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# THE GANDHIAN CONCEPT OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

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## Introduction

Justice is something for which human existence has an inborn longing to—something which comes to humans naturally. Yet, when the human world today is taken into account, justice is experienced more in its denial and violation, than in its fulfillment in the lives of individuals and societies. In many societies, to see justice done is seen as something great, rare, and sometimes, a miracle! In such a world, to come across someone who would be described as a personification of justice, would indeed be a miracle. Mohandas Karmachand Gandhi (M. K. Gandhi) was an experience of a presence of justice for his times, as well as for the world today. Albert Einstein aptly put it thus: "Generations to come, it may be, will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon earth" (quoted in Chatfield, 1976, pp. 579–580).

Can Gandhi be seen as proponent of Social Justice? Yes and no. The thoughts and writings of Gandhi are a mixture of political science, religion, spirituality, and ethics. However, all of them would have an unmistakable stamp of social justice. To understand Gandhi and his viewpoints it is important to understand his milieu and his background. Gandhi's thoughts and what he wrote are inextricably linked with his religious background and upbringing, and the socio-economic and political reality of his times—of a subjugated and oppressed nation.

Mohandas was born in the upper-caste Gandhi family associated with local rulers of a region in Gujarat, a state in the Northwest of India. As pointed out in his own autobiography, he was raised in the Vaishnavite<sup>1</sup> tradition of Hinduism, which is strongly influenced by Jainist ethos.<sup>2</sup> Romain Rolland (1924) described Gandhiji's world view as consisting of an edifice of two levels—a solid foundation of religion, on top of which is an upper structure of social and political action. "It is into the depths of this crypt that he descends everyday to seek inspiration and strength to carry on the work above" (p. 26). Religiosity with firm foundations of truthfulness, non-violence, and sacrificial self-suffering were the core values he imbibed from his family and from the books he read during his childhood (Gandhi, 1927). Later, his Western education exposed him to the works of authors like Tolstoy, Ruskin, and Thoreau, as well as the New Testament, especially its Sermon on the Mount, which inspired in him values of service, care for the poor, and the weapon of self-suffering for victory.

Although Gandhi wrote no single treatise on social justice, all his life, work, and published writings contain insights about social justice. They were drawn from his own experiences and



observations of injustice as a victim of political oppression, racism, and apartheid in South Africa and India.

### Foundations of social justice

The Gandhian outlook on social justice had its foundation in the over-arching Indian concept *Dharma*. *Dharma* can be understood in many ways. Generally, it is defined as “that which supports or sustains”<sup>3</sup> (the universe, the relationships)—the moral law according to Sanskrit<sup>4</sup> tradition. In a derivative sense, it can also mean religion and duty. Gandhi’s understanding of social justice has both these meanings as a foundation, and they are inextricably interlinked. For Gandhi, it is a spirituality based on his religion that inspires his action. It is the *Vedic*<sup>5</sup> religious view of reality as non-dual,<sup>6</sup> which in the ultimate analysis binds you to a life of “seeking truth alone” in its various manifestations (including diverse individual world views and practices), and thus creates immense space for tolerance. From this perspective, social justice can become a reality only in a world where diverse presences have a rightful claim to co-existence as manifestations of the “absolute truth.”

While today’s perception about social justice is often founded on a “rights-based approach,” Gandhi’s vision of a just world is one based on “duties.” Gandhi personally firmly adhered to the ancient religious doctrine of duty based on one’s caste and status.<sup>7</sup> Among his beliefs, he lists *varnashrama dharma* or “Discipline of the Castes,” which is to be on strictly Vedic lines, and may be distinct from the crude popular belief of unequal class status based on birth. Gandhi’s conception of the caste system does not base it on pride or vain notions of social superiority, but on duties assigned to them specifically (Rolland, 1924).

On October 6, 1921, Gandhi wrote, “I decline to be bound by any interpretation, however learned it may be, if it is repugnant to reason or moral sense” (quoted in Rolland, 1924, p. 26). He re-interpreted and redefined the existing paradigm of caste-based duties by reiterating the dignity and significance of all such duties for the “sustenance” of the society. However, the reality of Indian experience of this framework was an enslaving and exploitative hierarchical stratification, which led to the oppression of the majority by a privileged minority. Hence, in his later years, while fighting to eliminate such oppression, he also gave up on adhering to this notion of duty. All the same, he never abandoned the “notion of duty” as fundamental to a just society, as he writes in his radical attack on (modern) civilization:

Civilization is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty. Performance of duty and observance of morality are convertible terms. To observe morality is to attain mastery over our mind and our passions. So doing, we know ourselves. The Gujarati equivalent for civilization means “good conduct.”

Gandhi, 1908, p. 53

That logic of justice sounds simple— if one performs one’s duties, everyone else’s rights are ensured. However, there is often clamor for obtaining rights, and getting “others” to do their duties, and a near total neglect of a focus on individuals fulfilling their duties.

### Goal of social justice

Gandhi believed that the praxis of social justice aims at a utopia—a religious utopia, very much in the context of Indian (Hindu) thinking and tradition. He terms it *ramarajya* (Reign of Rama,



or Kingdom of Rama), where justice would prevail as it used to during the reign of the legendary King Rama.<sup>8</sup> In order to establish "righteousness," Rama had to suffer the loss of his throne, exile in the forest, and countless other sufferings, through which he emerged victorious over all demonic powers, to establish a reign of justice for all. (However, today there are many who question Rama's version of justice, especially with respect to the treatment of women—his wife.) In Gandhi's advaitic religious view, Rama is not the legendary Rama of Ayodhya, rather the Absolute Truth, addressed in human terms, which alone can be the plenitude of justice. This perspective is very similar to the Christian utopia presented by Jesus as the Kingdom of God, which, today, is rendered as "reign of God," which according to St. Paul is "justice, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (*Holy Bible*, Letter of St. Paul to Romans, XIV).

If this vision of social justice is expressed more in religious-idealistic terms, Gandhi does not deprive us of a secular version, even if he did not regard it as the ultimate goal of praxis of justice. The rich Indian terminology he employs is *sarvodaya*,<sup>9</sup> which means the "progress of all" or, in a proximate rendering, the "well-being of all." However, this term is not to be confused with the concept of the "greater common good" (Roy, 1998, 1999), which has become a more exploitative term, especially in developing nations like India where people are easily driven away from their habitats, and denied access to natural resources, which they had traditionally used. For example, it is estimated that in the name of the "greater common good" of the nation, almost 50 million people have been displaced without adequate compensation or rehabilitation, and most of them are already on the fringes of the socio-economic landscape. This fatality lurking in the "rise of nation-states" had not gone unnoticed by Gandhi; hence he asserted that the attainment of such a goal was dependent and conditional on achieving the preliminary goal of *antyyodaya*—the progress of "the least, the last and the lost." He drew inspiration for his social economics from the much criticized work of John Ruskin, *Unto This Last* (1860, paraphrased in Ghandi, 1908), which is based on the biblical story of the eleventh hour laborer being paid an "equal wage." In broader terms, this perspective on social justice demanded an uplift or development of the least developed, to ensure that the "well being of all" is ensured. Gandhi's experiments at Phoenix settlement were an attempt to implement these ideas. However, he went beyond this goal in his later efforts—to ensure that all those who were oppressed or subjugated—particularly oppressed communities and women were lifted up.

### Means and methods

In Gandhi's view, there is just one primary method to attain a just society where everyone's well-being is ensured—that is, "holding on to truth" (*satyagraha*).<sup>10</sup> In making "truth" your God, you set aside everything else and cling on to it, as it is realized by you. Also, in the ultimate analysis, it would mean understanding all presences as God's presence.

Hence, based on *satyagraha*, the next principle, non-violence (*ahimsa*), will follow.<sup>11</sup> In the Indian tradition, *ahimsa* is described as the greatest of all "duties."<sup>12</sup> Usually, this concept has been equated with "passive resistance," a translation that was not acceptable to Gandhi. Passive resistance is a mode of non-violent struggle, wherein your resistance is devoid of violence, especially physical injury, while the struggle remains, however, very active. To Gandhi, non-violence is a negative terminology, but to him, *ahimsa* implies an "all embracing love." It goes beyond doing no harm, and involves an invincible good will to all, doing good even to one's enemy. It is through the weapon of self-suffering and love that one ought to overcome an unjust person or system.

Suffering is the mark of the human tribe. It is an eternal law. The mother suffers so that her child may live. Life, comes out of death. The condition of wheat growing is that the



seed grain should perish. No country has ever risen without being purified through the fire of suffering .... It is impossible to do away with the law of suffering which is the one indispensable condition of our being. Progress is to be measured by the amount of suffering undergone.... The purer the suffering the greater is the progress .... Non-violence in its dynamic condition means conscious suffering.

Quoted in Rolland, 1924, p. 40

To achieve this condition requires tremendous discipline, which can only be attained through rigorous training.

Another corollary, a *sine qua non* to establish a just economic order, is “non-covetousness” (*aparigraha*), another principle from the ancient Indian tradition; it means you do not take what you do not require. The famous Gandhian dictum in this context is:

Nature produces enough for our wants from day-to-day, and if only every being took enough for himself and nothing more, then there would be no paupers in this world, there would be no man dying of starvation in this world.... God never creates more than what is strictly needed for this moment. Therefore, whoever appropriates more than the minimum that is really necessary for him is guilty of theft.

Gandhi, 1980, pp. 3-5

## Ingredients of a just society

### *Equal distribution*

Gandhi promoted a very radical socialist ideal of “equal distribution” while articulately separating himself from the “socialist” school, basically because he objected to the means proposed to attain this ideal. The ideal of equal distribution did not, however, involve an equal division of resources among the people. In Gandhi’s view, “the real implication of equal distribution is that each man shall have the wherewithal to supply all his needs and no more” (Gandhi, 1980, p. 18). It resembles the famous communist axiom—“from each according to one’s ability to each according to one’s needs.” Gandhi realized that to bring this ideal into being the entire social order has to be reconstructed. This has to take place by voluntary renunciation, which is in the mode of a spiritual revolution and not of a violent revolution. He experimented with this ideal successfully at the Phoenix settlement he established, where everyone, irrespective of the tasks was paid equally.

### *Trusteeship*

In Gandhi’s view, a very radical component of a just society is that of ownership of resources: “[A]t the root of the doctrine of equal distribution must lie that of the trusteeship of the wealthy for the superfluous wealth possessed by them” (Gandhi, 1980, p. 19). This principle is based on the very famous axiom of Indian tradition, “Enjoy thy wealth, by renouncing it”<sup>13</sup> (Gandhi, 1980, p. 4):

To do this we would naturally have to resort to violence. This violent action cannot benefit society. Society will be the poorer, for it will lose the gifts of a man who knows how to accumulate wealth .... The rich man will be left in possession of his wealth, of which he will use what he reasonably requires for his personal needs and will act as a

trustee for the remainder to be used for the society. In this argument, honesty on the part of the trustee is assumed.

Gandhi, 1980, p. 19

The ability to accumulate or generate wealth is seen by Gandhi as a skill which all do not possess. Those who possess this skill have to use it for generating wealth, which needs to be utilized for the common good, after meeting his "reasonable requirements." Does this reflect pure idealism? However, in Gandhi's time the movements of *bhooadaan* (gifting of land) and *gramadaan* (gifting of villages) occurred in India; they persist even after his death. The concept of trusteeship they reflect emphasizes the inherent goodness in human beings, and the effect of "sound reason" on them. It is indeed a socialism of sorts—where emphasis is more on "how and for whom" the wealth is utilized, rather than on "who possesses" the wealth (whether the state or the individual). It is a spiritual form of socialism, which operates on the spiritual principles of *ahimsa* and *aparigraha* (read as love and renunciation, respectively).

On the basis of his treatise of equal distribution and possession, Gandhi decided to confine his needs to the minimum, sticking to strictly vegetarian and need-based meals, and loin-cloths made of hand-spun cotton that was affordable to the poorest peasant.

### **Self-rule**

Gandhi also held a very radical view regarding state power. He believed there is "violence in state power." He asserted "the State represents violence in a concentrated and organized form. The individual has a soul, but as the State is a soulless machine, it can never be weaned from violence to which it owes its very existence" (Gandhi, 1980, p. 22). He favored a "minimalist state" with the bare minimum functions of security and resolutions of conflicts between its various units. While all of Gandhi's thoughts were presented against the injustice of an oppressive alien rule, for Gandhi, "self-rule" (*swaraj*) had a much wider and more liberating meaning.

Optimally, independence and the establishment of parliamentary democracy was only the immediate goal or a first step. Self-rule had to begin with individual laborers and peasants becoming powerful enough to say "no" and "yes" according to their convictions regarding matters affecting them. However, he felt that social justice could be established firmly only when people of a locality (villages) lived in harmony, decided their matters at the local level, and resolved their disputes without having any recourse to the "evil of law courts," which he believed tend to perpetrate strife and thrive on conflict (Gandhi, 1908).

He insisted on the re-establishment of traditional self-sufficient villages revised to fit the changing times as "village republics," set up in a democratic and representative manner for a fixed term. They would be responsible for all legislative, judicial, and executive functions regarding education, health, sanitation, and production. They would organize village economies in a sustainable manner; they would primarily be independent, yet would be inter-dependent on neighboring villages in matters of necessity. In sum, it is a vision of an ever-widening circle of inter-dependence, without the aggression or oppression implicit in a pyramidal structure (Gandhi, 1959).

### **Swadeshi—self-sufficient local communities**

Gandhi thought that social justice requires that local communities become self-sufficient. Each community has to produce what it requires—in terms of material goods and services. Anything that tends to displace human labor has to be eschewed, as what is required is the "production by



the masses" ensuring that they have a livelihood, and not "mass production," even if the latter produced goods more cheaply.

For example, Gandhi pointed out the injustices implied in the "transportation" business—leading to the unnecessary movement of people and goods. According to him, it led to the spread of evil—physical and cultural—faster, rather than of sustained fulfillment of human needs. Gandhi also believed that a just society has to have minimum need of minimally a "curative health care" system, because such a system makes people slaves of medicines, lethargic, and less concerned about their personal health. He asserted that justice in health care lies in "preventive care," where hazards to health are avoided through healthy living and adequate sanitation. He promoted the creation of a curative health care system in harmony with nature and a balanced diet.

### ***Bread labor***

To reconstruct society into a "just society," the dignity of labor has to be upheld. For Gandhi, social justice demands that everyone contribute to the production of societal goods through physical labor. In other words, physical labor was to be placed on a par with intellectual labor in dignity. Although intellectual labor cannot be avoided, Gandhi believed that respect and readiness "to earn one's bread by the sweat of one's brow" should be instilled in all, especially through schools that educate people's hands as well as their heads. All children's education, therefore, would have a necessary component of manual labor.

### ***Protection of animals***

Recently, there has been a radical shift in our understanding of social justice as a consequence of the environmental movement. We have begun to speak of the rights of animals and all beings in the context of "environmental justice and ethics." In today's environmental thinking, much stress is laid on the R's,<sup>14</sup> especially on "rethinking"—of revising the anthropocentric world view with a cosmo-centric or bio-centric world view. Thus, for Gandhi, even in those times, this perspective was an extension of the biblical law of "love thy neighbor," with every living being as your neighbor. Thus, Gandhi would claim "cow-protection" as Hinduism's unique contribution to the cause of international love and tolerance.

Gandhi promoted "cow-protection," a longstanding religious practice of Hindu tradition, as one of the items of his credo:

Because the cow, to him, is taken as the symbol of the entire 'sub-human world.' Cow-protection means that man concludes a pact of alliance with his dumb brethren; it signifies fraternity between man and beast .... By learning to respect, revere an animal, man is taken beyond his species and is enjoined to realize his identity with all that lives.

*Rolland, 1924, p. 29*

A cow is preferred because of its cultural fit with the countryside, which has long considered it as the best beast companion, and giver of plenty.

### ***Work for the uplift of the oppressed***

With the specific practice of *antyo daya*, Gandhi took up the fight against untouchability and promoted the uplift of society's "pariahs." He considered untouchability the product of a "vile



deformation" of the caste system. In this regard, he went so far as to present his view on the Hindu doctrine of rebirth:

I do not want to be reborn, but if I have to be reborn, I should be "untouchable" so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings and affronts leveled to them in order that I may endeavor to free them from their miserable condition.

*Quoted in Rolland, 1924, p. 31*

He also adopted a child of seven from the untouchable class who moved around his ashram with abandon, as a proof of his commitment to the cause (Rolland, 1924, p. 32).

In his desire to bring justice to the untouchable class by correcting their age-long oppression, Gandhi popularized the term *harijan*—God's people—for the communities, which were outside the privileges of the caste system. In all these efforts, his goal, in line with his doctrine of *ahimsa*, was to bring about the conversion of the hearts of the oppressor to include and accept their excluded brethren.<sup>15</sup>

### **Gandhian vision of a just society in practice**

Gandhi's vision of social justice emerged in the context of India's struggle for independence from British domination. This struggle was based on the concept of a non-violent society as envisioned by its leader, Gandhi. However, as an independent nation the ideals of a just society that promotes social and economic justice are more prominent in lofty declarations and stated goals, rather than in its actual governance. In the initial phase of its existence, India emerged as a democratic power more on the basis of its military and economic might among the South Asian countries. More recently, its power has rested on its urban based, free-market (neo-capitalist) economy. Nevertheless, there have been constant efforts to return to the ideals of justice propounded by the Mahatma (Great Soul).

#### ***Positive discrimination***

One example is the position of the Indian government on positive discrimination. Indian governments have consistently stuck to the provision of positive discrimination or affirmative action by making special provisions for the communities oppressed under the age-old caste system, against which Gandhi led a non-violent struggle throughout his life. Irrespective of the numerous mechanisms currently in place, recent critics of this policy assert that it is now used more to appease these populations and attract their votes, rather than to promote the positive development of these communities.

#### ***Promoting local self-governance***

Almost five decades after Gandhi's death, with the passage of the 1992 constitutional amendments, serious attention was finally paid to the ideal of self-sufficient local communities. These amendments have indeed led to greater possibilities of realizing and experimenting with Gandhi's ideal of a just society. Much has been achieved in this area as a consequence; millions of Indians are now involved in the governance of their affairs and women and *dalits* (the former untouchables) have assumed power as a matter of right through the provisions of the law. However, the Indian people still lack an education as to how to construct a non-violent, self-sustaining, and non-exploitative society; for most people it is not even a dream.



## *Struggles against the state power and development of induced marginalization*

After the successful demonstration of the power of non-violent means to create a more socially just society in the United States, especially under the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr., and in South Africa, in the later stages of the struggle against apartheid under the leadership of Nelson Mandela, there have been successful experiments using the power of non-violent means for social justice in various struggles by local communities in India. Many of these struggles have targeted the oppressive state power, which has colluded with corporate capitalist interests. Such struggles still continue in India, around various issues of sustainable development and the denial of social justice to the victims of development. They have led to drastic revision of public policies in favor of the oppressed.

### Conclusion

Gandhi's views on social justice were based on the insights he drew from his encounters with culture and religion—his own and those of others. They are all about a spiritual revolution which has to begin with the individual, with no regret whatsoever, even if one has to be alone in the struggle. Many of his ideals, which emerged in the context of a nation struggling for political independence, contained references to a just society. Gandhi felt that political freedom would mean nothing unless the oppressed millions in Indian society are socially and economically free. Near the end of his life, he asserted "the Congress [Party] has won political freedom, but it is yet to win economic freedom, social and moral freedoms. These freedoms are harder than the political, if only because they are constructive, less exciting and not spectacular" (letter by Gandhi, January 27, 1948, New Delhi, cited in Gangrade, 2005, p. 140).

Is Gandhi's outlook on social justice a dull, drab theory devoid of joy? For a modern mind in pursuit of happiness that is usually equated with sensual pleasure, it might seem so. However, Gandhi's aims and goals are not devoid of the principle of happiness. "To the same extent as we make progress towards our goal we shall find contentment and happiness, and to that extent, too, shall we have contributed towards the bringing into being of a non-violent society" (Gandhi, 1980, p. 18). This view is a reality, as has been established by various spiritual traditions. By linking the spiritual vision into the material world of possession and consumption, Gandhi is but one more of those few voices, which have alerted humanity that our happiness involves finding the right balance (*yoga*) between material and spiritual realities.

### Notes

- 1 Vaishnavite tradition follows Vishnu of the Hindu "tri" who is said to take incarnations (*avatara*) for the redemption of the devotees, destruction of the evil and the establishment of justice (*dharmasanthapanaarthaaya*).
- 2 Jainism is the ascetic religious movement said to have had its origin in the fourth century BCE. One of its outstanding features is that of non-violence, sometimes taking extreme forms of behavior to avoid injury or death of any being. Jains, though small in number, have considerable influence, especially in the fields of business and education.
- 3 *Dharayeti iti dharma*: that which supports or sustains is *Dharma*.
- 4 Sanskrit—the ancient language considered the religious language (even today). Most of the ancient written scriptures and classics are in this language, and most of the Indian languages (Aryan and Dravidian) have either their foundation on it, or have borrowed much from it.
- 5 Based on the *Vedas*—four of them—*Rgveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Samaveda*, *Atharvaveda*—the former is considered the inspiration for religious life according to Orthodox (read, Sanskrit or dominant) Hindu tradition.



In the present pluralistic world, there can be other Hindu claims as well, many of which may be devoid of a written tradition.

- 6 *Advaita*—non-dual. Gandhi had a firm belief in the absolute reality (*janmavasthika satya*) as God. However, when the Indian tradition speaks about "reality as non-dual" (*Ekam evam advitiam*), it goes to the extent of accepting that the differences between "I and Thou and They" disappear, and realize that "You are That" (*tatvam asi*), "I am the Ultimate" (*Aham Brahmasmi*), and you are bound to deal with all "relative reality" (*vyavaharika satya*) with the care and reverence due to the Absolute.
- 7 *Varnaashrama dharma*—duties based on one's *varna* (caste) and *ashrama* (stage of life—which are said to be four: (1) Student (*brahmachari*); (2) House-holder (*grahastha*); (3) Retiree in search of wisdom (*vanshp-kshatriya*); and (4) Dedicated one for the Common Good (*sannyasi*). There were four castes (*Brahmin, kshatriya, vaisya, and shudra*) with duties related to knowledge generation and imparting, protection of the society, commerce and agriculture, and services of all sorts to all sections of the society.
- 8 Rama, the seventh *avatara* (incarnation, or rather, manifestation) of the Vishnu, the second of the Hindu triad. The oldest epic of the world, *Ramayana*, narrates his legendary life and power.
- 9 *Sarva* = all; *udaya* = rise. Rise of all or Development of all.
- 10 *Satya* = truth; *graha* = cling to or hold on to.
- 11 *Ahimsa* literally means, *a* (no) + *himsa* (killing), non-killing. However, any injury is said to be (in the direction of) killing, hence, it can also be non-injury.
- 12 *Ahimsa paramo dharmata*: Mahabharata—Adi Parva ([http://www.hindupedia.com/en/Ahimsa\\_Paramo\\_Dharma](http://www.hindupedia.com/en/Ahimsa_Paramo_Dharma)).
- 13 *Tena tyaktena bhunjitha ...* (Ishopanishad 1). The entire universe is permeated with "God," hence, enjoy (utilize/consume) it with "renunciation."
- 14 The 3 Rs term "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle" is now a household usage. More are being added by environmentalists; one fundamental addition is said to be "Rethink."
- 15 In recent years, however, his stance has been severely criticized by those who tried to promote Dalit rights, to the extent that Gandhi in several such circles is depicted as someone who did irreparable harm to the cause of such communities, as his efforts apparently made them still dependent on the benevolence of the oppressing castes.

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