
UNIT 5 BREAD LABOUR

Structure

- 5.1 Introduction
 - Aims and Objectives
- 5.2 Ruskin on Work and Bread Labour
- 5.3 Impact of Leo Tolstoy
- 5.4 Manual Labour
- 5.5 Intellectual Labour
- 5.6 Motivation for Work
- 5.7 Components of Labour
- 5.8 Shadow Work and Subsistence Works
- 5.9 Value-in-Use and Value-in-Exchange
- 5.10 Summary
- 5.11 Terminal Questions
 - Suggested Readings

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Gandhi had great regard and admiration for labour, whether bodily or physical labour, mental or intellectual labour. To him, the real wealth of any nation consists in its labour. He did not accept the labour theory of value which was propounded by David Ricardo or of Marxian form; rather he advocated the moral idea of dignity of labour and believed that labour has its unique place. He was more near to Saint Paul remarks that if any person would not work, neither should he eat or Saint Augustine who regarded labour as a means for perfection of man. The following extract from “Yervada Mandir” gives us an idea as to how the concept of Bread Labour gripped his mind: “The Law, that to live man must work, first came home to me upon reading Tolstoy’s writings on Bread Labour. But even before that I had began to pay homage to it after reading Ruskin’s “Unto This Last”. The Divine Law that man must earn his bread by labouring with his own hands was first stressed by a Russian writer named T. M. Bondaref. Tolstoy advertised it and gave it wider publicity. In my view the same principle has been set forth in the Third Chapter of Gita where we are told that he who eats without offering sacrifice eats stolen food”(Gandhi,1932, p. 21). Sacrifice here can only mean Bread Labour.

Aims and Objectives

After studying this Unit, you should be able to:

- Explain the concept of Bread Labour as developed by Gandhi.
- Discuss how Gandhi gave equal importance to manual and intellectual labour.
- How Bread Labour can solve the problem of inequality and exploitation in society.

5.2 RUSKIN ON WORK AND BREAD LABOUR

John Ruskin, a British Writer and Thinker believed in sincere, honest and happy work, a work by the hand. The significance of manual work and necessity of bread labour was noted by him in 'The Seven Lamps of Architecture', where he is very much concerned with happiness of the carver when he is doing his work. "For we are not sent into this world to do any thing into which we cannot put our hearts. We have certain work to do for bread, and that is to be done strenuously, other work to do our delight, and that is to be done heartily: neither is to be done by halves and shifts, but with a will; and what is not worth this effort is not to be done at all" (Ruskin, 1925, p.318). He also said that hand-work elevated and machine work degraded the soul. In his famous essay on 'The Nature of Gothic', he expresses his concern for happiness and the delight that a worker should take in his work: "It is not that men are ill fed, but that they have no pleasure in the work by which they make their bread and therefore look to wealth as the only means of pleasure" (Ruskin, 1924, p.194). Work with a will and with all delight is the first requisite of honest and simple life. Life can be made pleasant only on the sound principle of 'joyful human labour', as presented by Ruskin in 'Unto This Last': "Smooth in field; fair in garden; full of orchard; trim, sweet, and frequent in homestead ringing with voices of vivid existence" (Ruskin, 1934, p.10). Happy work in the field, in the garden and at home will bring peace and prosperity to the individual and will create conditions conducive to national health and wealth. In the same book, he noted that what was needed in England at that time was 'to show the quantity of pleasure that may be obtained by a consistent, well administered competence, modest, confessed and labourious.' In *The Political Economy of Art*, Ruskin wrote that all youths of whatever rank, ought to learn some manual trade thoroughly; "for it is quite wonderful how much a man's views of life are cleared by the attainment of the capacity of doing any one thing well with his hands and arms" (Ruskin, p.174). The members of Parliament should learn how to plough and how to make a horseshoe. Ruskin is all praise for the life of a labourer and deems him in no way inferior to the soldier and the author. The labourer serves his country with spade, as a man in the middle ranks of life, serves it with his sword or pen: so he deserves honourable rewards also.

Mahatma Gandhi admitted in his autobiography that he derived three principles from *Unto This Last*. (1) That the good of the individual is contained in the good of all (2) That a lawyer's work has the same value as the barber's in as much as all have the same right of earning their livelihood from their work, and (3) That a life of labour, i.e. the life of the tiller of the soil and the handicraftsman is the life worth living. He further acknowledged: The first of these I knew, second I had dimly realised. The third had never occurred to me. *Unto This Last* made it clear as day light for me that the second and third were contained in the first. I arose with the dawn ready to reduce these principles to practice (Gandhi, 1927, p.275).

5.3 IMPACT OF LEO TOLSTOY

Gandhi was also deeply influenced by the thoughts of Tolstoy, who warned the humanity of the impending peril if it neglected the value of bread labour. Referring to the Russian writer Bondaref, Tolstoy observes that his discovery of the vital importance of Bread Labour is one of the most remarkable discoveries of modern times. The idea is that every healthy individual must labour enough for his food and his intellectual faculties must be exercised not in order to obtain a living or amass a favourite but only in the service of mankind. If this principle is observed everywhere, all men would be equal, none would starve and the world would be saved from many a sin. It is possible that this globe rule will never be observed by the whole world. Millions observe it in spite of themselves without understanding it. But their mind is

working in a contrary direction, so an incentive to those who understand and seek to practice the rule. By rendering a willing obedience to it they enjoy good health as well as perfect peace and develop their capacity for service (Gandhi, *Ashram Observances*, 1955 edn, pp.60-61).

To avert the moral degradation and cultural decadence, we have to order our life and vocation in such a manner as to exert our hands and legs. Brain work alone is not enough, because man has not only head. He has also the faculty or other limbs, which also needs attention and proper exertion.

Tolstoy discusses the system of division of labour and said that a section of society is in poverty, while another enjoys the fruits of others in the name of science and art. He said, 'Science and art are beautiful things, but just because they are beautiful they should not be spoiled by joining depravity to them, that is freeing oneself from a man's obligation to support his own and other people's lives by labour'.

5.4 MANUAL LABOUR

Gandhi practised the ideal of Bread Labour in Phoenix Settlement and Tolstoy Farm in South Africa. Body labour was essential for certain hours of a day in the ashrams. There were various activities carried on such as agriculture, dairying, weaving, carpentry, tanning etc. which were must for every member of the ashram. After returning to India, he included these items in his Ashram vows. He imparted special dignity and position by making it the pivot of all activities whether political, social, economic and educational activities. The real purpose of work is to develop man's higher faculties, just as food builds and sustains the physical body.

Gandhi was of the firm opinion that the adoption of bread labour by one and all as a necessary value of life would surely pave the way for the establishment of classless and casteless society. A millionaire cannot carry on his luxurious way of life for long and soon will get tired of this lifestyle of rolling in his bed all day long and being helped to his food. He has to induce hunger by exercise. Gandhi said, 'If everyone, whether rich or poor has thus to take exercise in some shape or form, why should it not assume the form of productive i.e. Bread labour? No one asks the cultivator to take breathing exercise or to work his muscles (Gandhi, 1932, pp.36-37). He was sure that the distinctions of rank would be abolished when everyone without exception acknowledged the obligation of bread labour.

According to Gandhi, everyone must be his own scavenger. Evacuation is as necessary as eating; and the best thing would be for everyone to dispose of his own waste. "If this is impossible, each family should see to its own scavenging. I have felt for years that there must be something radically wrong where scavenging has been made the concern of a separate class in society. We have no historical record of the man who first assigned the lowest status to this essential sanitary service. Whoever he was, he by no means did us a good" (Ibid.). We should realise that everyone of us is a scavenger and commence bread labour as a scavenger. By prescribing the adoption of bread labour by all the Varnas and by making the scavenging the concern of all, Gandhi attempted to rectify the social structure which was highly stratified into different castes with the attendant high low, caste outcaste syndrome.

In his own words, "Brahma created his people, with the duty of sacrifice laid upon them, and said: 'By this do you flourish, let it be the fulfiller of all your desires.'" He who eats without performing this sacrifice, eats stolen bread," this says the Gita, "Even thy bread by the sweat of thy brow," says the Bible, Sacrifices may be of many kinds. One of them may well be bread labour. If all laboured for their bread and no more, then there would be enough food and leisure for all. There would be no cry of overpopulation, no disease and no such misery as

we see around. Such labour will be the highest form of sacrifice (Harijan, 29.06.1935, p.156). By this our wants would be minimised, our food will be simple. We should then eat to live, not live to eat. Let anyone who doubts the accuracy of this proposition try to sweat for his bread, he will derive the greatest relish from the production of his labour, improve his health and discover that many things he took, were superfluities'. Men will no doubt do many other things, either through their bodies or through their minds, but all this will be labour of love, for the common good. There will then be no rich and no poor, none high and none low, no touchable and no untouchable.

He further elaborated, 'Everyone should deem it a dishonour to eat a single meal without honest labour. If we could shed the aversion to labour and adapt ourselves to unexpected changes of fortune, we would go a long way towards the acquisition of fearlessness and thus towards an upliftment of our national character'. He further clarified, let me not to be misunderstood. I do not discount the value of intellectual labour, but no amount of it is any compensation for bodily labour which every one of us is born to give for the common good of all. It may be, often is, infinitely superior to bodily labour, but it never is or can be a substitute for it, even as intellectual food, though far superior to the grains we eat, never can be substitute for them. Indeed, without the products of the earth, those of the intellect would be impossibility' (Young India, 15.10.1925, pp.355-356).

5.5 INTELLECTUAL LABOUR

Gandhi remarked that intellectual labour is for the soul and is its own satisfaction. He said, 'In the ideal state doctors, lawyers and the like will work solely for the benefit of society, not for self. Obedience to the law of bread labour will bring about a silent revolution in the structure of society. Man's triumph will consist in substituting the struggle for existence by the struggle for mutual service. The law of brute will be replaced by the law of man. Intellectual work, however superior, cannot compensate for bodily labour, even as intellectual food though far superior to the grains we eat, never can be a substitute for them. Gandhi said, 'Intellectual work is important and has an undoubted place in the scheme of life. But what I insist on is the necessity of physical labour. No man, I claim, ought to be free from that obligation. It will serve to improve even the quality of his intellectual output'. When the rich take to some useful physical labour, they will come to know the problems and difficulties of millions of labourers.

Gandhi wanted to stop the mad craze for white collar jobs and check the feeling of hatred towards physical labour. He said, 'Under my system it is labour which is the current coin, not metal'. Therefore he wanted that everyone must do some productive physical labour. Physical labour done out of ignorance or compulsion can also not be termed as Bread Labour. Compulsory obedience to the law of Bread labour breeds poverty, disease and discontent. It is a state of slavery. Willing obedience to it must bring contentment and health'.

Man cannot develop his mind by simply writing and reading or making speeches. Gandhi believes in eight hours' day of honest and clean labour. He would not approve of free meals because, he thinks, it has degraded the nation and has encouraged laziness, idleness, hypocrisy and even crime. He calls it a misplaced charity which adds nothing to the wealth of the country, whether material or spiritual, and gives a false sense of meritoriousness to the donor. He strongly recommends organising institution where honest work has to be done before meals are served. He wanted to give effect to a cultural revolution by asking even poets, doctors, lawyers, etc., to practise bread labour and to use their special talents for the service of humanity. There would be no diseases in the society because the physical labour will keep men healthy.

Gandhi felt that the conflict between labour and capital can be eliminated only when everyone voluntarily takes to some useful physical labour. He felt that agriculture, spinning, weaving, carpentry, etc. which are connected with some primary needs will flourish if all take to physical labour of the productive nature. The love for Bread labour will not only provide work to the unemployed manual labourers but will also solve the problem of educated unemployed. When everyone will be engaged in useful physical labour not only the wants will be reduced but also the production will increase. These two things will reduce scarcity and solve the problem of overpopulation, disease and misery.

Gandhi noted that in India, villagers lived a life worse than animals. They were so debased that they could not work and live naturally. If the people of India had realised the dignity of labour, they would have never debased and exploited their brethren. Gandhi emphasised that everyone had the capacity to work and earn more than his daily bread. No labour is too mean for an honest penny. The only thing is that man should be ready to use his hands and feet for his bread.

There was a great disparity between the rich and the poor and a great conflict between labour and capital. This disparity and conflict could be easily removed if everyone put in labour enough to win his bread. If all worked for their bread, distinctions of rank would be obliterated, said Gandhi. In India it was particularly required as caste distinctions had become severe and the number of the poor and the unemployed was increasing.

Bread labour, further, was essential for those who followed a life of non-violence and truth, as these principles preclude every possibility of exploitation, idleness and the possession of property for private profit. Gandhi wants every man to work according to his capacity – and that too useful or serviceable work – that will be a sure remedy against the economic ills of the country.

5.6 MOTIVATION FOR WORK

One of the major sources of motivation for work lies in the ethical, moral and spiritual values. Gandhi formulated it in the form of bread labour. The concept of bread labour involves a union of two basic principles: (i) the expenditure of energy through body work and (ii) the moral and ethical values enjoined to such energy use. A person expresses oneself through work. Such work has both subjective and objective dimensions. The objective dimension is the production of values. The subjective part involves the process of raising the spiritual level of the person. In other words work is necessary for spiritual growth. It is this spirituality that provides the most important motivation for work. However, this work has to be searched so that it can promote spiritual growth. It cannot be ‘stranger defined work’. It has to be ‘friend or self-defined work.’”

Gandhi’s idea about bread labour provides an alternative motivation and source for work and production. In the work emanating from bread labour, the motivating force is caring, love, and service. The person who performs bread labour questions both the nature of work and production; both ends and means are equally important. One does not justify the other. The production of values generated through bread labour must satisfy the criteria of service, caring, and love. Similarly the work that is done through bread labour must also be motivated by caring, love, and service.

5.7 COMPONENTS OF LABOUR

J. D. Sethi distinguishes four components of labour, namely (i) minimum physical necessary labour, (ii) instrument for self-actualisation, (iii) method for service, and (iv) means to earn a living. The concept of bread labour fully incorporates all the first three components. As regards component four, the concept of bread labour accepts a part of this component with the clear proviso that the labour involved in earning a living does not involve the giving up of the principle of morality and service.

This contrasts, fundamentally, with the nature of production in our “modern” production system of today. In this “modern” system the person who works has no say about the end of this work production. Many a time they do not even know what they are producing; as, for example, workers in chemical plants have no idea what sort of chemicals they are producing. It is not that the workers in our society do not care about what they produce and would like to produce. But they just do not have the opportunity to effectively express their preferences. They feel alienated both from the nature of their work and from the resulting production. The alienation of this work follows from its being devoid of moral and service criteria perhaps because of its injury to the spirit.

In spite of the alienation and “joyless economy”, the conventional wisdom of today is that the existing production system is the best, that is, it ensures the production of all the values desired. What is produced is justified by the existence theorem, namely that if it exists it must be desired and be desirable. Behind this, no doubt, there is a whole ethical and moral superstructure. In view of the existence of production, any alternative is immediately suspect particularly the one based on bread labour. It is dubbed as utopian, idealistic, impractical, and all that. Such characterisation, criticism and doubts imply a number of questions. Is production at all possible under an alternative system where the major motive for work is caring, love, and service? What type of values would such an alternative produce? Is such an alternative consistent with the existing nature of production? These questions deal with the feasibility, nature, and comparison of production under the principle of bread labour.

5.8 SHADOW WORK AND SUBSISTENCE WORKS

It should be quite obvious that certain values will certainly be produced by bread labour. It follows from the principle that human beings do like to work. Bread labour involves that people gain satisfaction, utilities, and enjoyment from work. The work is, in this case, its own reward. Such work will, thus, be done simply to raise the spirit of the persons working. In all societies from past to present, such work has been performed. In our own society a lot of work is done by people voluntarily. However, voluntary or unpaid work needs to be distinguished between shadow work and subsistence work. The real difference between the two kinds of unpaid activity- shadow work which complements wage labour, and subsistence work which competes with and opposes both is consistently missed. Subsistence work is nothing else but bread labour. The important point here is that the society/person has to bring in the elements of a different value system, that of caring, loving, and service.

A contrary view of work prevails when a community chooses a subsistence oriented way of life. There, the inversion of development, the replacement of consumer goods by personal action, of industrial tools by convivial tools is the goal. There, both wage labour and shadow work will decline since their product, goods and service is valued primarily as a means for ever increasing activity rather than as an end, that is, dutiful consumption. There, the guitar is

valued over the record, the library over the schoolroom, the background garden over the supermarket selection. There, the personal control of each worker over his means of production determines the small horizon of each enterprise, a horizon which is a necessary condition for social production and the unfolding of each worker's individuality. This mode of production also exists in slavery, serfdom and other forms of dependence. But it flourishes, releases its energy, and acquires its adequate and classical forms only where the worker is the free owner of his tools and resources; only then can the artisan perform like a virtuoso. This mode of production can be maintained only within the limits that nature dictates to both production and society.

5.9 VALUE-IN-USE AND VALUE-IN-EXCHANGE

Regarding the nature of production, virtually all things that satisfy basic needs will be produced. In addition, things and activities that bring joy to people and uplift them will be produced and performed. These are the values that have been classified as "values in-use". Even in the "modern" production system a very large part of "values in use" are produced by the voluntary and unpaid work process; e.g., the kitchen gardens, the caring for children, old and sick people, the comradeship, the production of arts and crafts, etc. Even in a "modern" society, where the emphasis of production is on "values-in-exchange" and "values in threat", the contribution of bread labour type work is considerable.

If the society promotes opportunities for and principles of bread labour, the share of "values in use" in total production will increase and the share of bread labour that produces these values will also go up. It is quite feasible for the "values in use" to be a preponderant part of production and all these "values in use" being produced by bread labour.

A question is generally raised: is bread labour consistent with technology? One has to be clear about technology. Obviously, any technology that dehumanises people is not consistent with bread labour. On the other hand, there are technologies more specifically tools that are complementary with bread labour. In a society where bread labour is performed, there will be a good amount of far more modern technology albeit of a different kind.

For purposes of comparison, it needs to be pointed out that production under the principle of bread labour may not produce "values in threat" and very little of "values in exchange". The reasons are not far to seek. The ethical dimensions of caring, love and service ensure that "values in threat" will not be produced since these manipulate, degrade and hurt people the very antithesis of caring and love. Theodore Roszak states the idea forcefully: "Work that produces unnecessary consumer junk or weapons is wrong and wasteful. Work that deceives or manipulates, that exploits and degrades is wrong and wasteful. Work that wounds the environment or makes the world ugly is wrong and wasteful".

The societies that produce "values in exchange" are generally export oriented. Successful export orientation involves a work force that feels equally committed to the goals of the society and willing to maintain the high quality of its product. Japan is, perhaps, the most visible example of such modes of production. The organisations in Japan are structured to make the workers identify with the organisations. Japan has been very successful in this effort. West Germany has also been successful in this regard.

The bread labour and "values in use" determine the quality of life in a society. In the current literature there is a growing discussion about the divergence between "standard of living" and "quality of life". With the growth in GNP, "standard of living" has been going up. However,

increasingly it is being found that the “quality of life” in these societies has been declining. Part of the explanation lies in the reduction in the use of bread labour and the production of “values in use”. As a result, growth has involved an extension of “values in exchange” and “values in threat”. Such growth has resulted in greater inequality in the society.

5.10 SUMMARY

Gandhi had great regard and admiration for labour, be it bodily or physical labour, mental or intellectual labour. He noted that the real wealth of any nation consists in its labour. He did not accept the labour theory of value which was propounded by David Ricardo or of Marxian interpretation. He firmly believed in the moral idea of dignity of labour and believed that labour has its unique place. He was highly influenced by the works of Ruskin and Tolstoy in his views on bread labour. He also believed with great conviction that the adoption of bread labour by one and all is a necessary value of life that would surely pave the way for the establishment of classless and casteless society. Above all, Bread labour was essential for those who followed a life of non-violence and truth, as these principles preclude every possibility of exploitation, idleness and the possession of property for private profit. Gandhi wants every man to work according to his capacity – and that too useful or serviceable work – that will be a sure remedy against the economic ills of the country.

5.11 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. Analyse the doctrine of Bread Labour. How does it solve the problems of inequality and exploitation in the society?
2. Critically examine the concept of Bread Labour as developed by Gandhi.
3. Write short notes on the following:
 - a) Shadow work and subsistence works
 - b) Value-in-use and value-in-exchange
 - c) Ruskin and Tolstoy on Bread Labour

SUGGESTED READINGS

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