UNIT 9 GANDHI'S VIEWS ON COLONIALISM AND IMPERIALISM

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9.1 INTRODUCTION

Colonialism and imperialism have been important influences in the shaping and articulation of political thinking of most, if not all, of the modern Indian political thinkers, including Gandhi. The exceptionally long years of colonial rule in India had been able to mould the thinking process of Indian leaders in both positive and negative ways. As a result, while they were able to get newer insights and perspectives in conceptualising and evaluating the values and systems of life, it also showed them the ugly face of the immoral, debasing and illegitimate character of colonialism and imperialism that presumably led to moral and material decline in the historically glorious traditions and life-styles of the people. Positively, for instance, British colonialism in India afforded the Indian leaders an opportunity to travel and reside in Britain that exposed them to the liberal traditions of democratic governance in that country with a fairly large amount of freedom and independence enjoyed by the citizens of that country within a framework of rule of law. Furthermore, the deep influences of English language, literature, culture and ways of life convinced the Indians of certain plausible aspects of modernisation and westernisation that catapulted Britain in the category of most progressive and prosperous countries in the world. The legal training of many of Indians in the English system of rule of law led them to appreciate and clamour for the enjoyment of loftier ideals of a civilised life such as liberty, equality, fraternity, democracy, tolerance, peaceful methods of resolving conflicts in society, appreciation for merit, respect for human dignity and individuality of an individual, constitutional limits of the functioning of a government in the Indian scheme of things as well. But negatively, the march of colonialism and imperialism in India also revealed to the Indians the inherent fallacies of the liberal traditions when it comes to offer the same kind of concessions and privileges to the other people, naked exploitation of the economic resources of the colonies, driving social and political frictions in a society for the longevity of colonial rule, use of excessive violence to unnerve the people asking for their due from the government and lack of a moral and legitimate authority of the colonial rulers to rule over any part of the country. In a nutshell, the colonial experiences in India provided the Indians an opportunity to explore the inherent fallacies of the notion of colonialism and nationalism so that they are able to offer an insightful critique of a theory that was able to subjugate a large part of the world for many

more years. The views of Mahatma Gandhi, in this context, appear most authentic and empirically tested given his leadership of the Indian National Movement on the one hand, and his brush with the colonial mindset in his early days in South Africa, on the other. The unit, therefore, seeks to explore Gandhi's views on colonialism and imperialism as they were conceptualised and practised in the form of the British colonialism in India.

Aims and Objectives

This Unit will enable you to understand

- The impact of colonialism and imperialism on state and citizens
- Its impact on socio-economic life and
- Gandhi's non-violent struggle against colonialism

9.2 IMPACT OF COLONIALISM AND IMPERIALISM ON STATE AND CITIZENS

Gandhi viewed colonialism and imperialism as the predating tendencies in the morally corrupt and economically insatiated countries of the world that seek to fulfill such desires of theirs through the mechanism of colonialism and imperialism. Hence, in the course of the industrial revolution, when the availability of raw materials and the provision of fairly large market to consume the surplus production in the factories became a teasing problem, they found a golden opportunity in the ideology of imperialism and started colonising various parts of the world. What furthered their pursuits of colonialism in a more vigorous and speedy manner was lack of moral and humanist considerations in their scheme of thought which would have restrained them from infringing into the rights and domains of other people. Gradually, a feeling developed in the colonising countries to take their control over the colonies, not just an ephemeral issue. Rather, they thought of devising ways and means that could have provided sustenance to their forcible rule in the alien territories a longer duration. Therefore, from their erstwhile economic enterprise of sourcing raw materials from these countries and flooding their markets with the finished products produced in their factories, the colonial powers sought to irretrievably alter the value systems of the colonies. As a result, almost all the aspects of life of people in the colonies-social, economic, political, cultural, language, literature, educational and even assessment of their own values and ideals- were subjected to a well-designed sinister plan of alteration in such a way that they increasingly get alienated with whatever they claim to be their native feature of life and replace it with the given ones drawn on the colonial calculations. Colonialism and imperialism, thus, seek to cut the native people from their roots and mould their ways in the typical colonial value system so that they start emulating the colonial ways of life. This would gradually rob them of their indigenous and respectful ideals and values of life and convert them into just a blind follower of the artificially planted habits, institutions, values and ideals of the colonial country. Hence, to Gandhi, colonialism happens to be an ideology that not only dispossesses the native people of their material possessions but also their moral and spiritual self.

The modus operandi of the colonialism in altering and replacing the value systems of the native people with that of the colonial ones was arguably novel. In the course of their interactions with the native people, they clandestinely sought to undermine the vitality and significance of the beliefs, values, habits and practices of the people by not only pointing

out their leaner sides but also making a selective comparison of such things with the things prevalent in the colonial country. Such a hostile and motivated comparison was sought to be done on the basis of taking as rational and scientific what existed in the colonial country. For instance, while comparing the food habits of two distinct sets of people, they would take the criterion of the habits as existing in the colonial country and brand that most scientific and rational. As the major portion of Indian population happened to be vegetarian in their food habits, the British would take their food habits of non-vegetarian food as scientific and rational and would seek to convince the Indians of the futility and limits of their food habits. Already a submissive and subjugated lot, the native people very quickly tended to accept the value systems of the colonial powers as the ideal one to be followed. In this format, most of the aberrations in the Indian social, economic, political, familial, cultural and daily life styles were introduced by the British to make Indians the 'desi' Englishmen. Gandhi opposed such tendencies on the part of the colonial rulers not because it brought about mechanical change in the value systems and lifestyles of the people but because this would render the people morally unsustainable and spiritually dislocated given their loss of faith in their personality and the sinister designs of the colonisers not give them an identity under their value system and lifestyle. Gandhi charged colonialism with the moral corruption and spiritual degeneration of the native people and societies with a view to further the sinful interests of the colonialism and imperialism. He also, at the same time, pointed out that the goal of any national movement, therefore, should not have been confined to waging a relentless negative battle of driving the colonial forces out of the country. Rather, it should go to the extent of bringing about a positive reorientation in the outlook of the people by undertaking constructive programmes and moral and spiritual regeneration of the masses and societies.

Gandhi was fiercely critical of the British colonialism for supplanting the native systems of government in India with the abstract and legalistic notions of modern government rooted in narrowly rationalist conception of Indian society. Traditionally, in the Indian system of government, society was always accorded a prior position in comparison to the state structures as reflected in the apparatus of the king. But in the course of the colonial rule in the country, the British sought to replace the society and people-centred system of government with an autonomous and abstract state standing over and beyond the purview of society. Such a structure of government was marked by two distinct features that distinguished it from the native Indian system of government. One, it reversed the order of society-state relations in such a way that instead of society having precedence over the lives of the people as in the previous times, it now gave precedence to the state in conducting and regulating the affairs of the lives of people. The root cause behind such a reordering of society-state relations was the desire of the colonial rulers to fundamentally alter the values and ideals of the life of people. But as in the existing system that was the domain of society and they could not control the societal forces, hence, they devised an alternative course of action. Given their control over the state and governmental apparatus, they needed the state to be the custodian of social life of the people as a result of which in due course of time, they would alter the societal conventions and norms in regulating the collective behaviour of the people. Two, even in the reordered scheme of things, state's interactions with the society was limited to bare minimum and, even that too, in a very formal manner. The reasons for this mechanism might be located in the apprehension of the British that greater interactions between the state and society would lessen the fear of the state power in the minds and psyche of the societal forces that may produce problems in controlling the societal passions at later stage. Moreover, by introducing the element of formal contacts between the state and society, the colonial masters sought to ingrain the

legalistic orientation in the mutual interactions of various components of community life in the colonies. Gandhi was quite distressed at finding a sinister long term plan of the colonialism in altering the basic norms of social and communal interactions amongst various peoples and organisations in the society.

9.3 IMPACT ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC LIFE

The colonial agenda of fragmenting and distorting the fundamental institutions of government and social interactions did not stop at just seeking to replace native ones with the imported ones from the colonial country. To Gandhi, indeed, the colonisers would have found it difficult to rule over the vast tract of land with a massive population unless they were aware of the underlying customs, traditions, values, numbers of people, their rituals, habits, social structures, geography and modes of social interactions. Therefore, in their scheme of things, the next item appeared to gather adequate information and clues regarding their socio-economic, political and cultural life so that they could have been suitably modified in order to gain the colonial upper hand in the management of the people. A mammoth exercise was, therefore, started to collect, classify, organise, codify and interpret the massive amount of data and information on the various people of the country. However, such an exercise was conducted by the British with two remarkable characteristics. One, in collecting, classifying, organising, codifying, analysing and interpreting data and information, the colonial officials took into account only those principles and categories that made sense to them. In other words, those customs, traditions, values and norms of social interactions could not find place in the British scheme of things that did not appear comprehensible to them. The vast diversity of people and cultural mass of the country was oversimplified and categorised into just a few broader categories. In this process, they rejected a number of variables informing the socio-cultural and economic life of the people if they did not conform to their notions of justice and rationality. Two, and more significantly, the availability of sufficient data with the colonial officers motivated them to devise certain schemes and policies that would prove very harmful to the interests of the native people but would serve the interest of the colonial powers both in the long as well as short run. For instance, the policy of divide and rule was introduced by the British in India only when they came to know the dynamics of Muslim population and their socio-economic and politico-cultural life. Similarly, the flaring up of the caste issues in the Indian socio-political discourses began with its political uses and misuses at the hands of the colonial government in the course of pitting one set of people against the others. Such tactics of the colonialism were seriously castigated by Gandhi.

9.4 MODERN CIVILISATION

Gandhi attributed the rise of European imperialism as a natural expression of the inherent impulse of aggressiveness and exploitation underlying the heart of modern civilisation. To Gandhi, the very structure of modern civilisation revolved round the idea of exploitation of one's fellow human beings by others. The dynamics of market economy had been so that in commercial transactions no moral or ethical considerations should have been allowed to have crept in as such considerations would compromise with the commercial viability of an enterprise and would ultimately result in the closure of the activity. Moreover, under the schemes of the modern civilisation, all economic activities must be conducted in a highly rational manner in which emotions, sentiments, passions, human values and non-commercial considerations should be kept aside. Only then, an economic venture would turn out to be a viable activity. However, what was found objectionable in such a conceptualisation of

economic activity was the loss of human values and considerations in conducting the enterprise. Hence, in such a scenario, exploitation of one person by another was considered perfectly all right. More and more jobs were being done by people even at the subsistence wages. Attempts were made to minimise the earnings of the labourers by cutting back their pay and other packages. Even beyond factories, the behaviour of the consumers were also sought to be manipulated in making them desire for things that they really might not need and the production of such things that they might need was either curtailed or hoarded and black-marketed in order to jack the prices to ensure exorbitant profits for the producers and the traders. The only basis of social recognition and political weight of an individual in society was considered to be his economic worth. As a result, the poor and the dispossessed felt alienated with the socio-economic and political activities of the life. Taking advantage of such precarious situations, the nexus of politicians-industrialists and bureaucracy were able to monopolise the power structure of the society. Such a configuration of power structure ultimately became the norm of the social conduct in modern civilisation in which the poor, deprived, marginalised and other peripheral sections of society found themselves totally out of reckoning for the decision-making processes of the government. Thus, it turned out to be a system of moral bankruptcy and spiritual demise of the individuals.

Colonialism was also subjected to severe indictment by Gandhi on the basis of his notion of indivisible humanity. The basic underlying idea behind his notion of indivisible humanity was that humanity could not be viewed in atomistic and compartmentalised perspective wherein one person remained aloof and unattached with the situations of other persons. In other words, Gandhi suggested that the entire mass of humanity was so intertwined with each other that one individual stood in relative position with another in which the attitudes, behaviour, perspective and convictions of one impact on the life and thought of another. Gandhi used this analogy to evolve an argument criticising all the systems of oppression and exploitation prevalent in various parts of the world in different incarnations. For instance, talking of the white treatment with the blacks in South Africa, he noted that by such immoral and unethical treatment with the blacks, even the white people also damage their own capacity for critical self-reflection and impartial self-assessment, and falling victim to moral conceits, morbid fears and irrational obsessions. Applying the same argument in the case of colonialism, he underlined that Colonial rulers met the same fate. They could not dismiss their subjects as effeminate and childlike without thinking of themselves as hyper-masculine and unemotional adults, a self-image to which they could not conform without distorting and impoverishing their potential. In misrepresenting their subjects, they misrepresented themselves as well and fell into their own traps. They also took home the attitudes, habits, and styles of government acquired abroad, and corrupted their own society. Colonialism did promote their material interests, but only at the expense of their larger and infinitely more important moral and spiritual interests. Since human well being was indivisible, a system of oppression had no winners, only losers, and it was in the interest of all involved to end it (Parekh, 1997, p.53). Gandhi, thus, noted that the baggage of colonialism would not only distort the vision and behaviour of the subject masses but also spill over to the supposedly immune colonial masters and their families and societies. He, therefore, argued that it would be in the fitness of things for all concerned to end the system and processes of exploitation and moral debasement of the people even in the colonies as its by-products would not leave anybody involved in the activity untouched from sharing the gains and losses of the acts of suppression.

9.5 GANDHI'S NON-VIOLENT STRUGGLE AGAINST COLONIALISM

The theoretical perspective of Gandhi on colonialism and imperialism got its reflection in his practical taking on the mighty British colonial administration as part of his leadership of the Indian National Movement. However, Gandhi was convinced from the very beginning that morally belittling strategies and tactics of the colonial rulers would not be able to sustain themselves in the face of moral courage of conviction shown by the Indian masses. Hence, in order to match the brute force of the British colonialism, Gandhi did not suggest the strategy of taking up arms to his fellow countrymen. Rather, he entered in to detailed and heated arguments with some of his compatriots who believed in the strategy of armed struggle in order to liberate the country from the yoke of British imperialism. Though Gandhi was appreciative of the courage and objectives with which the revolutionary sections of the Indian society was thinking of taking up cudgels against the British rule, he was doubly sure of the futility of such a move given the far superior preparedness of the British forces in taking on any violent protest to the British rule in India. Even Gandhi was apprehensive that such a strategy of armed struggle against the British rule would have been liked by the colonial rulers as they could have justified their excessive use of force and violence in meeting the challenge of the revolutionaries in the name of defending themselves from the onslaught of the armed band of revolutionaries. However, such mechanism of the British colonialism was very well understood by Gandhi who thought of evolving an alternative strategy to beat the colonial forces in their own game of moral turpitude. Consequently, instead of falling in the trap of the British colonialism, he refined his strategy of non-violent struggle that he had already successfully tested in his sojourn to South Africa. Gandhi very well knew that the British forces in India could not suppress the unarmed masses of the country staging peaceful protest to seek the departure of British colonialism from India. However, he appeared apprehensive of the capabilities of the masses to undertake long spells of peaceful protest given their restiveness in case of non-responsiveness of the British rulers. Thus, besides mobilising the masses to undertake peaceful protest against the British rule, Gandhi was also trying to train the mass of Indians in the art of peaceful and non-violent protest so that the moral bankruptcy of the colonial authorities could have been exposed without earning their ire in terms of repression and imprisonment of the innocent people.

Gandhi's theoretical formulations on truth and non-violence were put to final test in the course of the long drawn nationalist struggle of the country. Strategically, Gandhi did not begin his forays in the nationalist movement of India by calling upon the masses to rise against the British rule in one go. He first tried to demonstrate the power and technique of his strategy of non-violent struggle by undertaking fast and peaceful protest against certain acts of the British government such as the oppression of the planters in the Champaran region of Bihar, industrial unrest in Ahmedabad, Rowlatt Act and the Jallianwala massacre of the innocent people. Though such individual acts of protest and peaceful opposition to the British rule produced a mixed bag of results in terms of partial fulfillment of demands put forward by Gandhi in these cases, they, nevertheless, convinced Gandhi and the Indian masses as well in the capabilities of each other in starting and carrying out the peaceful methods of protest against the British rule. Subsequently, the first major pan-Indian protest movement against the British rule in the mode of non-violent protest began in 1920 in the name of the Non-cooperation movement. This was the first movement in which the masses of the countryside as well as the well-educated and well-off sections of the people from

towns and cities joined hands together to launch a formidable battle against the British rule in India without taking laws in their own hands. In the early phases, the movement went on quite perfectly and as per the plan. But an unpleasant incident took place in 1922 at Chauri Chaura, in eastern Uttar Pradesh, in which a mob of non-cooperation activists set on fire a police post in which about two dozens of policemen were charred to death. This incident shook the psyche of the Mahatma who immediately called off the movement on the plea that it had distracted from the defined course of action and by killing the policemen the people had violated the pledge to be non-violent and peaceful in the course of the movement. However, more than the compromise with the philosophy of non-violence, what appeared to have played a critical role in persuading Gandhi to call off the movement in such a quick manner was the fear of ensuing British repression on the innocent masses in various parts of the country. Thus, the first experiment of Gandhi in mass mobilisation on the basis of the doctrine of non-violence met with a sudden withdrawal as he found the people still unprepared to embark upon a long and sustained struggle in the format of non-violence based on the moral force of the satyagrahis.

In the subsequent years, the march of national movement in India, under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, turned out to be a war of nerves between the moral force and soul-force driven non-violent methods of taking on the British rule on the one hand, and the naked display of brute force on the part of the British colonial administration, on the other. For instance, in the times of the civil disobedience movement, the participants in the national movement were instructed to evolve a strategy of harming the interests of the British government without taking recourse to violent methods of venting their ire against the government. Hence, salt emerged as the central figure of the protest movement as it was considered to harm the commercial interest of the British government without coming into conflict with it. The long drawn movement almost exhausted the people without any silver lining visible in the Indian firmament. So, Gandhi had to console his fellow participants in the national movement that in order to defeat the designs of a colonial power, they needed to be patient and prepared for a long drawn battle. He was sure that the British government could not hold on for longer durations in the face of the strident national movement for independence going on in the country. But it would not come so soon as well. Hence, in order to sustain the zeal of the national volunteers, Gandhi suggested the idea of constructive programmes to keep them engaged with some activity on the one hand, and remind the British government that certain aspects like education etc. would now be taken into the hands of the common people themselves. Afterwards, the final act of national movement, under the Gandhian leadership, came in 1942 in the form of the Quit India movement, in which the exasperation of Gandhi as well as the common freedom fighter in the country with reticence of the British government was quite obvious. Therefore, while Gandhi gave the call for do or die for the common freedom fighters, the immediate arrest of the senior leaders of the national movement by the British government, gave the people ample opportunity to take the law into their own hands. But Gandhi's conviction with the virtues of Satyagraha and non-violence remained steadfast and the activities during the Indian National Movement could not be construed as any dilution of Gandhi's faith in the veracity of Satyagraha and non-violence as viable strategies to win independence for the country.

9.6 SUMMARY

An analysis of Gandhi's views on colonialism and imperialism reveals two interrelated aspects of his critique for the same. First, Gandhi conceptualised the ideology of colonialism

and imperialism as off shoots of the modern western civilisation that itself could not withstand the critical scrutiny of Gandhi. Gandhi was quite convinced that the material basis of the modern western civilisation would never yield space to a moralist and ethical philosophy of life that would have deterred the western countries from embarking on the path of colonialism and imperialism. Moreover, he noted that unbridled quest for money and other material possessions of these countries motivate them to forego all norms of civilised and humanist conduct so much so that they did not feel hesitant in subjecting their own people to the same kind of conduct as they would have done the colonial subjects in terms of economic activities and charging a price for everything done to them. Gandhi was not surprised when the colonial masters were willing to let loose a reign of terror on the hapless masses of the colonies even if they raised even the slightest of murmur against the British rule in India. Second, in Gandhi's perspective of life, moral and ethical considerations carried much weight in comparison to the material and physical considerations that acted as the basic motivating factor in ideologies such as colonialism and imperialism. What pained Gandhi more was the unavoidable impact that colonialism and imperialism had on the moral and ethical standing of the people in society. To Gandhi, long years of colonial rule in a country would have led to moral and spiritual decadence in the society whose regeneration would have been a difficult task in hand for the leaders of the colony in the post-independence times. Thus, to Gandhi, colonialism and imperialism were the bane of humanity, not just the people of the colonies only.

9.7 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. What do you understand by colonialism and imperialism? Elaborate its impact on the socio-economic life.
2. What impact does colonialism and imperialism have on the state and its citizens?
3. Discuss at length Gandhi's non-violent struggle against colonialism.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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