

would have all the authority and jurisdiction required. Since there would be no system of punishment in the accepted sense, the Panchayat would be the legislature, judiciary and executive combined to operate for a year of office. Any village could become such a republic without much interference, even from the present government whose sole effective connection with the villages was the exaction of village revenue.

The purpose was to present an outline of village government where there is perfect democracy based upon individual freedom. The individual is the architect of his own government. The law of non-violence rules him and the government where an individual and his village are able to defy the might of a world. The law governing every villager was that he would suffer death in the defence of his and his village's honour. Thus, Gandhi's conception of the village was based on the post-modern perspective of quality of life.

Keeping aside his theory of Non-violence and Trusteeship even his close associates and friends failed to understand the meaning and significance of the Village Society that he had advocated. Most of his close associates were people influenced by the European thought and way of life. In a letter to Pandit Nehru in 1945 he wrote, that he was convinced that if India had to attain true freedom and through India the world also sooner or later, the fact has to be recognised that the people had to live in the villages, not in towns, in huts not in palaces. Crores of people would never be able to live in peace with each other in cities and palaces. They would have no recourse but to resort to both violence and untruth. Without truth and non-violence there could be nothing but destruction of humanity. Truth and non-violence could only be realised in the simplicity of the village life and the simplicity could best be found in the Charkha and all that the Charkha connotes. He did not fear if the world today was going the wrong way and it may be that India too would go that way and like the proverbial moth burn itself eventually in the flame around which it dances more and more fiercely. However he thought it to be his duty to his last breath to try and protect India and, through India, the entire world from such a doom. The essence of what he said was that man should

rest content with what are his real needs and become self-sufficient; if he does not have this control, he cannot save himself.

8.9 GRAM SWARAJ: CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

Gandhi's Gram Swaraj in fact aimed at individual's development, character-building and adherence to basic human values for the development of the community as a whole. But the way our Panchayati Raj system in its present form addresses to these problems remains a question of debate and inquiry. The 73rd Amendment Act was brought about to confer a constitutional status on the panchayats but except in a few states, the situation remains unchanged. People's participation in the development of the villages is missing as the gram sabhas rarely meet to discuss the village development plans. No doubt due to reservation of seats a large number of women and members from the deprived class have come to occupy positions in the panchayats, but their role in decision-making is very limited. The concept of service to the community or 'shramdaan' appears alien in our system of village development as the dependence on government has increased to a large extent. The Gandhian concept of rural development is more of a people's movement than a system of regimented governance. Unemployment is increasing, environment degradation is a major problem, village community is fragmented, people do not participate in development process and due to break down of village and cottage industries and migration to the cities has only aggregated the problem. The answer to some of these problems lies in adopting the Gandhian model of village reconstruction, where every village will be self-dependent and self-sufficient to meet its basic needs and the individual will have enough to lead a life of contentment .

The development of villages was not considered by Gandhi as an end in itself. He thought of the villages not in their isolation but as a starting point in the crusade for a better and peaceful world order. If we do not go back to the ideals of Gandhi as envisaged for the upliftment of the rural population, rural India would continue to suffer as a result of evidently super-imposed process of development. During the last six decades we have seen that the Gram Sabhas and village Panchayats that formed a

part of Gandhi's political philosophy got relegated to political dormancy. But as Gandhi recedes into history he appears more and more a decentralist, even localist and less and less nationalist. In the Gandhian model, village is the central and not the peripheral source that would generate forces of social transformation. The goal of Gandhian action is attainment of a truthful human society and not the creation of a powerful, *albeit* just state. We shall be deluding if we believe that the recent attempts to revive Panchayati Raj Institutions are not an incarnation of the structural elements of state power. They will derive their legitimacy and authority from the state and not from society as such as is being projected. In the present form, the system of rural governance will only perpetuate the 'Raj' further where the ruling class would continue to dominate. By the time the nation rediscovers Gandhi's Gram Swaraj, it may be too late.

The path of development that we have chosen for the Panchayats to trek upon will lead us nowhere near to Gandhi's gram swaraj. In the years to come it will only complicate the rural scene further leading to greater migration to the cities in search of employment. The solution lies in promoting cottage and small-scale industries so as to hold back people from flooding the cities. Employment has to be generated within the confines of the village boundary. The Gandhian approach to rural development should be understood. Gandhian concept of gram swaraj does not really answer only one aspect of development, i.e. economic, but it is a way of life to be practised by a developing, over-populated and rural-based country like India to solve its multi-dimensional problems. Our present development model has no answers to many of these questions.

8.10 SUMMARY

Gandhi is perhaps the only great thinker of this century who could foresee the social and ecological consequences of the exploitative model of development and offer an alternative model. Gandhi was not only a pioneer but also very original as he was not an academic theoretician, but a man of unparalleled wisdom. The gap between this man of wisdom and the men of knowledge that this century has produced in plenty still

remains unabridged. The nonviolent struggle launched successfully against the mightiest colonial power of the time was emulated elsewhere too but it has yet to make a major dent in the war machine of the world and the war mentality of the people. He demonstrated how a very high level of culture and civilisation could be evolved without destroying the environment, and without exploiting nature and fellow humans.

Gandhi's philosophy offers a practical way to a peaceful social revolution to improve the quality of life. What he preached was not only for the Indian masses but for the entire deprived people of the world. His message was not for a particular time but for the future of the mankind, especially his theory of non-violence and peaceful co-existence. But his immediate concern was the Indian masses, especially in the countryside. In fact people needed courage and sense of self-respect to enable them to come out of the slavish mentality developed over centuries of bondage. In his view if these conditions were to be changed, politics, education, social reform, economy, and technology had to suit the genius of the society.

8.11 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. India lives in Villages. Discuss
2. State the basic principles of gram swaraj.
3. What did Gandhi's Gram Swaraj aim at?
4. Define Gandhi's views on modern machine.

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