
UNIT 12 GANDHI'S VIEWS ON SOCIALISM AND COMMUNISM

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12.1 INTRODUCTION

In the realm of modern Indian political thought, numerous ideologies and philosophies have been able to influence the thinking of the Indian thinkers to a great extent. Amongst such ideologies, the socialism and communism stand out prominently. In fact, there was a time when a whole generation of prominent Indian thinkers, a few exceptions notwithstanding, took socialism and communism as the principal determining factor of their philosophical contemplations. For instance, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose, Acharya Narendra Deva, Ram Manohar Lohia, Jayaprakash Narayan, M.N. Roy and many others took the ideology of socialism and communism as the starting point of their socio-political thought. In the process of conceptualising and articulating their socio-political thoughts, while many of them discarded the ideology of socialism and communism as not conducive to the needs and circumstances of the countries like India, many of them, particularly Nehru tried to modify the ideology to suit the requirements of the country. Subsequently, India was chartered on a course of development that was supposed to establish a socialist pattern of society in the country. However, Gandhi was one of the few exceptions of the leaders who could never imbibe the philosophy of socialism and communism as the guiding ideology of their socio-political thought. But this does not mean that Gandhi was not able to appreciate the remarkable features of the socialism and communism particularly their concern for the virtues like equality and fulfillment of the basic needs of the people. What appears remarkable in his views on socialism and communism is the fact that despite appreciating the underlying humanist orientations of these philosophies, he was convinced with the concomitant methodology of achieving the noble objectives inherent in them. Therefore, at the times when the political thinking in the country appeared poised for a critical debate on the plausibility of adopting the socialist ends and means to steer the post-independent India on the course of development, Gandhi offered quite insightful critiques of the totalitarian

tendencies inherent in these philosophies. He argued that the essence of socialism and communism, no doubt, lies in the economic emancipation of the people but the problem lies with its total neglect of the moral dimensions of the human life on the one hand, and almost totally unacceptable means of attaining the objective of establishing a socialist society through violent means, on the other. This Unit, thus, attempts to provide a critical understanding of Gandhi's views on socialism and communism as political ideologies. It needs to be clarified that despite having certain subtle differences, this Unit takes socialism and communism as somewhat similar ideology based on the philosophical formulations of various thinkers the most prominent of which is Karl Marx.

Aims and Objectives

After reading this Unit, you would be able to understand

- The meaning of socialism and communism
- Gandhi's critique of these ideologies
- The mode of social transformation, redistribution of power and politics, economic life etc. propounded by these ideologies.

12.2 GANDHI'S CRITIQUE OF SOCIALISM AND COMMUNISM

While articulating Gandhi's views on socialism and communism, it is important to point out that Gandhi criticised them at the levels of both as a political philosophy as well as an economic strategy to reorder the economic contours of a society. What Gandhi found appreciable in socialism and communism was their concern for the masses in terms of making provisions for fulfillment of the basic needs of the people. But beyond that, Gandhi happens to be a staunch critic of socialism and communism. That is why, despite having declared Nehru as his political heir, he quite often entered into fierce debate with Nehru on the merits of socialism as an appropriate ideology to pattern the future course of activities of the country on the same. Indeed, most, if not all, of the major socio-economic, political, religious and moral formulations of socialism and communism appeared antithetical to the ideological orientations of Gandhi. Given the basis of Gandhi's socio-economic, political and religious ideas in the moral emancipation of the masses, it was quite natural that they ran counter to the formulations of socialism and communism as they seek to ensure socio-economic emancipation of the people. For instance, while the notion of equality of Gandhi was apparently the provision of equal ethical and moral independence to all in order to secure the development of their soul and spirit, it was the primary concern of the socialism and communism to afford economic and material equality to all in such a way that the basic needs of each individual in society could be fulfilled. Thus, in Gandhi, the basic unit of analysis and theorisation appears to be the individual whose moral emancipation would presumably lead to the moral upliftment of the society as a whole. But in the socialist discourse, community appears as the unit of social reorganisation as a result of which the individual identity and existence evaporates into its submergence with the community as a whole. As such, a collectivist conceptualisation of the individual and his or her role in society would have been unacceptable to Gandhi; it was thus natural that Gandhi emerged as one of the staunchest critics of the theory and practice of socialism and communism in various parts of the world.

As a political philosophy, socialism and communism earned the critique of Gandhi right from their conceptualisation of the nature of men to their ideal of establishing a classless and stateless society. Gandhi criticised them, like his critique of liberalism, for devaluing the basic essence of human personality by taking it as essentially selfish and driven by motivated pursuits for material gains in society. In a way, Gandhi discredited the entire philosophy of historical materialism of socialism as it was thought to draw its sustenance from a fallacious notion of human beings. Conceptually, socialism and communism sought to explain the evolution of human civilisation over the centuries with the formulation of historical materialism. These philosophies apparently tried to establish that the basic pursuits of each and every human being in society are to gain material resources and physical comforts. However, the departure of human life from the state of nature to that of man-made system led to the creation of two distinct classes in society: the haves and have nots. Moreover, in accordance with the changing nature of relations between the haves and have nots, the nature of socio-economic relations also underwent subtle transformations as well, whose latest incarnation could be seen in the form of the capitalism. The underlying argument of this classic Marxist formulation was that human nature was inherently materialistic and selfish which led to the perpetuation of the exploitation of one class of people at the hands of other. But given the moralist and religious overtones of Gandhian thought, it would have been obvious that Gandhi would have rejected such a description of human nature. He argued that taking human being as fundamentally selfish and materialist was a patently wrong preposition that would have produced equally wrong conclusions. Therefore, in place of Marxist characterisation of human being as selfish and materialist, Gandhi argued for the selfless and spiritual nature of human personality. He firmly believed that human beings inherently carried a positive orientation rooted in his or her spiritual outlook to life as a result of which material considerations had only limited role to play in determining the course of the human life. Thus, to seek plausible and lasting solutions to the difficulties being faced by the human beings in present times, it was important that the positive moralist and spiritual instincts of human personality needed to be invoked.

12.3 SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

An interrelated argument of the philosophy of socialism and communism on the issue of social transformation relates to the violent method of doing so. In other words, in Marxist discourse, the transformation of capitalist order into socialist one and eventually a classless and stateless society would be marked by the violent methods of protest that the have nots would take recourse to in ousting the capitalists from the hegemonic positions in society. Thus, class-struggle emerged as the focal point of communist ideology which argued for a violent revolution as the plausible methodology of bringing about communist revolution in the capitalist societies. This formulation of communism came in sharp conflict with the ultimate virtue of Gandhian philosophy, for example, ahimsa or non-violence. Coming down heavily on the communists for being so fond of violence and bloodshed, Gandhi argued that such an approach in solving a problem could never bring a long lasting and morally appropriate transformation in society. To him, the only plausible method of transforming the state of things in society or to bring about a change of heart in an individual, the recourse should be taken only to the soul-force whose infallibility was a question of supreme faith for Gandhi.

Gandhi was not even convinced with the peaceful methods of socio-economic reconstruction in the socialist countries. For instance, Gandhi was quite opposed to the strategy of socio-economic development adopted in the Soviet Union under the leadership of Stalin. His

distaste for regimented nature of life in society in which each and every activity of the common people would be decided by the state apparatus was very obvious. Moreover, even if such a system of socio-economic life leads to relative peace and tranquility in society and results in bumper production of goods and services, that would not be acceptable to Gandhi. The fundamental flaw with such a system was the negation of moral right of the individuals to carry out the basic chores of their life as per their own volitions. Therefore, to Gandhi, the Soviet model of socio-economic and political life, though peaceful, was morally demeaning and devaluing the dignity of human personality as the coercive methods of getting them to do the things that they might not have done otherwise robbed that system of its moral strength. As a result, it suffered from the same kind of moral bankruptcy that the capitalist system of life would have suffered.

Having criticised the composition of power element in communist societies, Gandhi argued for conceptualisation and operationalisation of such a model of socio-economic and political mobilisation in society that could have achieved the desired results without compromising with the personal freedom and moral high pedestal of the people. In this regard, his ideas on the art of non-violence and its operationalisation in the Indian circumstances appeared quite relevant. By opting for a non-violent method of mobilising the masses to rise against the illegal, illegitimate, immoral and unacceptable colonial rule in the country, Gandhi called upon the moral courage of a defeated and relegated mass of people. As a result, when the massive upsurge of people started erupting on the streets and by-lanes of the countryside, without any coercive or material provocations, the mighty colonial rulers could not just hold on and they had to bow before the moral convictions of the people that the British rule in India was morally undesirable. To Gandhi, the communist path of violent and immoral methods of bringing about change in society would not have been morally acceptable and practically long-lasting.

The communist formulation of dividing the society into two mutually opposing classes of haves and have notes came in for strong denouncement by Gandhi. He argued that the material bases in terms of possessing or not possessing property in society could not become the sound criterion of classifying people. To him, the non-ownership of the means of production could never be the sure basis for someone to become a true socialist. Alternatively, he suggested that even the richest person in society could also become socialist provided he is not attached with his material possessions in such a way that that becomes prejudicial to the larger interests of the common people in society. Therefore, to Gandhi, the appropriate way to assess the socialist credentials of an individual was not to look at his material and physical possessions but to test his orientations towards truth, non-violence, morality, equality and sense of care towards others.

12.4 REDISTRIBUTION OF POWER

The socialist concern for redistribution of power and resources in society was also shared by Gandhi. He supported the argument of the socialists that socio-economic and political interactions between individuals in society should be marked by the sense of equality and mutual respect for each other. However, Gandhi differed with the socialists in so far as the ways and means of realising the ideal of equality and mutual respect for each other was concerned. The socialists were of the firm belief that the holders of power and privileges in society would neither be ready to relinquish their possessions so easily nor so quickly. Therefore, their favoured course of action appeared to be the violent methods of forcible capture of the privileges and possessions of the capitalists on the one hand, and their torture

and eventual massacre in case of protest and revenge, on the other. The essence of the socialist philosophy lied in taking the capitalists and other well off sections of society as inherently static and unresponsive and, thus, only violent and coercive methods would serve the purpose of removing them from their seats of power and possessions. But Gandhi refused to accept either the socialist perception regarding the nature and attitude of the capitalist class nor was he supportive, even an inch, of the idea of using violent and coercive methods of getting rid of their power, possessions and even personality. In contrast, Gandhi suggested that nobody is inherently good or bad. The nature and attitude of an individual was determined by his or her social upbringing and worldly environment. Yet, the soul of every individual is pious and prone to listen to the moral urgings of the other individuals in society. Therefore, instead of taking somebody's bad nature and ill attitude for granted, efforts must be made to appeal to the soul of that individual so that his moral and spiritual longings could have been aroused. Once an individual listens to his or her moral urges, the apparent stubbornness starts melting away gradually and that person gets ready to partake with his or her belongings including power and possessions in such a way that socio-economic and political systems are redrawn to serve the common interests of the society.

Gandhi was also critical of the use of socialism as a fashionable dogma by a few individuals to show their false concern for the poor and downtrodden sections of the society. He once chided a group of students who came across him portraying themselves as icons of socialism despite being opulently rich and enjoying all sorts of amenities and comforts including hiring poor people as slaves to serve them in their daily chores or activities. He took exception to the duality of intellectual profession and practical manifestation of socialism in those students and called upon them to be true to their moral and spiritual character and convictions. Only then, can they could become true socialists.

To Gandhi, the epicentre of socialist activities must be the *daridranarayana* (poorest of the poor) or the most suppressed and miserable person in society. Unless socialism is informed by such humanitarian concerns for the *daridranarayana*, it would not be able to become an all encompassing philosophy promising a happy and satisfying life for the people. He was sure that if communism sought to present itself only as an economic ideology sans other aspects, particularly moral dimensions of social conduct, it would prove to be sterile. Instead, he pointed out that in his conception, socialism, and for that matter any other philosophy of life needed to be imbued with love and care for the daridranarayana along with the efforts for providing a distinct identity for such people in the social interactions. Socialism, for Gandhi, would be more a code of moral conduct in society rather than an economic ideology or a political philosophy aimed at eliminating the capitalist system from the world.

12.5 DICTATORSHIP OF THE PROLETARIAT

In the political scheme of things under socialism, the idea of dictatorship of the proletariat appeared to be a formidable concept. But to Gandhi, the whole notion of dictatorship of proletariat seemed to be a contrast of the terms. While on the one hand, the focus of socialism had overwhelmingly been on the issues of social and economic democracy with its major thrust on the eradication of the class and other sorts of distinctions in society, how could have it thought of any kind of dictatorship, on the other. In other words, the very purpose of liberating people from the exploitative tentacles of capitalism would have been defeated with the establishment of dictatorship, even of proletariat, because that would again create wedges in society amongst the rulers and ruled classes of the people. Moreover,

Gandhi noted that the whole concept of dictatorship smacked of moral degeneration of both rulers and the ruled as neither of them should either think of or appreciate the idea of establishing any kind of dictatorship in society as doing so would complicate the problems of moral rejuvenation in societal interactions amongst various groups of people.

The fallacy of the idea of dictatorship of proletariat and the moral bankruptcy of the resultant socio-economic and political system of such a society was also strongly emphasised by Gandhi. He did not agree with the conviction of the socialists that the dictatorship would be that of proletariat given the typical dynamics of state and government in modern times. Even if it was a proletariat dictatorship, the social cleavages amongst the various groups of people would be obvious as no government could have accommodated each and every interest in the power sharing of the state. Moreover, the size of governmental organisation and the increasingly specialised nature of conducting the businesses of government would necessitate the gradual transfer of reigns of running the government from the hands of the proletariat into the hands of the specialised and elitist bureaucratic clique. In due course of time, this clique would join hands with other exclusivist formations such as army and big industrial land business magnates to evolve a typical ruling echelon that would enjoy all the powers of government and run the business of government to serve their interests instead of the interests of the masses. And, all such immoral and illegitimate misdeeds would be carried out in the name of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The moral discomfiture of the notion of dictatorship of proletariat also became distinct to Gandhi because of the legitimacy and legality accorded to the cult of violence in the socialist philosophy. In other words, Gandhi believed that by sanctioning the use of violence and eulogising the revolutionary methods of transforming the existing social order, socialism had automatically put itself in relative disadvantage as any superior force could have crushed it without even an iota of repentance on its part. What, however, appeared more alarming to Gandhi was the probability of reliance on violence as the only plausible means of resolving the conflicts in society even under the dictatorship of proletariat that might eventually lead to the spiralling of violence and moral turpitude becoming the norm of the day. Such a state of affairs appeared more dangerous given the dictum that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Therefore, in such a scenario, as there would be no check to balance the use of powers in the hands of the dictators working under the garb of proletariat class, it would be a distinct possibility that truth and morality would become the first casualty of the predating tactics of the self-serving proletariats.

Even the post-revolution socialist idea of a proletariat society was not appealing to Gandhi as he found that quite lop-sided and one-dimensional. To Gandhi, the socialist philosophy could not rise above its overbearing preoccupation with the economic aspects of the life of people. Its materialistic interpretation of history so much blurred the vision of even the future dispensation of the life of people that they remained confined to banishing the capitalist class in society and its replacement with the proletariat class as the ruling class. Moreover, in the socialist state, the people would be asked to collectively work in the farms and factories in such a way that they produce bumper number of things for state which, in turn, would take care of their basic economic and materialistic needs. In such a conceptualisation of human life, Gandhi found a hidden agenda of the socialist power holders to shield away from the people all other aspects of social conduct so that their ruling cycle moved on continuously.

As against this, Gandhi perceived the dynamics of human life consisting of a variety of aspects in the nature of social, economic, political, cultural, religious and moral, amongst

others. He felt that all these aspects have their own unique place in providing a fulsome meaning and definition to the life of people. Even a slight absence or even compromise with any of these aspects would invariably lead to lopsidedness in the overall system of life in society. Therefore, Gandhi argued that a mere fulfilling of the basic economic and material necessities of life of people would never be able to provide them the propitious conditions to develop their self to the fullest possible degree given the inadequacy of circumstances for the same. Rather, excess engagement of the people with the economic, material, production-oriented and entrepreneurial activities would eventually reduce them to be mere cog in the machine of the socialist production. That would produce some sort of debilitating tendencies amongst the people as a result of which they would not be able to look beyond their factories, industries and workshops to the formidable detriment of not only their self but also the variegated and multidimensional nature of the personality of their dependents and family members.

12.6 POLITICS, RELIGION AND ECONOMICS

12.6.1 Politics

Some significant aspects of socialist life that came on the radar of Gandhi's critical examination appeared to be the politics and religion. To Gandhi, politics was not a means of appropriating power and wielding authority over the other unwilling mass of people. To him, politics was an instrument of mass mobilisation, service, concern, participation and moral regeneration of the moribund majority of people. Moreover, it would give the people an option to branch out of their stipulated economic and materialistic life as was found in the socialist countries. At the same time, it ingrained in the people a sense of self-respect, dignity and value for the noble principles of equality, justice, fraternity etc. But, by negating the importance of politics in society, the socialist societies do great injustice to their people. They not only made them a subservient group of atomistic entities, but also their sense of perceiving the moral goodness or just and unjust in social relations got blunted as a result of which there did not exist any critique of the wrongdoings of the rulers. Moreover, the positive energies of the society remained unutilised for the purposes of moral and spiritual regeneration of the people.

12.6.2 Religion

Another point of discord between Gandhi and socialists existed on the issue of place of religion in society. While Gandhi took religion as the basic force to ingrain the sense of morality, spirituality and self-regulation for the people in society, the socialists labelled religion as the opium of the masses on the ground that it intoxicated them to be blind to the exploitation and oppressions perpetrated on them by the forces of capitalism and other vested interests of society. Therefore, in almost all the socialist countries, the public practice and propagation of religion and religious sermons were prohibited in order to dissuade the people to be religious and spiritual. This irked Gandhi to the extent of chiding the socialists as unaware of the positive potentialities of religion in bringing about formidable transformations in both individual as well as public conduct of the people in society. He convincingly argued that the ways and means of moral and spiritual emancipation of the people could have been taught only through the religious and moralist discourses as that would lead to the development of the sense of self-regulation amongst the people. Gandhi asked for free and voluntary invocation of religious and moralistic teaching and preaching in society so that human beings could attain spiritual salvation through self-regulation and service and care for other distressed and miserable people in their neighbourhood.

12.6.3 Economics

Though Gandhi was appreciative of the insightful diagnosis of the socio-economic ills plaguing people in the capitalist society, he was not convinced of the capabilities of the alternative socialist model of economic life to eradicate those ills and ensure moral regeneration of the society. As an economic system, Gandhi discovered a number of malaise of the socialist economy as it existed in the socialist countries such as the Soviet Union. It was materialist and consumerist in its orientation and did not represent a higher civilisation. Although it encouraged sharing and cooperation, it imposed these by force and did little to develop the moral energies of its citizens. It insisted on uniformity and ignored the demands of individual *swabhava*. Since it invested the state with both economic and political power, its statism posed the gravest threat to human dignity and self-respect. Above all, communism was established and continued by means of massive violence with all its attendant evils (Parekh, 1997, p.95). Thus, Gandhi presented a comprehensive critique of the economic system envisaged by socialism to be the ideal model able to cure all the ills of the toiling masses.

12.7 AN OVERVIEW

The abovementioned arguments of Gandhi on socialism and communism may seem to portray Gandhi as the bitterest critique of the philosophy that became the reference point of socio-economic reconstruction of a number of countries in the world. However, it must be pointed out that Gandhi was not criticising socialism and communism from any parochial or partisan perspectives. The Gandhian views on socialism and communism were premised on the basic framework that Gandhi evolved, stood by and practised throughout his life in both India and abroad. This perspective was to take individuals as the starting and ending point of reference in any social discourse aimed at ameliorating their conditions of life. Moreover, more than socio-economic, political, cultural or civilisational perspectives, Gandhi was a believer in moralistic and spiritual perspective of life in which he tended to evaluate the activities and products of life in terms of their contribution in the moral and spiritual upliftment and regeneration of soul force amongst the common people. Since, such considerations found little, if any, space in the socialist and communist discourses, it was natural that Gandhi refused to accept them as plausible alternatives to the prevailing exploitative liberal-capitalist model of life.

Consequently, various theoreticians and practitioners of socialism and communism in India who were able to appreciate the Gandhian stand point in critiquing the theory and practice of socialism did not find any partisan or vested interest in his points of view. They, in fact, commended the views and role of Gandhi in mobilising the masses in India to rise and fight against the capitalist colonial system by taking the strength of their moral courage and spiritual force of their personalities. For instance, articulating his views on life and works of Gandhi, Hiren Mukherjee, a stalwart amongst Indian communists, wrote: "Not for a thousand years or more has India resounded to any name so much as Gandhi's. He strode the Indian earth like a gentle Colossus. None else not even Rabindranath Tagore or the great figures of modern China has represented in his life and works as Gandhi has done uniquely, the spirit, schizophrenic and sublime, of New Asia indeed Gandhi is greater by far than Gandhism. The ism was always rather inchoate, largely self-contradictory and in its indifference to the modern context of life, something of a fallacy. Yet of all our heroes in recent Indian history, this frail little man was the tallest" (Quoted in Ghosh, 1984, pp.171-72). Likewise, another pioneer of the communist movement in India, E.M.S. Namboodiripad

was also appreciative of the concerns of values with which Gandhi identified himself and his love, affection and care for the poor and downtrodden of the society despite being critical to the ideology of socialism and communism. As he wrote, "Moral values like truth, non-violence, renunciation of the pleasures of life etc., political ideals such as freedom, democracy, peace etc., social objectives such as abolition of caste distinctions, emancipation of women, unity of all religious groups and communities, etc., these were indivisible parts of his life and teachings" (Quoted in Ghosh, 1984, p.172). These illustrative appreciations of Gandhi at the hands of the diehard communist leaders in the post-independent India showed the veracity of points raised by Gandhi in dealing with the issues of socio-economic, political, cultural and moral life of the people in different societies and under different ideological baggages. Though Gandhi's views on socialism and communism might not be appealing to the sympathisers of these ideologies, there would not be any dispute on the perspective and vision with which Gandhi offered his critique of mainstream strands of the philosophy of socialism and communism.

12.8 SUMMARY

Gandhi's views on socialism and communism provide a moralist critique of a philosophy rooted in excessive concern for materialism and physical aspects of life. In offering his views on socialism and communism, Gandhi acted neither as a liberal philosopher nor an agent of capitalist class to denounce the fundamental assumptions of the ideology of socialism and communism. Rather, as a devout humanist, deeply embedded in his unending concern for the comprehensive and all round, more particularly moral, development of the individuals, Gandhi could not accept the one-dimensional conceptualisation of human personality in the socialist and communist discourses. Moreover, he appeared extremely pained at the blatant support of the socialists and communists to the use of naked force in attaining the pious goal of ending the centuries of capitalist exploitation and subjugation of the people. Therefore, he offered the alternative that not only the ends, but also the means need to be equally pious and proper in order to have a morally liberating results of any humanist pursuit. It was due to this apparently disinterested passion of Gandhi for moral and material liberation of the individuals that silenced even his critics and supporters of the ideologies that he criticised from labeling any charge of being partisan or serving any vested interest, in the main, in his staunch critique of the theory and practice of socialism and communism in various parts of the world.

12.9 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. Discuss at length Gandhi's critique of socialism and communism.
2. Examine the concepts of social transformation and redistribution of power in the scheme of socialism.
3. What do you understand by the dictatorship of the proletariat? Substantiate your arguments.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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