

# Gram Swaraj: Relevance of Gandhian Philosophy in Contemporary Indian Democracy

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## *Abstract*

The majority of Indian population could not get benefits of the economic development brought by the economic liberalisation, and one of the reasons is the flawed administrative system of Indian democracy. Even, the implementation of 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendments and Panchayati Raj System could not bring the desired benefits to the rural people as all provision of these Amendments were not implemented and socio-political factors. In this paper, the Gandhian philosophy of Gram Swaraj and its relevance in the contemporary Indian democracy was discussed briefly. Gandhiji presented Gram Swaraj as the conception of his ideal of stateless democracy and wanted true democracy to function in India. It is the practical embodiment of truth and non-violence in the spheres of politics, economics and sociology and offers a potent cure for many of the political ills of the present political systems. The concept of Gram Swaraj is not political; it touches all aspects of life: cultural, social, economic and ecological. It provides an ideal non-violent social order, in which self-sufficient, self-reliant and self-governing villages function independently in vital matters leading to the holistic development of the villages.

**Keywords:** *Gram Swaraj, Stateless democracy, self-reliant, self-governing*

## INTRODUCTION

India is the world's largest parliamentary democracy and is one of the postcolonial countries that could be regarded as having a stable democratic in terms of size, population and resources. It is also the world's most participatory political system based on the universal adult regime. Inclusive economic development is one of the major aspects for a participatory democracy wherein each section of the society is an integral part of the economic development process. About 70% of the Indian population live in rural areas; therefore, there

can be no national development without development of rural India. Since the economic liberalisation, a lot of development has happened in many parts of the country; however, its benefits could not reach the rural people. One of the reasons why economic progress has not reached the grassroots is our flawed administrative system of Indian democracy and improper planning and implementation of economic policies. To rectify the flawed administrative system and to strengthen the governance at a grassroots level, the Constitution was amended in 1992, and new chapters on panchayats were added with power to make schemes for the coordinated development of rural areas. The state governments were directed to constitute district level development committees comprising elected representatives from panchayats. However, not a single state governments had taken any steps to enact appropriate legislation in accordance with Article 243 ZD of the Constitution. Article 243 ZD has suggested democratisation of planning with the consent and approval of people. No state is ready to decentralise power, and therefore, no democratic planning and no state in the country has implemented more than 6 out of 37 Articles of the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendments. Articles which not implemented are of transferring some powers and responsibilities of panchayats and make them responsible for development up to district level. [1] The confidence about the suitable path for reconstructing the Indian socio-economic and political order, which existed in the early years after Independence, has now given way to the disoriented, confused, and despondent state of mind in the country. People are compelled to think of Gram Swaraj as an alternative social paradigm, many of them still do not have the confidence and daring to accept and implement it wholeheartedly in its true nature. The terms such as Gram Swaraj, Gramsabha, Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis have been adopted now by many to create an impression of their allegiance to the philosophy of decentralisation and people's grassroots democracy in the country, while actually what is being promoted is only a ghost of Gram Swaraj or a Pseudo-Decentralisation [2]. In this paper, an attempt has been to highlight the Gandhian philosophy of Gram Swaraj and its relevance in Contemporary Indian Democracy.

### **GANDHIAN PHILOSOPHY OF GRAM SWARAJ**

Gandhi favoured participatory democracy and advocated for 'a village-based political formation fostered by a stateless, classless society' for the creation of Gram Swaraj. Gram Swaraj is an ideal non-violent social order, in which self-sufficient, self-reliant, self-governing village-states function independently in vital matters. It is a total revolution and a complete grassroots democracy in which people are awakened to their capabilities and are fully empowered. It is founded on spiritual values such as inner self-rule, love, compassion,

service, sacrifice, etc. Redefinition of development, minimum government, universalism, individual, national, etc.

Gram Swaraj, as conceived by Gandhiji, is not the resurrection of the old village Panchayats but the new formation of independent village units of Swaraj in the context of the present-day world. Gram Swaraj is the practical embodiment of truth and non-violence in the spheres of politics, economics and sociology. He considered Gram Swaraj as an ideal society which is a stateless democracy with liberal governance where social life has become so perfect that it is self-regulated. "In the ideal state, there is no political power because there is no State"[3]. Mahatma Gandhi being a practical idealist, realised the practical usefulness of the ideal of stateless democracy and presented Gram Swaraj as the conception of his ideal of stateless democracy. Gandhiji wanted true democracy to function in India. He, therefore, observed: "true democracy cannot be worked by twenty men sitting at the centre. It has to be worked from the grassroots level, by the people of every village" [4].

Gram Swaraj is different from Panchayat Raj and Decentralization, which are currently in vogue in India and abroad. A remarkable ideational ascent in respect of Gram Swaraj has occurred in India during the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the efforts and work of the visionaries like Gandhi, and Vinoba.

The concept of Gram Swaraj is not political; it touches all aspects of life: cultural, social, economic and ecological. Village life should be so organised and managed that community interests override personal interests, and everyone gets justice and problems, if any, are resolved locally. It should be economically viable in the sense that it should be self-reliant and not dependent on others for the basic needs. Everyone should have access to the natural resources of the community, and everyone should have employment. Ecological dimension is of special importance because it affects not only the health and wealth of the community but also its future existence.

Throughout his life, Gandhi used to emphasise the importance of village in India. To him, for the progress and improvement of India, it was imperative to develop the condition of Indian villages. Therefore, he prescribed a Panchayati Raj System for rural administration and rural upliftment. The fact is that no one else contributed to the theme of Panchayati Raj as much as he did and was able to present a clear view. He never claimed to be original or innovative, but he was representing Indian ingenuity in terms of an ideology and a way of life inherited from

India's antiquity. That is why he had an infallible appeal to both the elites and the masses in the country as a whole. He was only interpreting the Indian model of thought and practice in the light of modern challenges facing India, in particular, and other human societies of the globe, in general.

### **RELEVANCE OF GRAM SWARAJ IN INDIAN DEMOCRACY**

Gram Swaraj, as conceived by Gandhiji, is a genuine and virile democracy which offers a potent cure for many of the political ills of the present political systems. To Gandhiji political power was not an end in itself, but one of the means for enabling people to better their condition in every sphere of life. He, therefore, observed in his famous "Last Will and Testament" that though India has attained political Independence, she "has still to attain social, moral and economic independence, in terms of seven hundred thousand villages as distinguished from the cities and towns" [5]. It exemplified a picture and a programme of Gram Swaraj or Panchayat Raj which would be a non-violent, self-sufficient, economical unit with fullest political power. According to Gandhiji, the Gram Swaraj is man-centred, unlike the Western economy, which is wealth-centred. The former is the life economy; the latter is the death economy. The economy of Gram Swaraj will provide full employment to each one of its citizens based on voluntary co-operation and working for achieving self-sufficiency in its basic requirements of food, clothing and other necessities of life.

Modern economic systems rooted as they are in self-indulgence, the multiplicity of wants and divorce of ethics from economics are large-scale mechanised, centralised, complicated organisations. They are disfigured by unemployment, under-employment, pauperism, exploitation, a mad race for capturing markets and conquering lands for raw materials. Competitions, conflicts and class wars corrode the social fabric. They involve enslavement of the individual, treating man only as a hand feeding the machine, reducing him to a mere adjunct of the machine. He loses his fine sensitiveness owing to soul-killing repetitive jobs. Society is divided into the privileged and the underprivileged, the rich and the poor. Never before was there such economic inequality as is seen today where the multimillionaire is living aimlessly in the lap of luxury and the hard-working toiler has hardly enough to keep his skin and bones together.

Gandhiji suggested Gram Swaraj as an infallible remedy for the ills, not only of India, but, of the whole world. In a letter to Pandit Nehru dated 5-10-'45, Gandhiji wrote: "I am convinced

that if India is to attain true freedom and through India the world also, then sooner or later the fact must be recognised that the people will have to live in villages, not in towns, in huts, not in palaces. Crores of people will never be able to live in peace with each other in towns and palaces. They will then have no recourse but to resort to both violence and untruth. I hold that without truth and non-violence, there can be nothing but destruction for humanity. We can realise truth and non-violence only in the simplicity of village life" [5].

Gandhiji thus stood for simplicity in life and voluntary poverty. He said that everyone should have a balanced diet, necessary clothing and shelter. He believed that every living being has a right to food. He observed: "According to me the economic Constitution of India and for the matter of that of the world, should be such that no one under it should suffer from want of food and clothing. In other words, everybody should be able to get sufficient work to enable him to make the two ends meet. And this ideal can be universally realised only if the means of production of the elementary necessities of life remain in the control of the masses" [5].

Gandhi was opposed to all types of concentration of power and considered centralisation of power as a menace and danger to democracy, ultimately leading to distortion of all democratic values. He affirms that without decentralisation, it is impossible to ensure individual liberty and mental and moral growth of man. Similarly, it is equally essential for the realisation of the ideal of democracy, which is not possible without adequate opportunities for individuals to participate in the management of their own affairs [6].

Further, Gandhi does not seek only the decentralisation of political power. He rather pleads for decentralisation of both economic and political power. For, the success of political decentralisation, in his view, depends upon economic decentralisation. He reiterated that a new democratic, equalitarian social-political order had to be established on firm foundations and decentralisation in economics must go side by side with decentralisation in politics [7].

In recent years, decentralisation is the watchword of modern governance accentuating the relevance of Gandhi's thought. Gandhi's system of Panchayat Raj was based on the principle of democratic decentralisation. He believed that in India, power must flow to the masses. He regarded the villages as the basic unit of administration, and every village must have sufficient power to manage its own affairs. For him, a decentralised democracy based on non-violence must consist of groups settled in small communities or villages in which voluntary co-operation is the condition of dignified and peaceful existence. For, it is the only way to

realise the values of democracy from the grassroots level as it will enable the people to participate in taking and implementing decisions without a rigid and strict control of any higher authority. Moreover, it is the only alternative to reduce the interference of the state in the day-to-day affairs of the people [8].

Gandhiji indicated that Western mechanism of democracy was not suitable for India. Therefore, he favoured India's own institutional framework to realise the values of democracy. The conception of every village as a small republic was for him a workable ideal in the Indian situation [9]. He was in favour of a broad-based pyramidal structure of decentralised power, with numerous village Panchayats at the bottom as the vibrant sources of power, economic and political, and the National Panchayat at the apex. He envisaged intermediary levels of district and state panchayats, with the ultimate power vested in the village Panchayats. While the village Panchayats would be elected directly by the people, the Panchayats would elect the intermediary bodies that, in turn, would elect the National Panchayat. He subscribed to the village-based government with a self-sufficient, autonomous village economy. Gandhi's faith on Universal Adult Franchise, gender equality, and participatory democracy can be known from his concept of Panchayat Raj. The Panchayat of Gandhi's model would be sovereign, legally and politically, and would be subordinate to none. It would hold legislative, executive and judicial power – a perfect village government where perfect grassroots democracy would function to ensure individual freedom, social security and common welfare.

Gandhi thought that for perfect swaraj, all the villages and all the villagers must be enjoying freedom. So he opined, "Independence must begin at the bottom. Thus every village will be republic or panchayat having full powers. It follows, therefore, that every village has to be self-sustained, capable of managing its affairs, even to the extent of defending itself against the whole world.

## **CONCLUSION**

The preservation and strengthening of village independence will provide the solution of most of India's socio-economic and political ills, and the village independence can be maintained only when the Gandhian concept of Gram Swaraj is followed. Gram Swaraj is not something that can be achieved in a short time. It is not just a change in the physical look of the village; it involves the total transformation of the outlook of the people living there. The concept of Gram Swaraj is not political; it touches all aspects of life: cultural, social, economic and

ecological. It provides an ideal non-violent social order, in which self-sufficient, self-reliant and self-governing villages function independently in vital matters leading to the holistic development of the villages.

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