaraj* of the poor person (Ibid, p.17). A truly non violent state would be composed of self governing and self sufficient small cohesive village communities in which the majority would rule with due consideration to the rights of the minorities. It would be a participatory democracy whereby citizens have the positive freedom to "participate in the process of politics in every possible way, restricting its activities to the bare minimum,... it did not mean that the state was all-powerful, rather an intimate relationship should exist between the state and all its citizens". *Satyagraha* is the glue that cements on one hand his ideal of enlightened anarchy and common good and on the other hand his ideals of individual autonomy and moral self-determinism. Like Thoreau, Gandhi stresses on the supremacy of the individual conscience against all claims of the state.

For Gandhi a good society could be attained if it could realise liberty, equality and fraternity through non violent means. This is the lesson, he observed to the Indian princes in 1942 that Europe has learnt from the French Revolution of 1789. Gandhi distinguishes between the fuller moral connotation of freedom and the narrower conception of individual or national freedom while analysing *swaraj* or self rule. Asked to explain the meaning of *purna swaraj* in 1931, he says:

The root meaning of *swaraj* is self rule. *Swaraj* may, therefore be rendered as disciplined rule from within and *purna* means "complete". "Independence" has no such limitation. Independence may mean licence to do as you like. *Swaraj* is positive. Independence is negative. *Purna Swaraj* does not exclude association with any nation, much less with England. But it can only mean association for mutual benefit and at will. Thus there are countries which are said to be independent but which have no *Purna Swaraj* e.g. Nepal. The word *Swaraj* is a sacred word, a vedic word, meaning self rule and self restraint, and not freedom from all restraint which "independence" often means.

"*Swaraj* of a people means the sum total of the *swaraj* (self rule) of individuals; government over self is the truest *swaraj*, it is synonymous with *moksha* or salvation. He considers individual *swaraj* as logically and conceptually prior to the notion of collective or national *swaraj*. He also clarifies that "self government means continuous effort to be independent of government control whether it is foreign government or whether it is national. *Swaraj* government will be a sorry affair if people look up to it for regulation of every detail of life". Gandhi's conception of *swaraj* includes four aspects: Truth, Non violence, political and economic independence. *Swaraj* would be incomplete without realisation of each, since each, for Gandhi, is interwoven with all. His conception of *swaraj* makes the same distinction between 'inner' and 'outer' forms of freedom which

Vivekananda and Aurobindo conceive of. Vivekananda's distinction involves a relegation of political freedom and national independence to a subsidiary position. But as the struggle for national independence gathers momentum merely relying on 'inner' freedom does not seem enough. Aurobindo's identification of national with spiritual freedom takes on an extreme form of religious nationalism which threatens individual liberty which he subsequently abandons. Gandhi never espouses this view of freedom as he consistently emphasises on the supreme importance of a supra-political form of freedom which very few Indian leaders concur with. Swaraj for Gandhi means acquiring inner freedom which means that Indians gain sovereignty over themselves and over their nation (Dalton, 1982). *Swaraj* would become a reality only if people have the capacity to regulate and control authority. Real *swaraj*, for Gandhi, "will come not by the acquisition of authority by a few but by the acquisition of the capacity by all to resist authority when it is abused.... *Swaraj* for me means freedom for the meanest of my countrymen. I am not interested in freeing India merely from the English yoke. I am bent upon freeing India from any yoke whatsoever. I have no desire to exchange 'king log' for 'king stork'. Elaborating further he points out "there is no freedom for India so long as one man, no matter how highly placed he may be, holds the hollow of his hands the life, property and honour of millions of human beings. It is an artificial, unnatural and uncivilized institution. The end of it is an essential preliminary to *swaraj*". Gandhi does not consider good government as better than self government as there is a connection between individual and national self rule. The evolution of the nation and its component parts, the individuals are inter-twined; one cannot advance without the other. Individual self rule is included in *swaraj*. Self awareness, self discipline and self respect are key components of *swaraj*. Fundamental to *swaraj* is the essence of freedom which is more important than the social, political and economic liberty. *Swaraj* "is infinitely greater than and includes independence".

Let there be no mistake about my conception of Swaraj. It is complete independence of alien control and complete economic independence. So, at one end you have political independence; at the other, economic. It has two other ends. One of them is moral and social, the corresponding end is Dharma, i.e. religion is the highest sense of the term. It includes Hinduism, Islam, Christianity etc., but is superior to them all. You may recognize it by the name of Truth, not the honesty of experience, but the living Truth that pervades everything and will survive all destruction and all transformation. Moral and social uplift may be recognized by the term as we are used to, i.e. Non violence. Let us call this square of Swaraj, which will be out of shape if any of its angles is untrue. We cannot achieve this political and economic freedom without Truth and Non violence in concrete terms, without a living faith in God and hence moral and social elevation (Harijan, 2nd January, 1937).

Gandhi considers accumulation of wealth as immoral which is why he proposes trusteeship. To achieve equitable distribution he proposes four specific measures: (a) Bread Labour or manual labour which for Gandhi would remove exploitation. "If all worked for their bread, distinctions of rank would be obliterated; the rich would still be there, but they would deem themselves only trustees of their property, and would use it mainly in the public interest". Bread labour would reduce not only economic inequality but also social inequality and in the Indian context it would undermine caste based inequalities. Bread labour ensures that none would be rich and poor; high or low and touchable and untouchable. (b) Voluntary renunciation, a value that Gandhi reiterates from the *Isopanishad* of not coveting the possessions of others and not accumulating beyond one's basic needs. Personal wants ought to be kept to the barest minimum keeping in mind the poverty of

one's fellow human beings and try for a new mode of life. (c) *Satyagraha* to resolve industrial and agricultural disputes as legitimate and the proposal of trusteeship to resolve the conflict between labour and capital with the core idea of non appropriation by owners. He writes "If, however, in spite of the utmost efforts the rich do not become guardians of the poor in the true sense of the term and the latter are more and more crushed and die of hunger, what is to be done? In trying to find the solution to this riddle I have lighted on non-violent non-cooperation and civil disobedience as the right and infallible means. The rich cannot accumulate wealth without the cooperation of the poor in society....If this knowledge were to penetrate to and spread amongst the poor, they would become strong and would learn how to free themselves by means of non violence from the crushing inequalities which have brought them to the verge of starvation". (d) Governmental Action is necessary to ensure that every work receives a minimum or living wage. Gandhi insists that his ideal would have to be realised through non violent measures, through moral process of transformation involving individuals and keeping the role of the state to its minimum. This is what separates the Gandhian ideal from the Marxists and socialists who too emphasise on equality as a moral ideal but while the Marxists advocate violent transformation the socialists insist on a democratic transformation. Gandhi categorically rejects the Marxist ideal of the dictatorship of proletariat as a means of securing social and economic justice for the poor.

Gram Swaraj is Gandhi's ideal. As a virulent critic of all models of western industrialisation as they produce material goods but are alien to our moral values he considers the village as the unit of development. The village panchayat system, the village republic could create both a participatory model of democracy and would also allow an escape route to avoid the perils of western industrialisation. *Gram Swaraj* will be the essential framework of this alternative model with the promotion of self sufficiency in providing the material conditions essential for fulfilling the needs of the individual and enhance the elements of self respect and pride in one self. Gandhi is conscious that the present day conditions of the villages are far from the ideal that he desires and it is because of this consciousness that he argues for a reformed rural setting where truth and non violence would co-exist in a situation of harmony and promotion and practice of rural virtues of cooperation and performance of duties. His close associate, J.C.Kumarappa coins the term 'villagism' which Gandhi gladly accepts as an essential framework of realising rural *swaraj*. Gandhi desires a complete economic revival of India with *satya* and *ahimsa* as its foundation and the credit for preparing a blueprint along these lines goes to Kumarappa.

4.5 CONSTRUCTIVE PROGRAMME

Gandhi's prescription for social progress and transformation is contained in what he describes as the constructive programme. It is conceived as an alternative positive programme for social reorganisation to the one, the orthodox Anarchists offer. In its implementation, Gandhi met with partial success. It gives content to the concept of *satyagraha* and is framed with the purpose of their applicability within the Indian social and economic milieu. The programme is considered as the key to the attainment of *poorna swaraj* and consists of the following items: (1) communal harmony, (2) removal of untouchability, (3) prohibition, (4) *Khadi*, (5) cottage industries, (6) village sanitation, (7) new or basic education – *nai talim*, (8) adult education, (9) upliftment of women, (10) education in health and hygiene and (11) propagation of national language, *Hindustani*. Of these, the most important is *Khadi*.

For Gandhi, hand spinning and hand weaving is the salvation to the economic, political and psychological problems of India. He tries to meet the communist critique of the *Khaddar* programme by emphasising its capacity to organise the community. Decentralisation of industry is crucial for preserving the purity and cohesiveness of domestic life, artistic and creative talents of the individual members and more importantly, 'people's sense of freedom, ownership and dignity'. He wants to develop what he considers a *khadi* mentality by which he means decentralisation of production and distribution of the necessities of life thus ensuring economic and political freedom and reducing the dependence on the state and the government. He is also convinced that spinning would purify the body and soul of the spinners and would lead to spiritual progress.

Another highlight of the Constructive programme is the emphasis on the scheme of basic education by which he means the learning of the three R's (reading, writing and arithmetic) and acquisition of skill, preferably the traditional family skill. The aim is to make the individual self-supporting by the sale of products of work done by vocational training thus ensuring an assured occupation which would give the students, the material rewards which could, in turn, be diverted towards their further education and self-development. Gandhi also sees it as a practical expression of his belief in the idea of bread-labour, a concept which he borrows from Ruskin.

Gandhi is convinced that education has to be a lifelong process and should not stop with childhood. This is recommended with the view to enrich the minds of the individual, and here Gandhi, like Plato, believes in the human capacity to absorb knowledge lifelong. Moreover, education would have to be imparted in one's mother tongue as that enables the person to retain and understand what is taught. It would also instill love for one's mother tongue and pave the way for the development of a common national language, which for Gandhi would be *Hindustani*. He desires free and compulsory education for all children up to the age of fourteen.

Gandhi also drew attention to the filth and lack of hygienic conditions in Indian villages by his emphasis on sanitation, clean drainages, well-paved roads and education in basic hygiene. He also drew special attention to the exploited and the underprivileged sections of the Indian society. He pleaded for the abolition of child marriage, *pardah* and other customs that kept women in a state of subjugation. Under his stewardship of the freedom movement, women participated in large numbers. Initially, in the 1920s he wanted women to be confined to their homes and practice *swadeshi* by working on the spinning wheel but subsequently during the civil disobedience campaigns of the 1930s, he allowed them to picket liquor shops besides participating in the salt *satyagraha*. Women played an important role in many of the humanitarian works that Gandhi undertook like helping the poor, nursing the sick and promoting *khadi*. He advocated class, caste and gender equality seeing equality and justice as the bedrock of a humane and dignified society.

Through his constructive programme, to which he devoted most of his time and energy, Gandhi tried to link freedom with harmony. *Khaddar* and the spinning wheel would bridge the gulf between the small numbers of educated urban elite with the majority of villagers. Similarly *Hindustani* would be the lingua franca of the nation as it would create one language for the entire nation. For Gandhi, both untouchability and communalism were corrosive poisons. He considered Hindu-Muslim unity as an extension of untouchability, which needed to be fought, as long as it lasted. Within this framework of social harmony Gandhi persisted with attempts to resolve particular social problems. He wanted to reconcile freedom with harmony and deal with the contradictions of caste and religion.

Emphasising on compromise and cooperation he endeavoured to reconcile divergent interests.

4.6 SUMMARY

As a philosophical anarchist, the essential nature of the state as striving for more concentration of power and egoism is writ large in Gandhi's entire philosophy. He concedes the point that pursuit of power is an endemic human desire but he was equally careful on emphasising the countervailing and more effective role of moral values which may create a new category of power which will be in consonance with individual fulfilment and a humane collective face. Gandhi's emphasis on the individual and his rejection of the all powerful state stems from his belief that individual initiative, voluntarism and decentralisation are to be the organising principles of his ideal society. Gandhi rejects the idea and institution of the state on the basis of two anarchistic arguments: the state represents an authority that poses a threat to the liberty of the individual and the state represents violence in an organized form. From these two premises he derives his support for a decentralised, non-industrial, non violent, self sufficient and self reliant free society; village *swaraj* would advance the cause of individual freedom. Gandhi also stresses that political independence by itself is incomplete unless accompanied by a moral or spiritual transformation of the individual in society. Not only does Gandhi insist on moral progress but also in the elimination of slave mentality. Equally important is social reform with the help of constructive programme to realising the three pillars of *swaraj* and thus establishes close link between freedom and social harmony.

He stresses on devolution of power as the key to a better and fuller democracy. He also provides a vision of his ideal and at the same time accepts alterations to this ideal on grounds of feasibility, given the fact that Gandhi was a practical idealist. Gandhi's emphasis on the individual and his rejection of the all powerful state stems from his belief that individual initiative, voluntarism and decentralisation are to be the organising principles of his ideal society.

4.7 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. What are the reasons for Gandhi's rejection of the all powerful state?
2. Swaraj for Gandhi is self reliance and self government. Explain.
3. What is the importance of Constructive Programme in realising Swaraj?
4. Explain Gandhi's view on the individual initiative and autonomy.

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