

# *Gandhi's Eco-Ethical Philosophy-Relevance for New Globalised Era of 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

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## **Abstract**

*Gandhi was not conventional economist like Adam Smith, Alfred Marshall, and J.M. Keynes etc. In his early hind Swaraj, Young India, Harijan and Indian opinion, he made references to the kind of economic system, which was considered as ideal for India. His ideas of economic are a part and parcel on his philosophical, political and sociological ideas. Gandhiji was essentially concerned with the free growth of human beings. Emancipation of the downtrodden and exploited masses, Mahatma Gandhi's economic ideas are based mainly on four principles of life - Truth, Simplicity, Non violence and Dignity of labour. Gandhiji was intellectually influenced by the above mentioned situations prevailing at that time. He has taken economics at par ethics in his life. This paper has argued that despite profound economic and social changes that have taken place since Gandhi's lifetime, his economic ideas continue to be relevant today. The need for a re-orientation of economic ideology is keenly felt today. The failure of market-fundamentalism has revealed very starkly the necessity of re-establishing an ethically grounded ideology for both business and for policy. Gandhi's economic thought was deeply rooted in ethics. Gandhi had developed an integrative ethos that helped Indians unite purposefully to dislodge colonial rule. He had also discovered a powerful method for non-violent contestation of opposing ideas. We have discussed the essential principles of his approach, which was based on a goal of freedom that transcended material gratification and individualism, and upheld the principle of collective well-being as a desirable motivation for economic activity. These principles can contribute towards mainstreaming ethical and responsible corporate behaviour, as well as that of consumers. Gandhi's ideas and methods of non-violent persuasion can also help in transforming economic and social attitudes towards a culture that can bring about inclusive patterns of growth, and help in curbing environmental damage.*

**Key Words:** *Economic, Ethics, Philosophy, Swaraj, Harijan, Trust, Social Justice, Self Respect, Self sufficiency.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

No man in history has done so much single handedly to arouse national consciousness in the comparatively short period as Gandhiji did. He was the greatest revolutionary leader known to history who fought a mighty empire without arms and ammunition and without bitterness or hatred. He combined in him the political insight of Plato, the saintliness of Spinoza and the faith in the masses of Marx.

No leader achieved such worldwide attention in his own lifetime as Gandhiji did. For over three decades, Gandhiji was India and India was Gandhiji. Gandhi was not conventional economist like Adam Smith, Alfred Marshall, and J.M. Keynes etc. In his early hind Swaraj, Young India, Harijan and Indian

opinion, he made references to the kind of economic system, which was considered as ideal for India. His ideas of economic are a part and parcel on his philosophical, political and sociological ideas. Gandhiji was essentially concerned with the free growth of human beings. Emancipation of the downtrodden and exploited masses, Mahatma Gandhi's economic ideas are based mainly on four principles of life - Truth, Simplicity, Non violence and Dignity of labour. His economic ideas were simply a way of life and a part of general philosophy of life.

Schumacher (1978) has rightly said that "Gandhi enunciated his economic position in the language of the people, rather than that of academic economists. And so the economists never

*noticed that he was, in fact, a very great economist in his own right...*"

Any attempt to understand Gandhiji's economic ideas must be relatively checked with the economic circumstances prevailing in the ongoing decade. Briefly, these circumstances may be viewed as composing the following interrelated features-

- (i) The till date neglected agriculture sector (the Primary Sector as per our Five Year Plans) threatened by frequent famines and droughts, resulting in a desperate rural population.
- (ii) Decline of traditional textiles and other handicrafts in India. This decline was directly attributable to the series of measures passed by the British parliament in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to discourage the use of Indian textiles in Britain. These measures enabled the British textile industry to develop behind a tariff wall, unhindered by competition from Indian exports. The decline in textiles triggered off a decline in several other cottage industries (oil crushing, for example). Unfortunately, this decline was not offset by compensation gains in agricultural productivity as had happened in Sri Lanka and Malaysia, for example, with the emergence of plantations. The displaced artisans thus simply swelled the ranks of agricultural wage labourers with an associated intensification of rural poverty. The starkness of this process explains both the emergence of Gandhiji's ideas on *Swadeshi* as also the strong appeal this had for the general masses.
- (iii) Colonial neglect of infrastructure.
- (iv) Active discouragement to the emergence of Indian entrepreneurship.

'Gandhiji's views on economics have usually been termed as utopian by many (including Indian) socio-economic thinkers, and this characterisation has tended to evoke two diametrically opposite reactions among policymakers and the general population – the majority respect his views in so far as they are a reflection of his deep spirituality but tend to be extremely skeptical about their applicability to the real

world; a small minority, however, see in this utopian view the only alternative available to a poor country to correct an economic situation distorted by a history of colonial exploitation. This paper tries to connect the Gandhi's Eco-ethical philosophy with the present day globalised era of 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## 2. THE BASIS OF GANDHIAN ECONOMIC PHILOSOPHY

Gandhiji was intellectually influenced by the above mentioned situations prevailing at that time. He has taken economics at par ethics in his life. In an article published in Harijan (October 9, 1937) ... "True economics never militates against the highest ethical standards just as all true ethics, to be worth its name, must at the same time be also good economics... True economics stands for social justice; it promotes the good of all equally, including the weakest and is indispensable for decent life". Gandhiji's economic objectives are based on:

- (a) **Dignity of labour:** Labour has a very crucial role to play in an economy. He advised harmony between labour and capital. He observed that if the distinction between labour and capital is eliminated, the world would be a much happier place to live in capital should be a servant of labour not its master was in favour of maximization of labour welfare. He understood the importance of dignity of labour. M.G. has emphasis on the welfare of the workers, their dignity and proper wages. He advised that worker's hours of work should be reduced, more wages should be given and all safety measures should be taken in the factories.
- (b) **Trusteeship Doctrine:** Trusteeship is a means of transforming capitalist pattern of society in to a socialist pattern. In trusteeship the rich people will keep for them only that much of wealth which is essential for a good standard of living. The rest would be meant for others in the society. Trusteeship will eliminate economic inequalities between rich and poor people. He believed that trusteeship

would help considerably in realizing a state of equality on earth. He thought that there was a need of equal distribution of wealth amongst the people of the country; Gandhiji therefore, concluded that the capitalists or the rich should be the trustees of the economy.

- (c) **Economics of Charkha:** Charkha in Gandhian economics has more importance. The spinning wheel is not merely an instrument but an example of patience and self-control to the common people which provides them with self-sufficiency by all means. Gandhiji emphasizes “**Charkha**” because it requires very modest capital, simple in operation, good source of steady income of farmer, a proper solution to the problem of rural unemployment and it is good instrument for promotion of equitable distribution of wealth and economic welfare in the country. It is with this view that he advised Indian masses to solve their social and economic problems by using charkha and self-prepared Khadi clothes.
- (d) **Village Self – sufficiency:** The main principle of Gandhian approach is to set up a system of village self-sufficiency. In this regard, the hypothesis of M.K. Gandhi was the establishment of “Gram Swaraj” in the countryside which means the complete independence of Indian villages. The ultimate goal of Gandhian planning was to make Indian villages fully independent. Mahatma Gandhi often used to say that the real India was to be found in villages, not in cities and towns.
- (e) **Centralisation of Industry:** The decentralization of industry is an integral part of Gandhian economics. Gandhiji felt that India had enough manpower but did not have sufficient capital. With a view to absorbing the surplus manpower, he advised for adopting those methods of production which could absorb the surplus manpower. Gandhiji stated, “Much of the deep poverty of masses is due to the ruinous departure from ‘Swedes’ in the economic and industrial life. If not an article of

commerce had been brought from England, she would be today a land flowing with milk and honey.” Gandhiji was against the centralization of industries. He was of the view that the centralization of industries leads to the concentration of power in the few hands, and promotes capitalism in the country, and, therefore it should be avoided. In order to execute the idea of the decentralization of industries, he was against the use of power and machines, as they result in the concentration of wealth and economic power, unemployment of masses and a reduction in the income of workers at least in the short period. He always gave importance to dignity of labour, and thus, advised producers not to use machines, unless it was essential because it might destroy the feeling of self-reliance in man.

- (f) **Food and Population:** Gandhi was convinced that the food problem in India was a genuine problem. He requested the business people not to undertake speculative activities in foodgrains. He had seen the worst position in Bengal during the year 1943-44. He therefore suggested some measures to improve the conditions in India such as curtailment of food requirements by each person to the minimum consumption of foodgrains, check on blackmarketing, and restriction on the exports of food commodities.

As regard the problem of population, he was in favour of birth control through self-control (brahmacharya). He, therefore, emphasized sex education, the object of which might be to conquer the sex drive. As regard the poverty, he stated that “...in my opinion, by a proper land system, better agriculture and a supplementary industry, this country is capable of supporting twice as many people as there are today.”

### 3. ETHICAL BASIS FOR ECONOMIC ACTIVITY

The connection between material well-being and human effort is at the bottom of all economic

thoughts. Thus, it is assumed that goods and services are scarce relative to wants, and this is the root of the economic problem. Abundance can never be secured as because human wants multiple faster than anything. Economists' theories of consumer behaviour begin with the assumption that wants cannot be satisfied. The avowed goal of both capitalist and socialist policy makers has been to maximize consumption of goods and services. Gandhi, by contrast, saw non-material goals—such as 'freedom' in the sense of transcending material attachment, as the more worthy objective of human endeavour.

A strong ethical foundation was reflected ever in the economic philosophy of Gandhi ji. He asserted that the underlying motivation for our actions was extremely important, and firmly rejected the relentless pursuit of material satisfaction as the central objective of economic endeavour. Gandhi wanted to relate all human activity on a spiritual foundation. His main goal was moral upliftment. He sought ground this idea in an Indian ethos—arguing that the sense of duty (karma) was a more desirable goal and motivator as compared with material enjoyment (bhoga). He had proposed three main elements in his approach to development, which is known as his 'Constructive Programme'. These were - (a) 'Swadeshi' (local self reliance), (b) 'Sarvodaya' (commitment to public welfare), and (c) 'Aparigraha' (non-possessiveness). He also emphasized the importance and the dignity of work. These principles constitute the foundations of his eco-ethical thoughts. Their intrinsic logic is to create an ideology that is based on freedom from excessive material attachment, freedom from selfishness and a positive commitment to the cause of the larger community.

He wanted first and foremost to earn genuine self-respect, and also the respect of the adversary. His advocacy of 'swadeshi' was also motivated by the goal of restoring self-respect. The search for respect remains an important goal for many in an unequal world including the show of wealth and/or power by those who possess them. The spirit of Gandhi's message of earning self-respect had an inward focus. This was the essence of 'satyagraha', the core principle of his

life and legacy. As he showed through his own example, it was through self-improvement and self-purification that he sought to attain the inner source of self-respect. Once this was attained, he was secure in that awareness, and did not require the approval of others to confirm it. Hence, it was possible for him to respect his adversary and also to earn their respect.

Today in the globalised era of 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the image and status of India in the world of economics and business is better than it was a few decades ago. Many individuals and organizations have been highly successful in global competition. But is the attainment of individual excellence sufficient for self-respect? Gandhi did not place great value on individualism. He believed that 'the good of the individual is contained in the good of all. Hence, so long as large sections of the population remain poor and hungry, the task of our collective 'self-improvement' will remain unfinished. Ignoring these problems will only lead to social alienation. So by assuming the responsibility of creating economic opportunities for the poor, and by undertaking this task in a spirit of humility, we would be taking the Gandhian way to earn our self-respect. This is as true today as it was in Jamsetji Tata's time. The spinning wheel may not be economically feasible today, but the task for which it was envisaged by Gandhi—namely of finding employment, inclusion and gainful economic engagement for those that need it—still remains to be carried out. The idea of respect has several other dimensions. One aspect was public cleanliness. Gandhi was deeply distressed by public squalor that he saw around him. It represented a clear indication of lack of respect for others. In a speech at the Hindu University Central College, in Benares in 1916, he said, "*Can we say that in our time that this problem has been overcome? Alas, this is not the case. It is not filth per se that is the main issue here. It is connected with the state of our collective self-respect. The insides of homes are cleaned scrupulously while garbage can be found strewn around carelessly in most urban neighbourhoods. We can extend this observation further and note the same callous attitude in the continued use of plastic and other non-biodegradable packaging*



*material. Surely, this is an area crying out for socially responsible production and recycling mechanisms. Business firms are well aware of the environmental damage being caused. Instead, we find the responsibility for containing the damage being shifted to governments. The governments, in turn, find the task hopeless in the face of resistance from business lobbies, and the inadequate public pressure for improvement.”*

The same issue is raised by our H'ble Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The issue of cleanliness is an international issue. International counter-parts of India take us respectfully and automatically motivated towards Indian Economy, too. Thus, the issue of cleanliness is direct connected with the economics.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Gandhi is regarded as utopian socialist. He was not a theoretical economist. Gandhi's view on economic were simple and straight forward at the outset. They have even been criticized at various levels from being utopian to regressive. But it had deep political connotations, there is no place for capital accumulation in his schema. Gandhi never thought of the process of accumulation of surplus for economic development. His was a model of simple reproduction. The development of agriculture suggested by Gandhi has to be based on some sort of industrial development. The type of which Gandhi has never clarified. Be that as it may. Gandhian economic is the economics of bare self-sufficiency. He disfavours an acquisitive society, and materialistic conception of development.

He was right in emphasizing labour- intensive method of production for a labour- surplus economy like India;s. His scheme of development is also relevant for a capital- poor and inflation-based economy as India is. To some extent, Gandhian economics seems to be relevant for the developing economies of our times, and also for those economies which are fed up with the excess of materialism and lack of human values and relation. The spirit of Gandhian economics seems to be still alive today in the form of low- aspiration model of develop0ment, as proposed by Mellor and others. Thus he was a great economic reformer of his

time who develops a spiritual model of economics based on the holistic like as the modern liberal economics under this era globalization.

This paper has argued that despite profound economic and social changes that have taken place since Gandhi's lifetime, his economic ideas continue to be relevant today. The need for a re-orientation of economic ideology is keenly felt today. The failure of market-fundamentalism has revealed very starkly the necessity of re-establishing an ethically grounded ideology for both business and for policy. Gandhi's economic thought was deeply rooted in ethics. Gandhi had developed an integrative ethos that helped Indians unite purposefully to dislodge colonial rule. He had also discovered a powerful method for non- violent contestation of opposing ideas. We have discussed the essential principles of his approach, which was based on a goal of freedom that transcended material gratification and individualism, and upheld the principle of collective well-being as a desirable motivation for economic activity.

These principles can contribute towards mainstreaming ethical and responsible corporate behaviour, as well as that of consumers. Gandhi's ideas and methods of non-violent persuasion can also help in transforming economic and social attitudes towards a culture that can bring about inclusive patterns of growth, and help in curbing environmental damage.

There are many individuals and organizations that are already working along principles that Gandhi would have endorsed. Empirical analysis and assessment of such ongoing initiatives are beyond the scope of this paper. As Gandhi's own example shows, the application of his methods of struggle and persuasion on a scale large enough to create a movement to change the pre-existent ideological system calls for tremendous courage and sacrifice.

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