
UNIT 7 LIBERTY AND EQUALITY

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7.1 INTRODUCTION

Gandhi described himself as a practical idealist, yet there is a larger projection of an ideal world based on human equality and freedom. His philosophy begins with the expression of deep love and respect for the neighbour which is the basis of conceiving a universal association of free individuals superseding the artificial barriers of race, creed, wealth, power, class and nation. All these form the basis of his doctrine of universal brotherhood as any of these categories which tries to extract or dominate is a form of gross injustice and such a situation of exploitation can only be maintained by force. In such a situation there is a continuous process of hatred, suspicion and fear of losing on the part of the possessed in the hand of the dispossessed who are the overwhelming majority of the humankind. For Gandhi, a good society could be attained if it could realise liberty, equality and fraternity through non-violent means. This is the lesson, he observed to the Indian princes in 1942 that Europe has learnt from the French Revolution of 1789. Gandhi distinguishes between the fuller moral connotation of freedom and the narrower conception of individual or national freedom while analysing *swaraj* or self-rule. Asked to explain the meaning of *purna swaraj* in 1931, he says:

The root meaning of *swaraj* is self rule. *Swaraj* may, therefore be rendered as disciplined rule from within and *purna* means “complete”. “Independence” has no such limitation. Independence may mean licence to do as you like. *Swaraj* is positive. Independence is negative. *Purna Swaraj* does not exclude association with any nation, much less with England. But it can only mean association for mutual benefit and at will. Thus there are countries which are said to be independent but which have no *Purna Swaraj* e.g. Nepal. The word *Swaraj* is a sacred word, a vedic word, meaning self rule and self restraint, and not freedom from all restraint which “independence” often means.

Swaraj or self-rule is the core of freedom and is the crux of real home rule. Just as with Vivekananda and Aurobindo, for Gandhi, right conduct is right form of civilisation. Freedom

is not to be left alone but one that will enable the individual to cultivate love and service. Individual and society are complementary and a society, where citizens are not free cannot be a good society. He does not agree with the liberal conception, according to Terchek, in two ways: how people are treated and how are individual choices and capacity to make choices affected by the institutional practices and asymmetrical distribution of power. The more mature Gandhi, observes Dalton, establishes the link between non-violence and the preservation of liberty seeing the former as the bedrock of freedom. Yet in his commitment to non-violence he does not sacrifice the social and political freedom of the individual: "...to make mistakes as a freeman... is better than being in bondage in order to avoid them (for) the mind of a man who remains good under compulsion cannot improve, in fact it worsens. And when compulsion is removed, all the defects well up to the surface with even greater force" (Harijan 29th September 1946).

Aims and Objectives

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

- Gandhi's thoughts on the concepts of liberty and equality
- Gandhi's notion of individual freedom and swaraj
- Gandhi's concept of economic, racial and caste equality.

7.2 INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM AND SWARAJ

Gandhi rejects the notion of unbridled individualism and stresses on the notion of the individual as a social self. Within this framework he analyses freedom as not being left alone or to abdicate moral obligation towards others who are equally entitled to freedom for themselves. A free person can choose to enter into any association with others but cannot simply cut off from others. This is true of nations also. Gandhi's equation of freedom with self-rule is to underline the intrinsic link between freedom and obligation to others and to oneself, without abandoning the voluntary basis of freedom. Self-rule means voluntary internalisation of one's obligations towards others and that a free person and a nation cannot be selfish and isolationist.

Gandhi emphasises on the voluntary nature of freedom as a human being by nature is an autonomous moral agent having the capacity for choices and freedom to experiment. The individual that Gandhi has in mind is the social self and like Green, he too argues that it is the freedom which the individual enjoys that makes possible for the survival and the continuance of society. Gandhi writes, "Individual freedom alone can make a man voluntarily surrender himself completely to the service of society. If it is wrested from him, he becomes an automaton and society is ruined. No society can possibly be built on a denial of individual freedom. It is contrary to the very nature of man. Just as man will not grow horns or a tail so he will not exist as man if he has no mind of his own. In reality even those who do not believe in the liberty of the individual believe in their own". For Gandhi, freedom is rooted in human nature and is to be claimed as part of self-awareness earned through self-effort; conversely, any external threat to human freedom arises not from circumstances outside one's control but by recognising our weaknesses in the first place. Self-purification is therefore integral to the concept of *swaraj* as that gives us strength and capacity to translate the abstract notion of freedom into a practical reality in society and politics.

Gandhi wrote extensively on national freedom and self-rule but these were applicable to the individual as well. He considers the individual to be the bedrock of *swaraj* and that “*swaraj* of a people means the sum total of the *swaraj* (self-rule) of individuals; government over self is the truest *swaraj*, it is synonymous with *moksha* or salvation. He considers individual *swaraj* as logically and conceptually prior to the notion of collective or national *swaraj*. He also clarifies that “self-government means continuous effort to be independent of government control whether it is foreign government or whether it is national. *Swaraj* government will be a sorry affair if people look up to it for regulation of every detail of life”.

Gandhi's conception of *swaraj* includes four aspects: Truth, Non-violence, political and economic independence. *Swaraj* would be incomplete without realisation of each, since each, for Gandhi, is interwoven with all. His conception of *swaraj* makes the same distinction between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ forms of freedom which Vivekananda and Aurobindo conceive of. Vivekananda's distinction involves a relegation of political freedom and national independence to a subsidiary position. But as the struggle for national independence gathers momentum merely relying on ‘inner’ freedom does not seem enough. Aurobindo's identification of national with spiritual freedom takes on an extreme form of religious nationalism which threatens individual liberty, which he subsequently abandons. Gandhi never espouses this view of freedom as he consistently emphasises on the supreme importance of a supra-political form of freedom which very few Indian leaders concur with. Dalton observes that, *Swaraj*, for Gandhi, means acquiring inner freedom which means that Indians gain sovereignty over themselves and over their nation.

Swaraj would become a reality only if people have the capacity to regulate and control authority. Real *swaraj*, for Gandhi “will come not by the acquisition of authority by a few but by the acquisition of the capacity by all to resist authority when it is abused.... *Swaraj* for me means freedom for the meanest of my countrymen. I am not interested in freeing India merely from the English yoke. I am bent upon freeing India from any yoke whatsoever. I have no desire to exchange ‘king log’ for ‘king stork’. Elaborating further he points out “there is no freedom for India so long as one man, no matter how highly placed he may be, holds the hollow of his hands the life, property and honour of millions of human beings. It is an artificial, unnatural and uncivilized institution. The end of it is an essential preliminary to *swaraj*”.

Gandhi does not consider good government as better than self-government as there is a connection between individual and national self-rule. The evolution of the nation and its component parts, the individuals are inter-twined; one cannot advance without the other. Individual self-rule is included in *swaraj*. Self awareness, self-discipline and self-respect are key components of *swaraj*. Fundamental to *swaraj* is the essence of freedom which is more important than the social, political and economic liberty. *Swaraj* “is infinitely greater than and includes independence”.

“Let there be no mistake about my conception of *Swaraj*. It is complete independence of alien control and complete economic independence. So, at one end you have political independence; at the other, economic. It has two other ends. One of them is moral and social, the corresponding end is Dharma, i.e. religion is the highest sense of the term. It includes Hinduism, Islam, Christianity etc., but is superior to them all. You may recognize it by the name of Truth, not the honesty of experience, but the living Truth that pervades everything and will survive all destruction and all transformation. Moral and social uplift may be recognized by the term as we are used to, i.e. Non-violence. Let us call this square of *Swaraj*, which will be out of shape if any of its angles is untrue. We cannot achieve this

political and economic freedom without Truth and Non-violence in concrete terms, without a living faith in God and hence moral and social elevation' (Harijan, 2nd January, 1937).

7.3 INDIVIDUAL CONSCIENCE AND FREEDOM

A person is truly free if he listens to his conscience or the inner voice, the only tyrant that one would accept. He advises every individual to weigh his circumstances in the court of conscience according to the criteria of *satya* and *ahimsa* and the obligation of *sarvodaya*. This would redefine radically both the means and the ends of action providing the basis of fundamental reform of society. He advises political workers to engage wholeheartedly in the Constructive Programme and bread labour and to sacrifice their comforts in the service of the poorest of the poor.

Gandhi links his views on conscience with his arguments for *satyagraha*. "When people cease to think for themselves and have everything regulated for them, it becomes necessary at times to assert the right of individuals to act in defiance of public opinion or law, which is another name for public opinion. When individuals so act, they claim to have acted in obedience to conscience". He expects the *satyagrahi* to be honest to their deepest convictions and ready to suffer on behalf of their commitments. Gandhi goes on to argue that those who witness the suffering will be prompted by their conscience and be converted. A *satyagrahi*, when he sacrifices and voluntarily suffers, appeals not only to the reason but also the heart of others and this brings people on the same moral plane.

Like Thoreau, Gandhi does not consider the government to be important in the day-to-day activities of the individual. The disinterest and lack of enthusiasm towards the government that is found in perceptions of both Thoreau and Gandhi is because of their belief that all states, including the democratic ones, are the embodiment of force and physical strength, concerned with functions related to law and order, and protection of property. Laws, policies and associations are essentially coercive, stifling and hindering individuality and spontaneity. Thoreau sees law as a form of control and is not different from any kind of coercion and observes that 'the law will never make men free. It is men who have got to make law free'.

Thoreau had insisted that persons with conscience should disassociate from the state as that enabled them to lead lives untainted by the evils which the state sponsors and promotes. The government is incompetent to control the diabolical forces that it releases among individuals. It is for this reason that he suggests withdrawal and reliance on one's inner resources. Thoreau perceives individual conscience as inseparable from common standards and humane sensibilities and since the conscience is above the state, it is the true criterion of what is politically just and right. It is important that individuals perceive themselves first as individuals and only then as citizens or subjects. Conscience, which for him is the inner voice and the 'genius', as an exclusive and purely personal thing, is expressed through acts of civil disobedience. Conscience, for Thoreau is secular, the ability to do what one thinks to be right. However, his notion of morality and politics is subjective and anti-legalistic as he does not acknowledge the existence of general principles or universal standards of right, including the *Bible* and the constitution. For Thoreau, conscience has three implications for politics: first it becomes clear as to why does not restrict conscientious action to non-violence and passive disobedience, as conscience may demand more than non complicity or withdrawal. He does not rule out the use of violence and force if conscience demands. In fact, he views conflict as the gist of life itself and any action that flows from one's

convictions is good and it is for this reason, that violence is necessary. Second, intolerance is the crux of a militant conscience. Belief in one's convictions makes tolerance impossible. Third, in light of his anti-institutionalism he contends that solitary action rather than collective ones as good (Rosenblum, 1981, pp.101-03).

Gandhi differs from Thoreau and is more like Green, when he links individual actions to public interest or *sarvodaya* though he is certain that the dictates of individual conscience, if genuine, would culminate in conduct that would arouse and appeal to the conscience of others. Moreover, his emphasis on *ahimsa* as the means to be used in the vindication of *satya* makes him believe that resistance to injustice, properly conducted, could not lead to general anarchy. He regards *satya* and *ahimsa* as universal principles with an inseparable link between them. The omnipresence of truth and non-violence is derived from another basic foundation of his theoretical edifice, that human beings are amenable to moral persuasion. The individual, a moral and a social person, follows the paths of truth and non-violence since it is the best possible way of leading a good and satisfactory life. It enhances human dignity, relative equality and human perfectibility, as it allows for individual initiative and recognition and provides a mechanism for resolving conflicts in the complex modern world. It is the logical culmination of democratic principles based on active citizen's participation and civility leading to self-realisation, self-awareness and responsibility.

The individual, for Gandhi, is the bearer of moral authority and has therefore, the right and the duty to judge the state and its laws by the standards of *dharma* which in turn is based on *satya* and *ahimsa*. The individual can challenge and even disobey the state, as all states violate *satya* and *ahimsa*. Gandhi, like Raz, places considerable emphasis on autonomy as he pays attention to the role of institutions or the way resources affect choices that are available to the individual. But he differs from conventional theories of autonomy as he emphasises on duties along with rights and considers duty to act morally regardless of the consequences as the highest. Another difference is the stress on individuals as equal members of a harmonious and interdependent cosmos rather than as abstracted selves. Persons achieve good and become complete only in association with others based on mutual respect and cooperation. Such a community ought to be open and pluralistic. It would have to be tolerant of diverse conceptions of good and ensure that its institutional practices do not become obstacles to the ordinary persons' pursuit of their good. The gist of tolerance is the belief that differences can be resolved through reason and not by force and this belief is based on the faith that ultimately truth prevails. Tolerance allows for co-existence of competing forms of partisanship while civility enables the transcendence of partisanship for the pursuit of common good. As Iyer says, "Tolerance and civility both point out to the limitations of human powers, the folly of dogmatism and the futility of violence, the common search for truth by equal citizens in the service of common good. They provide the basis of respect for the inalienable freedom and the fundamental equality of all citizens united in their concern for truth and peace".

7.4 EQUALITY AS AN ALL-PERVASIVE VALUE

The crux of freedom, for Gandhi, is not being unrestrained or unhindered but to cultivate love and service as these are the quintessence of human nature. Freedom is worthwhile as long as it fulfils basic needs in dignity. Gandhi pleads for both freedom and equality of status which he thinks would make it possible for the establishment of a universal community of free persons. Those who accept such a community would have to overcome the artificial barriers of race and creed, wealth and power, class and nation. If one segment augments

for itself at the expense of others it would be adopting an undemocratic method and would have to use arms to defend the injustice that it perpetrates. The possessing class would always be in fear of dispossession and the oppressed would be storing up resentment. Gandhi laid emphasis on equal claim that every individual is entitled to by birth and he also acknowledges that in spite of many setbacks, the human civilisation has enhanced the philosophy of oneness and that is how we see that the ideals of justice, equality and freedom have been accepted by the major philosophies and social movements. This is also a reflection of the growing consciousness of being human which had to fight continuously a process which tried to retard them from this noble mission.

Gandhi's talisman of keeping the face of the poorest in mind while making policies and in undertaking any social reform is with the concern to bring the marginalised and the most vulnerable into the mainstream of politics and society. He champions the basic rights of the untouchables and women, as they have been objects of domination and humiliation. He rejects ascriptive properties such as gender, class, birth, caste, education or nationality that can justify unequal treatment and disqualify some as moral agents.

I believe implicitly that all men are born equal. All... have the same sort as any other. And it is because I believe in this inherent equality of men that I fight the doctrine of superiority... that I delight in calling myself a scavenger, a spinner, a weaver, a farmer and a labourer... I consider that it is unmanly for any person to claim superiority over a fellow human being.... He who claims superiority at once forfeits his claim to be called a man. That is my opinion.

For Gandhi, equality logically follows from non-violence; non-violence entails non-exploitation and non-exploitation is impossible without equality and thus equality and non-violence are interdependent. In Gandhi's perception, freedom and equality are also inter-related; without social and economic equality, there cannot be freedom and without freedom, there can be no social and economic equality. Thus, in Gandhi's thought, freedom, equality and non-violence mutually depend on one another and together constitute justice, which is the basis of good society.

7.5 ECONOMIC EQUALITY

Of all the dimensions of equality, Gandhi focuses most on economic equality and sees economic equality as the basis of non-violence and freedom. He considers economic equality "as the master key to non-violent independence. Working for economic equality means abolishing the eternal conflict between capital and labour. It means the levelling down of the few rich in whose hands is concentrated the bulk of the nation's wealth on the one hand and the levelling up of the semi-starved naked millions on the other. A non-violent system of government is clearly an impossibility so long as the wide gulf between the rich and the hungry millions persists. The contrast between the palaces of New Delhi and the miserable hovels of the poor labouring class nearby cannot last one day in a free India in which the poor will enjoy the same power as the richest in the land".

According to Gandhi, violence stems from inequality, the wide gap that exists between the possessing and the non-violence and unless the root cause of violence is weeded out through non-violent means, one cannot rule out the possibility of violent revolution. In Gandhi's ideal society there would be absolute equality of incomes for all types of work and for all individuals. Believing in the concept of bread labour and dignity of work, Gandhi insists that same amount of work in any occupation ought to be rewarded by the same

amount of wages. Echoing Ruskin, Gandhi observes that “if India is to live any exemplary life of independence which would be the envy of the world, all the *bhangis*, doctors, lawyers, teachers, merchants and others would get the same wages for an honest day's work”.

Gandhi knew that such an ideal would not be realisable in the foreseeable future but that does not justify the gross inequalities that existed in the contemporary human society nor is the argument that some need more than others is acceptable. He points out “let no one try to justify the glaring difference between the classes and the masses, the prince and the pauper, by saying that the former need the more....The contrast between the rich and the poor today is a painful sight. The poor villages...produce the food and go hungry. They produce milk and their children have to go without it”.

Gandhi clarifies equal distribution as his ideal and till that is realised he would like to settle for work for equitable distribution as that would not only ensure elimination of gross disparities in income but also allow every member of the society to receive enough goods and services to meet his basic requirements and enjoy a certain minimum standard of living. “The real implication of equal distribution is that each man shall have the wherewithal to supply all his natural needs and no more....To bring this ideal into being the entire social order has got to be reconstructed. A society based on Non-violence cannot nurture any other ideal”.

Gandhi considers accumulation of wealth as immoral which is why he proposes trusteeship. To achieve equitable distribution he proposes four specific measures: (a) Bread Labour or manual labour which for Gandhi would remove exploitation. “If all worked for their bread, distinctions of rank would be obliterated; the rich would still be there, but they would deem themselves only trustees of their property, and would use it mainly in the public interest”. Bread labour would reduce not only economic inequality but also social inequality and in the Indian context, it would undermine caste-based inequalities. Bread labour ensures that none would be rich and poor; high or low and touchable and untouchable. (b) Voluntary renunciation, a value that Gandhi reiterates from the *Isopanishad* of not coveting the possessions of others and not accumulating beyond one's basic needs. Personal wants ought to be kept to the barest minimum keeping in mind the poverty of one's fellow human beings and try for a new mode of life. (c) *Satyagraha* to resolve industrial and agricultural disputes as legitimate and the proposal of trusteeship to resolve the conflict between labour and capital with the core idea of non-appropriation by owners. He writes, “If, however, in spite of the utmost efforts the rich do not become guardians of the poor in the true sense of the term and the latter are more and more crushed and die of hunger, what is to be done? In trying to find the solution to this riddle I have lighted on non-violent non-cooperation and civil disobedience as the right and infallible means. The rich cannot accumulate wealth without the cooperation of the poor in society....If this knowledge were to penetrate to and spread amongst the poor, they would become strong and would learn how to free themselves by means of non-violence from the crushing inequalities which have brought them to the verge of starvation”. (d) Governmental Action is necessary to ensure that every work receives a minimum or living wage. Gandhi insists that his ideal would have to be realised through non-violent measures, through moral process of transformation involving individuals and keeping the role of the state to its minimum. This is what separates the Gandhian ideal from the Marxists and socialists, who too emphasise on equality as a moral ideal but while the Marxists advocate violent transformation, the socialists insist on a democratic transformation. Gandhi categorically rejects the Marxist ideal of the dictatorship of proletariat as a means of securing social and economic justice for the poor.

7.6 RACIAL AND CASTE EQUALITY

Gandhi was well aware of the contemporary situation, the savage brutality of the Nazi's treatment of the Jews and was saddened by the expression of racialism anywhere in the world. What puzzled him was that even in democracies, racialism is a fact of life both in the British Empire and the United States. His initiation to politics was his first hand acquaintance of racialism in South Africa and what disturbed him the most was that both the Church and the state approved the basic denial of equality to non-European races. For him, any form of inequality based on race and colour was unreasonable and immoral and to fight for the redress of such illegitimate inequality and to restore one's own dignity and honour, he began his *satyagraha* movements in South Africa.

Gandhi was a great believer in the principles of democratic equality and the British constitution providing equality and justice to all and could not accept this serious violation when it came to involve the Indians in South Africa. When he arrived in India he was struck by the inequalities from which the Indian society suffered and took a vow to get rid of all stark inequalities. Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan considers that one of the greatest contributions of Gandhi is the removal of untouchability. Gandhi went to the extent of declaring "if I have to be reborn I should wish to be born as an untouchable so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings and the affronts levelled at them in order that I may endeavour to free myself and them from that miserable condition". Though Gandhi called himself a *sanatani* Hindu, he was one of the severest critics of the curse of untouchability and any other form of inequality that was practised in the name of religion, caste, race or nation. He did not spare even the Indian princes and was very critical of the condition of the poor in their states. He was equally critical of the Permanent Settlement Act and the landlords and cautioned them hoping that "they will realise before it is too late that their safety and survival are bound up with the rapid introduction of responsible government which even the paramount power with all its strength was obliged to concede to the provinces".

One of the severest criticisms that Gandhi levelled against the British occupation of India was that it has led to extreme oppression of the poor, pointing out the earlier periods of plentiful situations; he castigated the British for keeping majority of the population in a situation of abject poverty and a system that is totally inhuman. As Gandhi himself says, "the semi starved millions scattered throughout the seven hundred thousand villages dotted over a surface of nineteen hundred miles broad" and added that it is a painful phenomenon that "those villages through no fault of their own have nearly six months in a year are idle upon their hands". This, he contrasts with the situation before the advent of the British, which was self-sufficient, with no shortage of food and clothing. He blamed the British East India Company for ruining the supplementary village industry for this situation and as a remedial measure proposed the regeneration of the villages through the Constructive Programmes with due emphasis on cottage industries. Gandhi was equally conscious that the problems of thickly populated underdeveloped colonial situations like India cannot have the same solution as the sparsely populated industrialised western countries. It is because of such an understanding that Gandhi discounted capital intensive production mechanism and pleaded for the revival of the village economies that were labour-intensive production as these would guarantee meaningful employment to our teeming millions. One of his close associates, J.C. Kumarappa, worked out the details of his plans.

7.7 CONCLUSION

Gandhi puts the consciousness of enjoying freedom as the very cornerstone of human history and accepts temporary setbacks which is led by the perpetrators of inequality and exploitation but always had the confidence of the human ability to overcome them. In a way, this is a dialectical understanding of the historical evolution as he gives important examples from history like serfs becoming freemen; no more burning of heretics and the privileges of the nobility is under increased threat; slaves are becoming equal citizens and the rich are becoming apologetic for their wealth; Mightiest of empires are understanding the necessities of peace and we find the dreamers dreaming about unity of the entire humankind as increasing all the time. He is critical and cautioning of the obstacles to this cherished path by the lust of the powerful, the lies and the hypocrisies that go by blindly following the diktats of arrogant racialism and nationalism, but again here his optimism is demonstrated when he talks of the inevitable march of democracy and increasing awareness that give the poorest of the poor the essential right to food, sunshine in their houses and hope, dignity and beauty in their existence equal to others. This optimism of Gandhi allows him to transcend the immediate setbacks and retreat towards equality and freedom and keep the torch alive as the servant of entire humanity.

7.8 SUMMARY

Gandhi rejects the notion of unbridled individualism and stresses on the notion of the individual as a social self. Within this framework he analyses freedom as not being left alone or to abdicate moral obligation towards others who are equally entitled to freedom for themselves. A free person can choose to enter into any association with others but cannot simply cut off from others. This is true of nations also. Gandhi's equation of freedom with self-rule is to underline the intrinsic link between freedom and obligation to others and to oneself, without abandoning the voluntary basis of freedom. Self-rule means voluntary internalisation of one's obligations towards others and that a free person and a nation cannot be selfish and isolationist. He considers the individual to be the bedrock of *swaraj*. The individual, for Gandhi, is the bearer of moral authority and has therefore, the right and the duty to judge the state and its laws by the standards of *dharma* which in turn is based on *satya* and *ahimsa*. The individual can challenge and even disobey the state, as all states violate *satya* and *ahimsa*.

Gandhi pleads for both freedom and equality of status which he thinks would make it possible for the establishment of a universal community of free persons. Gandhi's talisman of keeping the face of the poorest in mind while making policies and in undertaking any social reform is with the concern to bring the marginalised and the most vulnerable into the mainstream of politics and society. Of all the dimensions of equality, Gandhi focuses most on economic equality and views it as the basis of non-violence and freedom.

7.9 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

- 1) What is the link between individual freedom and *swaraj* according to Gandhi?
- 2) Explain how individual conscience is the basis of freedom.
- 3) Why does Gandhi consider equality as an all-pervasive value?
- 4) Why is economic equality important and how does Gandhi propose to achieve it?
- 5) Explain Gandhi's views on racial and caste equality.

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