
UNIT 7 TRUSTEESHIP

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7.1 INTRODUCTION

For Gandhi political freedom from the British rule was not the only important issue for India in the early 20th century. His travels throughout the country ad exposed him to the poverty and misery of the downtrodden masses. Economic development for India was of vital importance to him. The inequalities present in the Indian society did not escape Gandhi's notice. He believed that unless the landowners, the rich did not take into account the ferment brewing in the peasant and labour class, there would be an entire overthrow of the politico-economic system. The ownership of property and resources has always been a thorny issue between those who favoured capitalism and the communist economists. The former believes that right to property is absolute and needs no intervention by the state. They believe that each man is the best judge of his own interest and would make efforts to better his own lot and also promote general good. The Communists rejected the Capitalist model on the ground that it inevitably led to the growth of monopolies and imperialism on one hand, and the constant exploitation of the working class on the other.

Gandhi rejected both these solutions. He believed them to be based on violence, exploitation and tyranny. He firmly believed that instead of changing the property relations, if the uses to which property is put changes, one can have the desired results. He advocated trusteeship as a relevant choice between the existing but unacceptable system of Capitalist organization and its 'inevitable' throw by violence. He believed that as far as the present owners of wealth are concerned they have to make a choice between war and voluntarily converting themselves into the trustees of their wealth. The choice is not between the two parties, that is wealth-owners and their workers, but for the society as a whole. He seeks to harmonize the economic relations and to conciliate the ultimate values into a state of equilibrium through Trusteeship.

* Suruchi Aggarwal, H-6A Panchsheel ViharNr. D.D.A. Flats, Khirki Extn., New Delhi

Aims and Objectives

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

- Gandhi's doctrine of Trusteeship.
- Trusteeship as an ancient Indian concept.
- Kinds of property under the Trusteeship system.
- State regulated trusteeship.
- Contemporary relevance of Trusteeship.

7.2 CONCEPT OF TRUSTEESHIP

Gandhi's economic ideas were part of his general struggle against poverty, exploitation against socio-economic injustice, and deteriorating moral standards. Gandhi was an economist of the masses. His approach was rooted in human dignity. His economic philosophy is a result of a number of experiments which he conducted in the course of his life. His pragmatic approach gave a new direction to the existing socio-economic problems in the process of protecting human dignity.

According to Gandhi the landowner, rich men have to act as trustees of what they own, i.e. they have dedicated the rights to their property and material goods to the common people. In spite of their wealth they have to bring themselves down to the level of the common labour and earn their bread (livelihood) by labour (hard work). For the workers he advocated that they should act as trustees for their labour which means that they should believe that their productive efforts are for the welfare of the society.

In the present system, workers sell their labour and the rich buy it from the market. Thus the rich hardly engage themselves in any kind of physical labour, whereas the workers have to constantly engage themselves in physical labour. The ideal situation would be one in which the workers have their leisure time and the owners of the means of production also engage themselves in some kind of physical labour. Then alone the dignity of labour would be established in the society. The workers should have shares both in the process of production as well as distribution. Even some of the State laws give such rights to the workers.

7.2.1 Trusteeship formula

- i) Trusteeship provides a way of changing the present capitalist order of society into an egalitarian one. It does not give importance to capitalism, but gives the present owner class a chance to reform itself. It is based on the faith that human nature is never beyond redemption.
- ii) It does not recognise any right of private ownership of property except so far as it may be permitted by society for its own welfare.
- iii) It does not exclude legislation of the ownership and use of wealth.
- iv) Thus under state regulated trusteeship, an individual will not be free to hold or use his wealth for selfish satisfaction while disregarding the interests of the society.

- v) Just as it is proposed to give a decent minimum living wage, a limit should be fixed for the maximum income that would be allowed to any person in society. The difference between such minimum and maximum incomes should be reasonable and equitable and variable from time to time, so much so that the tenancy would be towards the obliteration of the difference.
- vi) Under Gandhi's economic order, the character of production will be determined by social necessity and not by personal greed.

7.3 TRUSTEESHIP-AN ANCIENT INDIAN CONCEPT

He based his doctrine of trusteeship on the first sloka of Isopanisad, according to which one is asked to dedicate everything to God and then use it only to the required extent. The principal condition laid down in it is that one must not covet what belongs to others. In other words, in the first instance, everything must be surrendered to God and then out of it one may use only that which is necessary for the service of God's creation, according to one's strict needs. This makes it clear beyond doubt that it is not in industrial and business sectors only that the doctrine of trusteeship is to be made applicable. The spirit of this doctrine is detachment and service. Unless these two virtues are inculcated, it is impossible to obey the command "covet not anybody's riches". Therefore Gandhi's idea of trusteeship arose from his faith in the law of non-possession. It was founded on his religious belief that everything belonged to God and was from God. Therefore the bounties of the world were for His people, as a whole, not for any particular individual. When an individual had more than his respective portion, he became a trustee of that portion for God's people. God who is all-powerful has no need to store.

Trusteeship, to Gandhi, was neither an economic expedient nor a make shift for him. It was a way of life. He said: "My theory of trusteeship is no make shift, certainly no camouflage. I am confident that it will survive all other theories. It has the sanction of philosophy and religion behind it."³⁷ The Indian philosophy, religion and morals are replete with this. The ancient Indian concept of rulers or kings was that of a real trustee. The philosophy contained in the concept of 'Ramarajya' bears testimony to the fact that under the Indian cultural heritage, the rulers wielded power not for their own sake but for the sake of their subjects. Bharat reigned over Ayodhya during Ramachandra's absence as the latter's trustee. Lord Krishna acted as the charioteer of Arjuna in the battle of Mahabharata, not with any ulterior motive or expectation of any gains from the battle. He acted as a trustee of Arjuna to give satisfaction to the latter.

In the past, the heads of Hindu joint families used to live the life of true trustees. According to K.M. Munshi, "He held the family property and was expected to manage and administer it for the welfare of the family He was expected to watch with care the advancement of its younger members belonging even to collateral branches and had to give asylum to the orphans, widows, destitutes in the family."³⁸ Writing specifically about the property, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan has pointed out, "Property according to the Hindu View, is a mandate held by its possessors for the common use and benefit of the commonwealth. The Bhagavata tells us that we have a claim only to so much as would satisfy our hunger. If anyone desires more, he is thief deserving punishment."³⁹

Thus the concept of trusteeship should be viewed in the context of the values it stood for. Though the doctrine is as old as the age, Gandhi tried to apply this philosophical teaching to the concrete realities of life for the solution of the existing economic problems. The ‘Bhagwad Gita’ had had a profound effect on Gandhi’s thinking and spiritual philosophy. According to him the principle of renunciation of property while retaining the property in the form of a trust for the common good of many was a thought applicable to the society perpetually.

7.4 KINDS OF PROPERTY

7.4.1 Gifts of Nature

Gandhi believed that everything on Earth belonged to God and was from God. According to him an individual who owns property as a legacy or due to his/her hard work and enterprise, should use the excess for the greater good of mankind. He said that everyone must realize that need and greed are two different things. Anything more than a person’s need which belonged to him/her is for the community and must be used for its welfare.

7.4.2 Product of Social Living

A person cannot accumulate wealth in a social vacuum. Suppose a person has accumulated huge wealth and established several industries, he alone cannot run or manage that. There might have been many persons who helped that person in accumulating that wealth. Gandhi emphasized that the ownership of the labourers and the peasants is something more than mere moral ownership. The rich cannot accumulate wealth without the help of the poor in the society. Since they have helped the capitalist in accumulating the wealth, they have their share in that also. Each is entitled to acquire only that much of wealth or property that is essential for his immediate need or his existence. None has a right to acquire more than what is needed to satisfy his absolute and immediate needs, particularly when millions are unable to satisfy their most basic requirements. He wrote, “You and I have no right to anything that we really have until these ... millions are clothed and fed better.”⁴⁰

He allowed the people with talent to earn more but asked them to utilize their talent for the good of the suffering people. They would have their earnings only as trustees i.e., owners in their own rights but owners in the right of those whom they have exploited. An industrious person with more than average intelligence may acquire by legitimate means, more property than idle men and men of average or below average intelligence even without resorting to violence and exploitation. He admitted, “It is my conviction that it is possible to acquire riches without consciously doing wrong. For example, I may light on a gold mine in my one acre of land.”⁴¹ This he wrote in the form of a reply to Shankar Rao Deo, who had raised an issue, whether crores can be earned by legitimate means, ‘Surely a man may conceivably make crores through strictly pure means assuming that a man may legitimately possess riches.... If I own a mining lease and I tumble upon a diamond of rare value I may suddenly find myself a millionaire without being held guilty of having used impure means.’⁴² Although such wealth may be legitimately acquired without violence and exploitation, he was not prepared to accept it as a source of one’s real happiness and his balanced growth. Rather they stood as stumbling blocks on the way of self realisation and blossoming of

an integrated personality and all-round development of the individual. Gandhi suggested cultivation of a spirit of detachment from wealth and utilizing only a portion of it for oneself that is needed for meeting one's 'legitimate needs' and 'honourable livelihood'.

He accepted trusteeship as a practical proposition which shall liberate the wealthy and the possessing class of their sin of acquisitiveness and greed and effect a change over in favour of egalitarian society. Elaborating the Upanishadic mantra 'Tena Twaktena Bhunjitha' he said, "Earn your crores by all means. But understand that your wealth is not yours, it belongs to the people. Take what you require for your legitimate needs and use the remainder for Society."⁴³

Gandhi knew that both physical and intellectual ability differs from man to man. Some are capable of working with greater vigour and energy than others and their labour sincerely performed and honestly executed, may prove more productive of material wealth than that of others, who are less energetic and enterprising. Besides, people with better intellectual ability and vigour may devise ways and means for greater material prosperity and intellectual excellence of the nation. The material prosperity and progress of the nation depend upon enthusiastic performance of such capable, energetic, enterprising and imaginative individuals and not on the half-hearted work of the idler, sickly, and the mentally deficient citizens. Gandhi preferred that such individuals with more than average, or unusual ability shall work as per their capacity but shall only get what is required for fulfilling their legitimate needs in return.

Trusteeship according to Gandhi was a noble goal to aspire for. A goal if realized by each individual would bring about a more equal and noble society. There is a finer, subtler, and a more vital chord, according to Gandhi, in every human heart, that is noble, self sacrificing and full of compassion for others. Sometimes the dust of greed, selfishness and egoism may accumulate on this chord, but properly handled, this subtle chord in the human heart shall transmit the melodious music of sacrifice, self sufferings and renunciation for the benefit of the others. "There are chords in every human heart. If we only know how to strike the right chord we bring out the music."⁴⁴ He also said, "We must appeal to the good in human-beings and expect response."⁴⁵

7.5 STATE REGULATED TRUSTEESHIP

Gandhi realized the limitations of the concept of voluntary assumption of trusteeship by the rich. He also realized the need for the adoption of the strategy of pressure that had to be exercised by the labourers. Thus, the significance of statutory measures or legislation for giving effect to his idea of trusteeship came about. But the statute that Gandhi had in his mind was not to be imposed from above by the all-pervading state that represented violence in its concentrated and organized form. It shall not be planned out and implemented by the elites of the ruling party or the bureaucracy. He wanted such statutes not to be imposed from above but should come from below. Gandhi's ideal picture of social and political organization comprehended a system of self sufficient and self governing village republics, democratically organized Gram Panchayats as the basic unit of the government formed on the basis of consent of the people. The legislation regulating the wealth of the propertied class shall therefore emanate from such Gram Panchayats after a free and full discussion and proper understanding of

the principles by people in general. He believed that when the people understand the implications of trusteeship they themselves through the Gram Panchayats introduce such statutes. Such statutes which originate from the grass-root levels are easy to follow as compared to those statutes which come from the state above.

Gandhi favoured the statutes or legislations as techniques of last resort to give effect to the idea of Trusteeship. He did not overlook the power of the technique of persuasion and conversion to aid and implement the statutory enactments effectively. He felt that persuasion and conversion should precede statutory enactments so that it will make the propertied classes mentally prepared to accept the statutory enactments intended to give effect to trusteeship system. But, the technique of conversion that he suggests is not by way of prayer and petitions, but by exhibition of potency of democratic forces or public opinion. He said, "If the owning class does not accept the trusteeship basis voluntarily its conversion must come under the pressure of public opinion."⁴⁶

Gandhi also felt that the state could be depended upon for the introduction of trusteeship. Educating the people in the principles of trusteeship to provide a basis to the statutory trusteeship system, or educating the workers and peasants to be conscious of their rights and dignity so that necessary social conditions conducive to trusteeship are created, is a time consuming process. But unless the state intervenes in time, some national assets may be spoiled by unimaginative and useless owners of that property. Although Gandhi was afraid of the power of the state and the violence perpetuated by it, for the sake of the long term interest of the nation, he was prepared to allow state intervention to force trusteeship upon the possessing and the privileged class. "I would be happy indeed if the people concerned behaved as trustees, but if they fail, I believe we shall have to deprive them of their possessions through the state."⁴⁷

When Gandhi wanted to secure the original trustees' choice subjecting it to 'legal sanction', he acted as a pragmatist who felt that the trustees, however above the average men and however, self sacrificing they themselves may be, may have some weakness for their own children. If the trustees are given unrestrained power to choose their successor they may choose their own people to succeed them as trustees. This may be particularly true in case of statutory trustees who have not voluntarily renounced their possessions or possessiveness, but have been forced to act as such under the pressure of the statute enacted either by the village Panchayat or the state. Gandhi suggested that the nomination made by the original trustees needed to be confirmed by the state.

7.6 SUMMARY

Gandhi in his concept of Trusteeship believes in the goodness of heart and humanitarian nature of other fellowmen too. His concept of Trusteeship has been thus criticized for being naïve and not propagating equality in society. Many critics and even his protégé Jawaharlal Nehru believed that the concept of Trusteeship carried forward a feudal society and promoted capitalism.

According to Professor M.L. Dantwala, "The division of the society into the property owning and the property less classes, which is the characteristic of capitalism, is sought to be retained in Gandhism also. The only difference in Gandhism is that the erstwhile capitalist, property owning classes will consider

itself trustee on behalf of the proletariat. The change is purely on the subjective sphere. The objective conditions of production will continue by remaining as they were in capitalism. Production will continue by unplanned private competition among the individual trustees. These conditions of production have a compelling logic of their own which will lead to the same contradictions as are witnessed under capitalism today.”⁴⁸

E.M.S. Namboodiripad said, “Not only in relation to the rural poor, but also in relation to the working class and other sections of the working people, his was an approach which, in actual practice, helped the bourgeoisie. His theory of trusteeship, his insistence on certain moral values as the guiding line for any political activity, the skillful way in which he combined his own extra parliamentary activities (constructive programme and Satyagraha) with the parliamentary activities of his lieutenants, the characteristically Gandhian way of combining negotiations with the enemy even while carrying on mass direct action against him all these proved in actual practice to be of enormous help to the bourgeoisie in (a) rousing the masses in action against imperialism and in (b) preventing them from resorting to revolutionary mass action. This ability of his to rouse the masses and yet to check them, to launch anti imperialist direct action and yet to go on negotiating with the imperialist rulers made him the undisputed leader of the bourgeoisie.”⁴⁹

According to Professor J.J. Anjaria, a sympathetic Gandhian economist, “Trusteeship as a short term measure was excellent, but in the long-term coercion is ethically bad; on any large scale, it is also not expedient. But the run away from the problem by merely appealing to the more fortunate ones to show a little more charity awful word is no solution.”⁵⁰

Nobel Laureate, Gunnar Myrdal, who calls Gandhi ‘a radical liberal’, maintains in his ‘Asian Drama’ that “the trusteeship idea is fundamentally a concept that fits into paternalistic, feudal, pre democratic society. It is so flexible that it can serve as a justification for inequality. Possibly Gandhi realized this, for he demanded a moral revolution, a change of heart among the rich. But in the real world, such a revolution is unlikely and the trusteeship ideal is nought but a vision of society where the rich are charitable so that the poor can remain weak ... by his stress on the principle of trusteeship, and his friendliness towards many in exalted economic positions, he established a pattern of radicalism in talk but conservatism in action that is still very much a part of the Indian scene.”⁵¹

The main thrust of trusteeship is very broad and deep and is thus not easy to comprehend. There is no historical example of it to go by. Besides full trusteeship cases have not been experimented anywhere. This doctrine of Gandhi has been either bitterly criticized or highly praised but not experimented.

7.7 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

- 1) Explain Gandhi’s concept of Trusteeship.
- 2) What is the Trusteeship formula?
- 3) Elaborate upon Trusteeship as an ancient Indian concept.
- 4) What is state regulated trusteeship?
- 5) Is the concept of Trusteeship relevant in today’s times?

7.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

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