
UNIT 8 **GANDHI'S VILLAGE: AN IDEAL ECOLOGICAL UNIT**

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8.1 INTRODUCTION

On his return to India from South Africa in 1914, **Gandhi** promised **Gopal Krishna Gokhale**, whom he considered his political guru that **for** one year he (Gandhi) would travel the length and breadth of India to understand and gain experience about the country. Gandhi accordingly travelled third class on trains and went into villages and thus got a first hand knowledge of the social and economic conditions of ~~the~~ villages. Furthermore, his early Satyagrahas in Champaran and **Kheda** (1917 and 1918) also opened his eyes to the economic exploitation of the **villagers** by the British. Since eighty per cent of the population of India lived in villages, for Gandhi, the economic and social revival of the seven **lakh** villages was a top priority. In his own words- "To serve our villages is to establish Swaraj. Everything else is but an idle dream". Many years later, in 1933, on his nation-wide tour in which he covered 12,500 miles in nine months, penetrating into some of the remotest villages on foot, he saw the plight of the deprived sections of society, and he brought in even more reforms into his concept of Gram Swaraj.

Having witnessed the ills of industrialisation in England, he wanted to protect India **from** following in its footsteps saying, "God forbid that India should ever take to industrialization after the manner of the West. The economic imperialism of a single tiny island kingdom (England) is today keeping the world in chains. If an entire nation of 300 million took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts".

On the other hand, he had experienced the advantages and joys of the community Ashrams he had set up in South Africa- Phoenix and Tolstoy Farm. These ashrams were self-sufficient centres where people of different castes, faiths and nationalities lived harmoniously with each other, as well as the environment. The community life, which he developed in these ashrams, consisted of the inmates doing manual labour, cooking, agriculture and crafts. These experiments in his ashrams gave him a vision for developing

the seven lakh villages of India into village republics which were self-sufficient units with decentralisation, trusteeship, swadeshi, nai talim or basic education, bread-labour, full employment, equality and cooperation.

Aims and Objectives

After studying this Unit, you would be able to understand

- The Community life in Gandhi's ashrams in South Africa and India;
- The importance of Gram Swaraj or Village self-reliance;
- The significance of Village Industry.

8.2 GANDHI'S ASHRAMS

South Africa- Phoenix Settlement and Tolstoy Farm

Gandhi aspired to realise a village community throughout his life. The first attempts were made in South Africa at Phoenix Settlement and Tolstoy Farm. More lasting attempts were made in India at Sabarmati and Sevagram. In her book, 'Global Concern with Environmental Crisis and Gandhi's Vision', Dr. Savita Singh writes, "Gandhi built his ashrams in wastelands adjacent to villages. The aim of these experiments was to bring back a generation gone astray under the onslaught of Western industrial culture as also to prepare a model for the seven lakh villages and prove the efficacy of living in harmony with nature and the fruits of bread labour". The ashrams in fact were precursors for the Gram Swaraj movement and village industries.

What was it that motivated Gandhi to think of starting an ashram in the first place? It was a book, 'Unto This Last' by Ruskin, lent to him by his friend Henry Polak. This book had a great impact on Gandhi- particularly the point "That a life of labour, i.e., the life of the tiller of the soil and the handicraftsman, is the life worth living".

Gandhi lost no time in procuring 100 acres of land situated amidst sugar plantations, served by a spring and many fruit trees, in a place called Phoenix, 14 miles from Durban. He proposed that the printing press for *Indian Opinion* be shifted to this farm, on which every one should labour, drawing the same monthly allowance of 3 pounds irrespective of colour and nationality and attending to the press work in spare time. However not everyone agreed to settle down there as the place was overgrown with grass, uninhabited and infested with snakes. The nearest station too was two and a half miles away. However they all agreed to work for the press and bring out the *Indian Opinion*.

Within a month a big shed seventy-five feet long and fifty feet wide was erected by the joint effort of all of them for the press. Eight buildings of corrugated iron and thatched roofs were built for the settlers. Thus the **Phoenix Settlement** started in 1904. The settlers were divided into the 'Schemers' and the 'Workers'. The schemers had to make a living by manual labour. They were given three acres of land around the press. No land was fenced in and just narrow paths divided the holdings. On the days the *Indian Opinion* was to be printed, there was a flurry of activity- Gandhi and Polak corrected the proofs, the printers ran off the corrected pages, the children folded and wrapped the journal.

Every Sunday all the residents met in Gandhi's cottage for a community prayer in which

recitations from the Gita, Koran and the Bible, Christian hymns and Gujarati bhajans were sung cutting across all race and religion barriers. One of the inmates, Millie Graham Polak describes life in the Phoenix settlement as a community life in the miniature. "Gandhi as the benevolent patriarch had no special privilege except to look after everybody else. The house resounded with laughter as the children joined with the parents every morning in the grinding of wheat in a hand-mill. The evening meal was a pleasant hour, interspersed with light conversations and serious discussion".

In order to sustain the Satyagraha struggle in South Africa, Gandhi felt the need to lodge the satyagrahis in a co-operative farm and so in 1910 he set up the **Tolstoy Farm** on a 1100 acre land which was given rent free to him by **Mr.Kallenbach**. The farm was twenty one miles from Johannesburg. The seventy-five odd residents hailed from all parts of India and espoused different religions. They were served by a common vegetarian kitchen and led a **frugal** and hard life. All of them, including the children, had to do their quota of manual labour. Vocational training was also given to the youngsters. Kallenbach learnt shoe-making from the Trappist Monks and taught this craft to the residents. Since the morning hours were devoted to farm work and domestic duties, the school for imparting literary training was kept for after the mid-day meal.

India- Sabarmati and Sevagram Ashram

- As mentioned earlier, India, since ancient times, has had its people living in the **villages**- in fact 80% of its population lived in villages. However, the villagers were steeped in poverty, ignorance, malnutrition and due to terrible insanitation and unhygienic conditions the people suffered from terrible diseases. Those who had managed to get education had moved into the city to further their prospects while completely ignoring the lot of their brethren back in the village. Under the British rule the natural and human resources of the country had any way been ruthlessly exploited and on top of that, their attempts to convert the ancient traditions of India and to convert India from village life to town life was totally destroying India's structure- its culture and economy- from the very roots. The only connection the British seemed to keep with the village was to exact revenue from them.

Gandhi took stock of the situation and immediately foresaw the total ruination that was taking place unless he did something for the villages. With 80% of India's population in villages, Gandhi knew that if the village perished then India would perish. He therefore gave all his attention to this foundational work and persuaded everyone who wanted freedom of India from the British, to go a step further and think of 'Poorna **Swaraj**' and bring true freedom to the villages. This was the spirit behind **Gandhi's** Constructive Programme and its practical implication was, 'Village Reconstruction'.

On his final return to India, Gandhi lost no time in seeking to establish a community settlement in India also. He first established his Satyagraha Ashram in Kochrab, a small village near Ahmedabad in 1915. But two years later, after an outbreak of plague, he shifted this ashram to a place on the banks of the **Sabarmati** river. From the very outset the Ashram was mainly **concerned** with the fight against untouchability and later in 1933 it was given up for a **centre** for the removal of untouchability- **Harijan** Sevak Sangh.

Gandhi then decided to settle down in a poor village in Segaoon, near **Wardha** with a population of just 600 which lacked bare amenities like a **pucca** road, shop or **post** office. Later it was renamed as **Sevagram**. Sevagram became the pivotal point for all

the historical happenings that ultimately led to India's independence. In J.C.Kumarappa's words, it was "the defacto capital of India".

The experiments carried out in Sevagram reveal the utopian dream of Gandhi, namely a village republic with self-rule by the villagers who are able to live with true dignity and freedom. Life in the ashram was one of simplicity and a daily routine. The day began at four o'clock in the morning with communal prayers and spinning. Breakfast was served at dawn. Then after a brisk walk Gandhi would spend time in his mud hut, writing. Lunch was served at 11 am with all inmates squatting on the floor in the verandah. This was followed by reading, spinning, and meditation. Dinner was served at 5 o'clock after which there were inter-faith prayers. Like the ashrams in South Africa, it was a classless community where everyone engaged in bread-labour, spinning, craft-work and lived harmoniously with each other. At the ashram he taught the people cattle-keeping, nature-cure, hygiene and sanitation, compost making, eradication of untouchability, cropping patterns and irrigation practices. He taught them to live a life of sharing and mutual aid amongst themselves and with the eco system so as to be able to show the world at large that a sustainable future lies in human beings living in small communities in tune with nature.

8.3 ECOLOGY: DEFINITION

The dictionary meaning of ecology is:

1a. The science of the relationships between organisms and their environments. Also called *bionomics*.

1b. The relationship between organisms and their environment.

2. The branch of sociology that is concerned with studying the relationships between human groups and their physical and social environments. Also called *human ecology*.

3. The study of the detrimental effects of modern civilization on the environment, with a view toward prevention or reversal through conservation.

4. The political movement that seeks to protect the environment especially from pollution.

Gandhi suggested three balances to be maintained in order to lead a life of peace and harmony on this earth. These were the balances between (i) the interests of human beings and Nature (ii) the individuals and the society they constituted, and (iii) the physical and spiritual desires of man. Gandhi envisioned a society where men lived close to nature and closer still to each other. The small village communities he conceived gave such opportunities for people to be close to each other as well as with nature. The bread labour, Nai Talim and inter-faith activities also helped in the development of the body, mind and spirit. Having understood the meaning of ecology it will be interesting to study and understand how Gandhi's ideal village took into consideration all the above points—the social, human and political aspects so as to create a truly self-sufficient village republic.

8.4 GANDHI'S IDEAL VILLAGE

I would say that if the village perishes, India will perish too. It will be no more India. Her own mission in the world will get lost."

Since ancient times India has been a land of relatively autonomous and self-governing village communities which based their life on dharma and righteousness. The British rule disintegrated these village communities by subordinating them to a formal and centralised legal system. In doing so, the traditional foundation was demolished and along with it the inner cohesion which had kept the Indian village going for thousands of years. The study tour that Gandhi undertook for one year on the advice of Gokhale helped him to see the pathetic reality of India- the horrible trains with a sea of humanity, shoving and jostling each other, the dirty roads, the heaps of refuse and night soil at the entrance of villages- all this shook Gandhi to his core.

As a first step Gandhi appealed to the educated city dwellers to return to the villages with a spirit of service and make a beginning by **making** the village cleaner by their own labour and removing illiteracy to the best of their ability. This was no easy task as Gandhi was not oblivious to the actual realities of Indian villages. He admitted that, "Instead of having graceful hamlets dotting the land, we have dung heaps. The approach to many villages is not a refreshing experience. Often one would like to shut one's eyes and stuff one's nose; such is the surrounding dirt and offending smell".

But then he shared with them his dream of how he envisioned his beloved India to be. He pictured India not as a poverty-stricken India teeming with ignorant millions but one which was continuously progressing and tapping the genius within her. He appealed to the educated class to join him in making India's villages into a republic which would have no illiterates, in which everyone is usefully occupied, has nourishing food, **Khadi** (meaning yarn spun by themselves) to clothe themselves, well ventilated homes, with a strict sense of hygiene and sanitation and which will be governed by a Panchayat. On another occasion he defined his ideal Indian village as follows:

"An ideal village will be so constructed as to lend itself to perfect sanitation. It will have cottages with sufficient light and ventilation built of a material obtainable within a radius of five miles of it. The cottages will have courtyards enabling householders to plant vegetables for domestic use and to house their cattle. The village lanes and streets will be free of all avoidable dust. It will have wells according to its needs and accessible to all. It will have houses of worship for all, also a common meeting place, a village common for grazing its cattle, a co-operative dairy, primary and secondary schools in which industrial (i.e. vocational) education will be the central fact, and it will have Panchayats for settling disputes. It will produce its own grains, vegetables and **fruit**, and its own Khadi. This is roughly my idea of a model village." Furthermore, he pointed out that 'all should make it a point of honour to use only village articles whenever and wherever available. Given the demand there is no doubt that most of our wants can be supplied by the villages. When we become village-minded we shall not want imitations from the West or machine-made products.'

8.5 VILLAGE OR GRAM SWARAJ

Thus we can see that for Gandhi, freedom in its truest sense was the uplift and Swaraj of the village and its inhabitants. So he set about reconstructing the Indian society based on the village system with the village as the basic unit. He called this Gram Swaraj. Based on the above quotation by Gandhi about his utopian village, we can understand that he wanted the village to produce basic useful goods for consumption purpose rather than trade and the governance was to be bottom-up, not top-down. The basic principles of Gram Swaraj as laid down by Gandhi were:

1. Supremacy of Man- Full Employment
2. Body-Labour
3. Equality
4. Trusteeship
5. Decentralisation
6. Swadeshi
7. Self- Sufficiency
8. Co-operation
9. Satyagraha
10. Equality of Religions
11. Panchayat Raj
12. Nai Talim

8.6 SELF-SUFFICIENT VILLAGE REPUBLICS

Constructive Programme- Khadi and Village Industries

How did Gandhi go about achieving his village republics and how did he picture its functioning? What did he mean by it being self-sufficient? Were they to work in isolation? Would not that defeat the whole picture of world being one family? The underlying spirit behind the revival of the village was Sarvodaya or welfare of all.

First of all, Gandhi outlined and launched his Constructive Programme. The first practical thing he laid out was the charkha programme and spinning of Khadi. For almost four to six months of the year the men in the villages were without work and took to drinking and gambling and behaving atrociously towards their wives and family. Spinning now ensured they were gainfully employed throughout the year, the women earned extra money and the rhythmic operation of the charkha was said to have a therapeutic value. Of course in addition to this people were now wearing clothes spun out of Khadi and thus boycott of British made clothes was complete.

Khadi is a village industry within the reach of the 'last person'. It signifies self-reliance and self-sufficiency. It is human centred, creative, participative, and based on the principles of self-reliance, ecology and peace. Gandhi referred to Khadi as the 'sun of the village solar system' and the other village industries as the planets supporting the sun (Khadi) in return for the heat and sustenance they derived from it.

The other village industries which he helped promote and develop were dairy farming, hand-pounding of rice and corn, soap-making, bee-keeping, pottery, tanning, hand-made paper, ink, handicrafts and **palm-gur**. All of this ensured not only a means of subsistence but also ensured that such village art and skill would not die out. Such focus on the villages also made the migration of able-bodied youth from the villages to the urban centres a less attractive option. In addition Gandhi strongly advised the city dwellers to 'use and purchase only those articles manufactured by the villagers'.

Gandhi was no idle dreamer. Always a man of action and an ever growing dynamic individual, his experiments in his community life the ashrams had taught him that it is not possible to be completely self-sufficient. It was not possible to be able to produce everything that was required for a simple basic living. So though the aim was complete self-sufficiency, he advised each village to produce more than the village requirements and exchange it with the surplus from a neighbouring village for in the final analysis 'man is not born to live in isolation but is essentially a social animal independent and interdependent'. Thus, when Gandhi speaks of villages collectively striving for a self contained system, he is advocating the need for regional specialisation and exchange of goods between regions.

Supremacy of Man- Full Employment, Bread/Body Labour

Gandhi's social and economic views were human centred. In his own words 'The supreme consideration is man'. He believed that every man has a right to be happy and ought to have the right to livelihood. In his Hind Swaraj he had been critical about the 'time and labour saving machinery' not because he was against machinery but if the use of such technology was going to replace human beings and thus render them unemployed he was against it. He said, "the poor of the world cannot be helped by mass production, only by production of the masses". He was in favour of Appropriate Technology i.e. technology appropriate for rural India where capital was scarce and labour in plenty. So the technology ought to cater to increased production in agriculture and rural industry, should not be capital intensive and should properly utilise man-power so as to solve-the problem of unemployment.

He was emphatic that everybody should be able to get sufficient work to enable them to feed and clothe themselves and make the two ends meet. In continuation with this right to livelihood was his belief in the dignity of labour. This idea first hit home to Gandhi when he read Ruskin's 'Unto This Last' and he was struck by the point- "A lawyer's work has the same value as the barber's, as all have the same right of earning their livelihood from their work". He felt 'How can a man who does not do body labour, have the right to eat'? So in Gandhi's scheme of things, each and everyone had an obligation to engage in productive physical labour.

Equality and Trusteeship

In the very first Ashram founded by Gandhi in Africa, economic equality was something laid down from the very beginning. Everyone drew the same wage and all tilled the land or worked at the press equally. To him the rich and poor divide was unbearable. He wanted to level down the few rich in whose hands lay the bulk of the nation's wealth and level up the semi-starved naked millions. Of course by this he did not mean to forcefully dispossess them as that would resort to violence. Instead he preached trusteeship in which he wanted the rich to become trustees of their surplus wealth for the good of society since society was an extended family. According to Pyarelal, the Trusteeship plan is a philosophy of life and organisation, with methods of management that bring about inter-personal relationships. "It envisages a new structure and system of organization based on non violence, welfare of all and the sharing of responsibilities".

In addition to economic equality Gandhi also ensured equality in the social structure. He gave great importance to the welfare of women and was indeed a revolutionary in bringing about the emancipation of women in India. He not only brought them to the forefront of his satyagraha movement but also strongly denounced the purdah, sati and dowry system, child marriage, and advocated widow remarriage. He wanted equal rights

and duties for men and women and said, "Woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the very minutest detail in the activities of man and she has an equal right of freedom and liberty with him. She is entitled to a supreme place in her own sphere of activity, as man is in his". Gandhi also strongly worked for the uplift of the oppressed Dalit class to bring about a just society.

Self-Sufficiency and Co-operation

Gandhi wanted every village to be self-sufficient in regard to food, clothing and other basic necessities and to never be a burden on society. After having achieved that, he wanted the people to use their spare time for the service of others. He explained that man is a social being and in as much he is independent he is also inter-dependent. He gave the example of a family. Each member while being self-independent is also inter-dependent, and all cooperate and help each other. He wanted everyone to do the same in society, for the nation and the world.

Equality of Religions

From childhood, Gandhi had never made any distinction between, Hindus, Muslims, Parsis or Christians. So he was pained to see the deep division between Hindus and Muslims in India. Till his last breath he fought for communal harmony. He proclaimed that all religions were good and equal and it was only the followers of these different religions who quarreled with one another. Religion was a personal matter and everyone was entitled to retain his or her own religion without interference. He taught, "Every religion has its full and equal place. We are leaves of a majestic tree whose trunk cannot be shaken off its roots...". Thus in his earliest ashrams every evening it was common place for hymns, bhajans and scriptures to be read from the Bible, Gita and Koran.

Panchayat Raj

Gandhi was pained to see the decline of the panchayati raj which was a system of governance since ancient times. With the British system of centralised rule and their ruthless method of revenue collection, the panchayat had all but become defunct. Gandhi set out to revive this and outlined a system of governance whereby the village was to be ruled by an assembly of five people elected annually by the villagers themselves. It was the responsibility of the panchayat to ensure the education of all children in its village, its sanitation, medical care, cleanliness of its wells, and **uplift** of the so-called untouchables.

post-independence, Gandhi gave an amazing blue-print for the future governance by the Panchayat. He described his concept in terms of an oceanic circle. Most organisational charts show a pyramid like hierarchy where there is a top to down rule and approach. Instead, Gandhi spoke of an oceanic circle where he goes beyond the individual village and sees the structure "composed of innumerable villages ever-widening, never ascending circles". They are all at the same level related to each other in the metaphor of the circle, not the pyramid. Moreover, each individual is the centre of his / her own circle and these circles intersect and expand in all direction, but never so that there is any "apex sustained by the bottom". Such a type of structure indicates and enables common ownership, equal opportunity, rights and responsibilities. In this structure every person has a right to contribute to the formulation of policy through participation in various committees at various capacities. There is no management or control from top. Only self discipline and self regulation guides the function of the whole community.

Nai Talim or Basic Education

Gandhi was very distressed to see how ignorant and steeped in superstition the villagers were. Education to him did not mean just literacy, rather for Gandhi literacy was just the beginning of education. It was practical and basic education for the 5 H's- Hand, Head, Heart, Health and Habit. Education through craft was taught along with importance of health and hygiene. This basic education was for children and adults, men and women. The aim of Adult Education was to educate village adults to have a better, fuller and richer lives, both as individuals and in the community. The education was imparted to them through handicrafts and other creative activities.

In addition to all the above points Gandhi also took care to impart sound advice on health and hygiene. He found that eighty percent of the disease in **rural** India was caused either due to malnutrition or lack of hygiene and sanitation. Malnutrition severely effects body and mind development and reduces working efficiency. He advised them to eat hand-pound rice and jaggery rather than polished rice and sugar, to reduce salt intake and spice, eat more vegetables, boil drinking water, eat meals at specific times. He also told them the importance of personal hygiene and community sanitation and cleanliness saying 'Cleanliness is next to Godliness'. He made them realise how precious the human body was by likening it to a Temple. A Temple was a holy place where God resides and hence should be kept clean. Similarly our bodies should also be kept clean as God is housed within our bodies.

Thus Gandhi had a comprehensive ideal of village Swaraj encompassing the economic, political, social and educational dimensions. Prof. Johan Galtung expresses this quite succinctly in his book 'The Way is the Goal: Gandhi Today' by describing Gandhi's village as a place where individuals led a modest almost puritan life and found joy and contentment in the life of villager, 'but in an uplifted form- with all basic needs satisfied and a high level of self-reliance. No big power to be exercised over millions of people, through the segmentation of modern social life, promised by modernization: you can become minister of education, you minister of health, you minister of public works, etc. Instead of that the power has to be limited to a small unit, a village, and shared with everybody in that unit since it is clear that Gandhi wanted some kind of direct democracy however much it was exercised through the five-person rule at the top of the village, by the Panchayat'.

8.7 SUMMARY

To Gandhi, the village is a primary community, large enough to offer a diversified life and small enough to generate and sustain a sense of community. Johan Galtung summarises it well by saying, "It is a republic steered by the Panchayat – a five person committee. Economically it is self-sustained and self-governed and the people are wise, cultured and courageous to do their own policing and ward off any evil forces from the outside. The village produces mainly for its own consumption, it respects scarcity of resources and there exists a spirit of sharing among the villagers."

As Gandhi's village was to be a self-governing autonomous community, he considered it necessary that it should be **self-sufficient** in its basic needs like food, clothing and shelter. Further, Gandhi's village was not an exclusively agricultural community; it maintained a balance between agricultural and village industries. Jayaprakash Narayan made the following observation- "Gandhiji spoke of self government, self sufficient village republics.

He taught us to visualize the village that does its own policing, settles its own disputes, looks after its sanitation, its education, its industries and its agriculture. He also spoke of establishing equality in the village society."

In his book 'Gandhi's outstanding Leadership' author Alan Nazareth, sums it up well by writing, " Gandhi's leadership in the environmental and ecological fields is clearly seen in his insistence on leading a simple life, keeping one's surroundings clean, protecting animal life, avoiding all wastage and utilizing locally available renewable materials to the maximum extent". To quote Gandhi on the subject- "The real conflict is not between environment and development but between environment and the reckless exploitation of the earth by man".

8.8 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. Why did Gandhi focus on village revival?
2. Briefly explain life at the ashrams established by Gandhi.
3. In what way did Khadi and spinning help in village swaraj?
4. Describe Gandhi's ideal village. Give five practical actions Gandhi took to achieve Village Swaraj.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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