
UNIT 8 POWER AND AUTHORITY

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8.1 INTRODUCTION

Gandhi's views on power and conflict resolution puts him apart from all the other major theories developed in contemporary times. His serious reservations about the desirability of what constitutes the major components of modern civilisation allows him to transcend known categories of power and enables him to develop a conceptual framework which is in total variance from the other dominant views. The starting point of his view can be traced back to the Indian roots of *maya* or illusion and *moha* or delusion. Gandhi uses these two categories as being symptomatic of modern civilisation because within this neither an individual human salvation nor a collective well-being can be conceived. One can only think in terms of an idealised world of harmony and bliss if an alternative thought process can be conceived and popularised. Modern civilisation, according to Gandhi, is not conducive to reaching higher end of life as it perpetuates false consciousness and encourages the pursuit of materialistic ends. However, Gandhi is also aware of the fact that it is practically impossible to go back to the golden past. Nor can one do away with all the facets of the modern civilisation by a quick violent intervention. The satanic nature of the modern civilisation pervades the entire evolution of Gandhi's formulation of power and authority in a reformed political order. The major characteristics of the degradation of the modern civilisation are discovered in the soullessness of the entire political process which inevitably makes the entire state system corrupt and irresponsible to the genuine needs of the people. In such an order, all the major political institutions become merely instruments for pursuing power, to enhance one's own authority and acquire ownership of property. 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 the 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.

Aims and Objectives

After reading this unit, you would be able to understand:

- Gandhi's intention behind spiritualising politics.
- Gandhi's concept of power
- His concept of making truth as authority.
- His concept of Authority in an Anarchic society.

8.2 SPIRITUALISING POLITICAL LIFE AND POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

Iyer rightly observed that, Gandhi challenges the conventional view of the nature and sphere of politics, widens the concept of power and undermines the distinction between private and public morals, religious values and political norms, and ethical principles and political expediency. In 1915, he declares that his aim was “to spiritualise” political life and political institutions. He underlines the importance of religion to politics observing that politics-divorced from religion- is completely meaningless. Politics is a part of individual's being and cannot be separated from the rest of life, in particular the deepest things of life. Gandhi approaches politics in a religious spirit: “I could not be leading a religious life unless I identified myself with the whole of mankind and that I could not do unless I took part in politics. The whole gamut of man's activities today constitutes an indivisible whole...I do not know any religion apart from activity. It provides a moral basis to all other activities without which life would be a maze of sound and fury signifying nothing”.

Gandhi insists on the need to look at political work within the framework of social and moral progress as power resides in the people and not in legislative assemblies. He dismisses disparagingly power politics as irrelevant and insists that “political power is not an end but one of the means of enabling people to better their condition in every department of life”. Like Huxley, not only does he distinguish between power politics and goodness of power but also does not see power politics as being co-extensive with the whole of life and the entire gamut of human activity in society. Politics divorced from religious values is a cynical game of power played according to its own immoral rules under the guise of morality. When Gandhi stresses on religion as the bedrock of politics what he means are religious values that are common to all religions rather than any kind of sectarianism. It means a belief in the “ordered moral government of the universe” as “when morality incarnates itself in a living man it becomes religion, because it binds, it holds, it sustains him in the hour of trial”. True religion and true politics is concerned primarily with human life and action and both must have a common basis in a common morality determined by a common set of values. Gandhi, however, rejects the idea of state religion even if a country has only one religion. Sectarian religion is purely personal and has no place in politics. “A society or a group which depends partly or wholly on state aid for the existence of religion does not deserve or have any religion worth the name. In reality, there are “as many religions as there are individuals”.

Gandhi rejects the attempts to compartmentalise human life as that leads to segregation of politics from religion. “Politics, like religion, is ever concerned with the happiness of the toiling masses, a means to the realisation of the highest realizable in life”. Echoing the sentiments of Aristotle and Gramsci, Gandhi considers public life as the arena for bringing

out the highest spiritual qualities of an individual. "Politics is art of doing on the largest scale what is right, and, as an affair of principle, it touches the eternal interests and religious sentiments". Politics is not the art of capturing, holding and managing governmental power but the art of transforming social relations in terms of justice; "a non-violent revolution is not a programme of 'seizure of power', but it is a programme of transformation of relationships".

8.3 CONCEPT OF POWER

Gandhi identifies two kinds of power: one which is obtained by the fear of punishment and the other by acts of love. He points out in 1947 that "by abjuring power and by devoting ourselves to pure and selfless service of voters, we can guide and influence them. It would give us far more real power than we shall have by going into the government. But a stage may come, when the people themselves feel and say that they want us and no one else to wield the power.... It is my firm view that we should keep altogether aloof from power politics and its contagion. To set our own house in order is the first indispensable requisite, if we want to influence political power...to regard adult suffrage as a means for the capture of political power, would be to put it to a corrupt use....Today, politics has become corrupt....The greater our inner purity, the greater shall be our hold on the people, without any effort on our part".

Stressing on the close link between religion and politics, Gandhi suspects politics as understood in the ordinary sense as power over the lives of the people that is vested in governments and is sought by legislatures. He rejects the notion of power for one's selfish gains and motives devoid of public good. Power for Gandhi, like Rousseau, lies in being an actively engaged citizen with a capacity of public involvement and political participation rather than being a passive acquiescent subject. If individuals recognise the power in their hands and use it constructively to bring out *sarvodaya* or good of all through non-violent means against injustice and repression of the state, then the monopolistic nature of state power could be reduced undermining morally and materially its coercive authority. This would ensure purification of politics which can be achieved through constructive programmes. Power based on coercion and hierarchy only ensures spiritual poverty of the society. Society ought to be changed through the efforts of morally evolved persons; if not, it would be diseased. Gandhi asserts the primacy of social power and political power and insists that social and political power is co-extensive. Politics has to be subordinated to morals; of doing the right thing and readily suffer for one's beliefs or to withdraw into oneself to find a basis for action. There is no justification for abdication of one's responsibility or a passive resort to continued inaction. Gandhi sees a close link between firm and pure intentions and the capacity for effective choices and decisions on the basis of what is considered right and necessary. Gandhi rejects the view that politics is intrinsically sinful or inherently moral or that it is essentially pragmatic with some utilitarian or prudential justification. For Gandhi, politics is inherently impure and is never ideal but could be purified by repudiating the distinction between the public and the private, political and personal morality. Impure politics, for Gandhi, is power seeking that hinders the relationships between individuals. A leader must seek acceptance and maintain it not just through reasoning with the people but by identifying with their dreams, activities and sufferings. The life of a leader ought to be one of continued sacrifice of the self for the immediate service of his fellow beings. A leader must never hold office or occupy any formal position of power.

Gandhi points out that while it is natural for those in authority to use force but if those who obey the commands of the government also decide to express their will by physical force

then it would become impossible for sanity. Individual citizens have the alternative of using 'soul force' which they should and to disregard non-violence is the surest way to destruction. He stresses on the need to make a conscious choice between coercion and peaceful conversion and stakes his preference for the latter as it is enduring: "True democracy or the *Swaraj* of the masses can never come through untruthful and violent means, for the simple reason that the natural corollary to their use would be to remove all opposition through the suppression or extermination of the antagonists. That does not make for individual freedom. Individual freedom can have the fullest play only under a regime of unadulterated *ahimsa*". Non-violence must be the means to influence power politics and a non-violent state would be the one based on the will of the people with no infringement on just rights, without exploitation and without inequality, namely the disparity between the rich and the poor, and the privileged and the underprivileged. Inequality exists as long as private property exists as that leads to sentiments of possession. Only through a detached attitude towards property, an attitude that possessions ought to service the needs of others can a non-violent society succeed. Differences must be settled through reason and not by force in the belief that truth would be ultimately vindicated and that is the essence of tolerance. Competing ideas could be transcended with the help of civility in the hope of reaching common good and that ensures respect for the inalienable freedom and the fundamental equality of all citizens. Dogmatism conceals one's fallibility preventing the expression of a sense of human solidarity.

Exploitation could be reduced if individuals are allowed to freely develop their moral capacities and not depend on the state. Increase in the power of the state is the greatest fear that Gandhi has, "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". For Gandhi, if there is greater decentralisation of power in any society, then there are greater the chances for the collective pursuit of truth or *satya* through non-violence or *ahimsa* among individual citizens. For citizens to accept the authority of the state and render obligation depends on the extent to which the laws and the policies of the state are just and non-repressive respectively. Gandhi categorically asserts that "a government is an instrument of service only in so far as it is based upon the will and consent of the people. It is an instrument of oppression where it enforces submission at the point of the bayonet". While all states misuse power, it is the citizen(s) whoever retains his moral authority which is why a citizen can never afford to allow his conscience to become silent. He insists that a citizen is responsible for the acts of the government, even if these acts are of minimal nature. Citizens are collectively responsible for the acts of the government and for the very nature of the state.

8.4 CONCEPT OF TRUTH AS AUTHORITY AND INDIVIDUAL CONSCIENCE

For Gandhi, authority is to be understood with reference to *satya*, which he considers as the supreme value in ethics, politics and religion, as the *raison d' être* of all existence, as it is 'philosopher's stone', the sole talisman available to mortal human beings. It is the highest of human ends, all important and all inclusive principle surpassing all other values and leading eventually to emancipation. This belief is an underlying axiom of Indian tradition and is common to Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism. For Gandhi, morality is the basis of all things and truth is the quintessence of morality. *Satya* is derived from *Sat* which implies that truth alone exists and everything else is an illusion.

The concept of truth as elaborated by Gandhi affirms the moral autonomy and authority of the individual as an active agent and performer in political and social life. He writes: I would reject all authority if it is in conflict with sober reason or the dictates of the heart. Authority sustains and ennobles the weak when it is the handiwork of reason but it degrades them when it supplants reason sanctified by the still small voice within". Once the quest for truth becomes universal, individuals begin to enjoy real freedom and the need for authority diminishes. The individual, in Gandhi's scheme, turns inward not to abandon his political and social responsibilities but to arm himself in his struggle against external authority. He needs the moral courage and spiritual equilibrium to become inward while remaining amidst society and fight untruth: "In the attitude of silence the soul finds the path in a clearer light and what is elusive and deceptive resolves itself into crystal clearness. Our life is a long and arduous quest for Truth, and the soul requires inward restfulness to attain its full height".

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 being 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 and more people become fearless then force would become redundant. Gandhi points out that it is because of this commitment to *ahimsa* that has made us question the 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 the 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 the 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 an 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 aims for social and political transformation by relying on *satya*, *ahimsa* and *dharma*. Resistance to unjust authority armed with the power of truth and to resolve conflicts, to bring change to non-violent action are central to his plank. Through the doctrine of *Satyagraha*, Gandhi shows how a person of conscience could engage in heroic action with the intention of vindicating truth and freedom against tyranny and injustice. By appealing to *dharma* or the moral law, Gandhi challenges the conventional notion of authority, law and obligation through self-suffering and sacrifice. There is no external authority which is higher than *satya* either in religious or the political sphere and no political or social action can be given legitimacy superior to *ahimsa*. Iyer points out that, "Like Proudhon, Gandhi visualizes the establishment of a new system of moral sanctions in society, based on universal harmony in nature". By that yardstick, Gandhi is critical of modern civilisation as it is unjust, coercive, untrue and exploitative.

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 the 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.

8.5 STATE, OBLIGATION AND CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Gandhi desires a society without the state but being the practical idealist that he is, he supports a minimal state. In a state of enlightened anarchy everyone is his own ruler, ruling in a manner without obstructing others. There would be no political power as there would be no state. In the absence of this ideal, Thoreau's maxim of that "government is best which governs the least" is the next possible option. According to Gandhi, human beings have the capacity for developing their moral capacities to such an extent that exploitation could be reduced to the minimum which is why he states that he "looks 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 relation between the state and citizens follows from Gandhi's exaltation of *satya* and *ahimsa* as ultimate values on which individual and social morality must be based. The citizens' pursuit of *satya* and *ahimsa* makes them morally superior to the state, the former with soul while the latter is soulless. Since social progress is towards furthering *satya* and *ahimsa*, the coercive role of the state would be weakened. This process could also be achieved with greater decentralisation of power in any society.

The citizens' obligation to accept the authority of the state would depend on its just laws and non-repressive policies. A government is an instrument of service if it is based on the will and consent of the people. It is citizens' obligation that distinguishes a democratic from an authoritarian state though Gandhi views all states as soulless machines. A citizen's responsibility is greater under a democratic regime as citizens would have to safeguard against authority becoming corrupt and farcical. In every state there is a possibility of abuse of power and it is the citizens vested with superior moral authority who should not lose their conscience or lose their distrust of state authority. Gandhi makes it the responsibility of every citizen for every act of the government.

It is the citizen who ought to decide whether to show active loyalty or total opposition to the state, to resist none or few of its laws as the citizen is endowed with *satya* and *ahimsa*. The citizen cannot relinquish a portion of this responsibility in the name of a social contract or legal sovereignty or tacit consent or the rule of law or similar notions that are implicit in democratic constitutionalism. According to Gandhi, for the sake of peace there can be no unconditional consent, even if secured under majority rule nor can the limits of state action be established in advance in a manner that will automatically secure the citizen his natural rights. Gandhi distrusts the institutional safeguards in societies with many factions and class conflict, as the majority could be wrong. The individual alone, for Gandhi, is a moral

person which no state or institution could ever become. A citizen could appeal to eternal unwritten laws against the laws of human beings and of states and the commandments of religion, but like Socrates accept the consequences for challenging the laws of the states.

Gandhi rejects the idea and institution of the state based on 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 organised form. Classical anarchism as articulated by Proudhon, Stirner, Bakunin and the early Kropotkin supports revolutionary violence to put an end to the organised violence represented by the state. Gandhi insists on non-violent resistance as the only means to end the tyranny of the state and desires a purely non-violent society based on voluntary organisations as the alternative to the state. He is convinced that once society becomes truly non-violent, true anarchy would be established, as non-violence is possible only in an anarchistic society. In 1940 Gandhi categorically stated that “the ideally non-violent state will be an ordered anarchy”.

Not only are states undesirable but even parliaments are as these are ineffectual and can do only when there is an outside pressure. Gandhi is critical of the parliamentary system of government in the *Hind Swaraj* (1909), as the members of parliament ‘are hypocritical and selfish’; indifferent to matters of serious concern and engage in endless talk. ‘Members vote for their party without a thought. Their so-called discipline binds them to it. If any member, by way of exception gives an independent vote, he is considered a renegade. The Prime Minister is more concerned about his power than about the welfare of the Parliament. His energy is concentrated upon securing the success of his party. His care is not always that Parliament shall do right. Prime Ministers are known to have made Parliament do things merely for party advantage.... If they are to be considered honest because they do not take what are generally known as bribes, let them be so considered, but they are open to subtler influence. In order to gain their ends, they certainly bribe people with honour. I do not hesitate to say that they have neither real honesty nor a living conscience’. Through his criticisms of the British parliament, Gandhi tries to show, according to Bandyopadhyaya (1969), that even the best of the parliaments are not the ideal substitute for anarchy.

8.6 AUTHORITY IN ANARCHIST SOCIETY

Regarding the nature of the ideal society under anarchy Gandhi does not offer a clear answer. He is unconcerned about preparing the blueprint for the future because he insists that the future end would depend on the means that are adopted at present, and that a purely mental construction is quite meaningless but offers few pointers.

Indian independence must begin at the bottom. Thus every village will be a republic or panchayat, having full powers. It follows, therefore, that every village has to be self-sustained and capable of managing its affairs, even to the extent of defending itself against the whole world. It will be trained and prepared to perish in the attempt to defend itself against any onslaught from without. Thus ultimately, it is the individual who is the unit. But this does not exclude dependence on the willing help from neighbours or from the world. It will be free and voluntary play of mutual forces.... In this structure composed of innumerable villages, there will be ever widening, never ascending circles. Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. But will be an oceanic circle, whose centre will be the individual always ready to perish for the village, the latter ready to perish for the circle of villages, till at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals, never aggressive in their arrogance, but ever number, sharing the majesty of the oceanic circle of which they are integral units.

The social basis of the ideal society would be *Varna* system which is a qualitative and functional division but without its humiliation, feeling of high and low, and indignities, and guaranteeing each, fruits of one's labour. The economic basis, the relationship between labour and capital in both agricultural and industrial sectors will be a harmonised one reconciling freedom, equality and non-violence through the system of Trusteeship. There would be no need for armed forces or the police. Defence from external aggression would be organised non-violently in two stages. In the first stage, people would offer *satyagraha* at the frontier in the form of an unarmed human wall, but if this failed to stop the aggressor, occupation of the country would be resisted by complete non-cooperation. If the entire population refuses to cooperate with the invading army even risking its personal safety, it would be impossible, according to Gandhi, for the foreign army and administrative personnel to maintain themselves in the occupied territory. The same principle applies to internal security as well. Police would be like a body of reformers than a coercive agency of the state.

Gandhi later diluted his rigorous opposition to parliaments. In 1937, he points out that today's legislatures, unlike that of the past, are composed of representatives of people and that people must be taught how to stand up effectively against the government. Members of the legislature ought to render service to the people, undertake constructive social work and ensure the passage of right legislations. He clarifies that he does not want to destroy the legislatures but "destroy the system which they are created to work". In the late 1930s, Gandhi also moved away from minimal role of the state in the economy to state ownership of key industries as it would provide employment to large number of people. The state would look after secular welfare, health, communications, foreign relations, currency and own land as cooperative farming by the peasants subject to state ownership of land is something that he toyed with but never really developed in full detail. Gandhi also insists that the state must eschew physical violence. He supports the idea of a decentralised, non-industrial, non-violent, self-sufficient and self-reliant free society; village *swaraj* would advance the cause of individual freedom.

8.7 CONCLUSION

Gandhi theorised about the nature of power and authority keeping in mind his commitment and preference to anarchist ideals of how to ensure wider diffusion of power to realise justice in society. His essential distrust of power and authority led him to articulate an alternative which he called enlightened anarchy. Gandhi insists on the need to anchor power and authority in the supreme values of *satya*, *ahimsa* and *dharma* to ensure that politics ultimately is service of all people in general and the underprivileged and the marginalised in particular. The distinctiveness of Gandhi lay in the fact that he desires social and political transformation through non-violent means. He also provides a vision of his ideal and at the same time accepts alterations to this ideal on grounds of feasibility.

The activist theoretician that Gandhi was, he is categorical that it would be futile to theorise about the future and expects the ongoing movements to yield the desired end, constantly reminding of the intimate relationship between ends and means. Gandhi also consistently reminds of the corruption that centralised power results in and underlines the need for the devolution of power to the grassroots. Rejecting modern civilisation and its stress on industries and technology as highly unequal and violent, Gandhi offers an alternative that would maximise self-reliance and self-sufficiency of ordinary persons. Gandhi stresses that devolution of power is the key to a better and fuller democracy. Gandhi's vision had its

critics. A major critic was Rabindranath Tagore who points 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 who seeks to defend the freedom of the individual against the authority of the state and social tyranny which is why he focuses on decentralisation. He clarifies 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 that it is the individual and not the state with the moral authority to question and judge injustice and repression and to bring about desired changes through non-violent means is the framework within which he defends the supremacy of the individual.

8.8 SUMMARY

Gandhi's views on power and conflict resolution put him apart from all other major theories developed in the contemporary times. His serious reservations about the desirability of what constitutes the major components of modern civilisation allows him to transcend known categories of power and enables him to develop a conceptual framework which is in total variance from the other dominant views. Modern civilisation, according to Gandhi, is not conducive to reaching a higher end of life as it perpetuates false consciousness and encourages the pursuit of materialistic ends. He dismisses disparagingly power politics as irrelevant and insists that “political power is not an end but one of the means of enabling people to better their condition in every department of life”. True religion and true politics is concerned primarily with human life and action and both must have a common basis in a common morality determined by a common set of values. Gandhi, however, rejects the idea of state religion even if a country has only one religion. Power, as Gandhi says, lies in being an actively engaged citizen with a capacity of public involvement and political participation rather than being a passive acquiescent subject. Gandhi rejects the idea and institution of the state based on 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 organised form. He supports the idea of a decentralised, non-industrial, non-violent, self-sufficient and self-reliant free society, in essence, a village *swaraj* that would advance the cause of individual freedom.

8.9 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. Why does Gandhi stress on the need to spiritualise political life and political institutions?
2. Explain Gandhi's concept of power.
3. Why does Gandhi consider Truth as Authority?
4. Explain Gandhi's concept of state and obligation.
5. What is the role of authority in the anarchist society?

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