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Sarvodaya Path for Resilient Gram Swaraj

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Abstract

Sarvodaya as a philosophy put forth a model of decentralised democracy in which the welfare of all through community engagement is sought. Mahatma Gandhi through his writings and speeches proposed the concept of Gram Swaraj which was a design for rural reconstruction. This concept was further elaborated and executed through a program of action by his disciple and an advocate of Sarvodaya philosophy, Vinoba Bhave. In the concept of Gram Swaraj, the thrust is given on individual's holistic participation in the development and welfare of the community. Gandhi and Vinoba both expounded the role which citizens at local level can play to revamp villages and enjoy self-rule. This paper presents a vivid picture of how Sarvodaya thinkers emphasised on the role of citizens in building up resilient Gram Swaraj.

Key Words: Gram Swaraj, Gandhi, Vinoba, Sarvodaya

Introduction

Gandhi had defined democracy in the words, 'Democracy must in essence mean the art and science of mobilizing the entire physical, economic and spiritual resources of all the various sections of the people in the service of the common good of all.' (Gandhi, 1939) This definition of democracy proposed by Gandhi amplifies the role he expected from citizens towards building up a resilient community under democracy. Here he referred to physical, economic and spiritual resources of individual citizens to be devoted to the society for the welfare of all. How citizens could play the pivotal role in democracy through channalizing their physical, economic and spiritual resources could be brought out on the basis of his suggestions in this regard.

Vinoba, his disciple and advocate of Sarvodaya, too had immense faith in the power of people. He had infact more faith in power of people than that of government. He had declared, 'The People are like a well and government is a bucket. That is why my emphasis is on power of people. The major objective is to increase power of people and to brighten it.' (Bhave, 1957) As Vinoba had declared his objective of increasing and brightening power of people, it can be drawn that he had put thrust on the role, the citizens rather than government should play under democracy. The role which he expected from citizens is found to be discussed by him under two broad heads one related to the political aspect of citizens' life which he elaborated under the caption of 'Lokniti' and another which covers the societal aspect of citizens' life consisting of their contribution towards building up a self-sufficient society. Explaining the former he had said, 'Lokniti' means that power must actually pass into the hands of the people at all levels. Government must continuously either recede into background or wither away, and its place must be taken up by the people themselves. Initiative must pass to the people.' (Tandon, 2004) This definition of 'Lokniti' makes it crystal clear that Vinoba wished to undertake sustained efforts highlighting role of citizens with the ultimate objective of its culmination in substituting power of government with initiative of citizens.

Gandhi and Vinoba both thus expounded the role which citizens at local level can play to revamp villages and enjoy self-rule. This paper presents a vivid picture of how Sarvodaya thinkers emphasised on the role of citizens in building up resilient Gram Swaraj. The paper is divided in III segments. In Segment I, the topic is introduced and methodology is discussed. In Segment II, a brief review of major ideas of Gandhi and Vinoba regarding active participation of citizens at local level is carried out and in Segment III, conclusion is drawn.

Methodology

This study is an exploratory study based on the method of literature review in accordance with the qualitative approach to research. The collection of speeches, books and articles by Mahatma Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave were primarily referred. Books and research papers written on Sarvodaya philosophy were reviewed.

Major ideas of Gandhi and Vinoba regarding active participation of citizens at local level – a brief review

Gandhi expected citizens to become active more than voting and evaluating decisions of government. Under his conception of Swaraj, he expected more participative and active role from citizens. For it he wanted to eliminate the distinction between ruled and rulers and wanted to grant the governing and administrative powers to the citizens themselves. He had once pointed out, 'The people of Europe have no doubt political power but no Swaraj. Asian and African races are exploited for their partial benefit, and they, on their part, are being exploited by the ruling class or caste under the sacred name of democracy.' (Gandhi, 1954) He therefore opposed the adoption of western form of representative government and instead pressed on revival of panchayat system ensuring active role of citizens. Referring to Sir William Wedderburn who firmly believed that Indian people ruined themselves by relinquishing the system of local self-government in India i.e. panchayat system, he said, 'The people will be ruined if they let go their rights out of weakness. Sir William Wedderburn, an ardent and sympathetic friend of the Indian people used to say all his life that, as the village *panchayats* gradually disappeared, along with them was lost the key to swaraj. These *panchayats* cannot be revived by writing books. If, in every village, the people learn how to manage their affairs, the true key to swaraj will have been found.' (CWMG, Vol. 16) He was dejected when came to know that in the Constitution of Independent India, there was no mention of village panchayats and decentralization. After coming to know it, he reacted in sharp words, 'It is certainly an omission calling for immediate attention if our independence is to reflect the people's voice. The greater the power of the panchayats, the better it is for the people.' (Gandhi, 1947) He accordingly brought out the pressing need for revival of panchayat system at village level. He also elaborated the kind of role he expected from citizens at local level which could be discussed under the following heads:

a) View on Citizen's Initiative in Policy Making

Gandhi expected people to initiate resolutions and take active part in policy making. He for instance, had suggested the villagers to boycott mill cloth and use khadi instead. He knew that such compulsion could be put by the government but he asked the villagers to come forward with resolution. His urge for citizen's initiative could be understood from the illustration under which he set forth his thoughts considering if he were a Minister and he had to make decision in this regard. He did accept that such decision could be imposed upon citizens through government. As he pointed out that the legislators in the independent India would be the true representatives of the people. Therefore, he held, 'For every act of a *bona fide* representative government would assume consent of the voters represented. The voters would mean the whole populace, whether

registered as voters or not.' (Gandhi, 2006) But as he himself believed and had declared, 'Swaraj government will be a sorry affair if people look up to it for the regulation of every detail of life.' (Gandhi 1954) He therefore asked the citizens to take initiative in this regard. He explained, 'Let me assume that the scheme, thus produced contains a clause saying that the villagers themselves declare that they would not want mill cloth, say, after one year from a fixed date, that they require cotton, wool and necessary implements and instruction, not as a gift but to be paid for on the easiest terms... Being convinced of its soundness, I would give it legal form in consultation with the law department and issue a notification, fully describing the genesis of the scheme. The villagers as well as the mill owners and others would have been party to it. The notification will show clearly that it is the people's measure, though bearing the Government stamp.' (Gandhi M. K., 1946)

Vinoba expected that under democracy the role of citizens should not be restricted to mere voting or putting up their candidates during elections. Rather he wanted also to expand their role beyond the duty bound citizens accepting the decisions of their representatives. He wanted that discussions on various issues which are held on the forum of legislature by different political parties should be held with the active participation of citizens. Decisions on all the issues should be arrived at only after thorough discussion and deliberation with citizens with their final approval. It could be easily possible at local level village communities. He explained, 'Many times people think after hearing me that I am given to attacking all the parties of today. But this attack of mine is from a long-term point of view, not for today. These parties may well exist for the present, but there should be good relations between them. The differences should only pertain to ideas. If so, they may be discussed in the presence of the people at the same platform, and the people, after consideration, may support any of them they approve of.' (Bhave, 1959) Vinoba thus did not want the people to helplessly look towards legislature and its decisions for their welfare. In independent India too policies are framed and decisions are taken at one corner of the country and implemented all over the country without consultation of local people for satisfying local needs. Vinoba's scheme on the contrary offered a unique solution where citizens could make suggestion to party-men by taking active part in decision making.

He had further suggested citizens to overcome their dependency on medium of political parties for arriving at decisions. He asked them to finalise certain decisions by themselves independently. He asked them to realise their capability of decision making and overcome their dependence. He expressed his urge in the words: 'You may say that those whom we vote, they only run the state, that means government is in our hand. But we have more expectations from you. We wish that you take over an affair one by one and as a result the work of government will be reduced... You take over the problem of land in your hand and decide to distribute land to all the landless people of the village. Call a meeting of villagers and after working on it gather sufficient land... In this way if the power of people will be expressed, the power of government will get less.' (Bhave, 1958)

He had infact wished that the people in villages should acquire so much perfection in policy making that the ministers would come to them to seek their opinion on matters related to policy affairs. That power will be earned when people of every village will solve their problems on the basis of power of village (*Gramshakti*), brain of village (*Grambuddhi*) and with the cooperation of citizens of village. Then whenever there will be any difficulty in any planning of government, planning minister Shri Nanda shall come to people of village to consult and they will solve that issue in the same way as the problems in village are solved by people of village.' (ibid)

Vinoba thus strongly pleaded for initiative to be taken up by citizens for making policies shunning their dependence upon government and its laws. He criticized vehemently the attitude of dependency developed among citizens of independent India. He said, 'After independence, the people have become less independent, less self-reliant. We have to rely on the government for everything. Things have come to such a pass that we expect the government to do everything while we do nothing, not only in social and religious matter like untouchability, but even in our domestic affairs. How can the people become stronger so long as they depend so much on the government? A law may solve our problem but it will not make us stronger. What people really need is to become aware of their own inner strength, and that they can only do if they solve some of their problems for themselves.' (Bhave, 2002)

b) Role of Citizens as Non-violent Defenders

Gandhi was convinced that rule of citizens at local level could be established on the non-violent basis. As he explained, 'Non-violence covers within it, the Family relations, relation with established authority, internal rebel and outside aggression.' (Gandhi, 1964) Here he upheld non-violence as all comprehensive method which could be applied while dealing with not only societal but also the relations with political authority, sorting out internal strife and facing outside aggression. While elaborating the pivotal role each individual had to play at local level he said, 'My purpose is to present an outline of village government. Here there is perfect democracy based upon individual freedom. The individual is the architect of his own government. The law of non-violence rules him and his government. He and his village are able to defy the might of a world. For the law governing every villager is that he will suffer death in the defence of his and his village's honour.' (CWMG, Vol. 83) Here Gandhi expected the role of citizen as a defender and protector and rejected his dependence on military aid for it by offering non-violent resistance. He therefore had declared, 'For me the only training in Swaraj we need is the ability to defend ourselves against the whole world and to live our natural life in perfect freedom, even though it may be full of defects.' (Gandhi, 2007)

Vinoba also believed that citizens should be capable of self-defence. He had expected each of the individuals to become fearless and protect themselves bravely. He said, 'Henceforth it would not be proper that only few people would be *Kshatriya* and rest of them being non-*Kshatriya*. All will have to be *Kshatriya*. 90 persons would not be saved by ten *Kshatriya*. The responsibility of protection of women would not be assigned to men. Women also should earn the strength of self-protection... Everyone has to become *Kshatriya*.' (Bhave, 1958) expected them to become fearless with steadfast faith in Truth. He also underlined that his conception of Swaraj would not be realized unless citizens overcome their dependence upon others for protection and become capable of self-defence. He said, 'It is not proper that fearlessness is in few people as capital is in few hands under capitalism. Fearlessness should be distributed in all as the distribution of wealth among all. It is not proper that many people are terrified and few people would protect them. The power of realization that, 'I can face the entire world if Truth is with me.' Should be generated in each child... When such courage would be imbibed in each child then only the real Swarajya would be realized.' (ibid)

He objected the very arrangement where government is hailed as protector and citizens as dependent upon it for their protection. He found it as the major reason for government to dominate citizens and perpetuate its existence. He therefore asked the citizens to become capable of self-defence. It not only would limit the functions of government but also help the citizens to realize the futility of its claim on the basis of its necessity for defence of citizens. Vinoba explained, 'The nature of government as protector and citizens as men to be protected should be changed.

Citizens should become their self-defenders. Government should only coordinate among different states and maintain international relations. Rest of the work should be managed by the citizens themselves.' (Bhave, 1958)

He had therefore suggested a kind of education to be imparted on citizens which would make them capable for self-defence right from childhood. He suggested, '...in a non-violent society, education is itself the means of defence, and the better our education, the less we should need to spend on police and on the army... True knowledge is the weapon before which all other weapons fail. Education ought to be able to claim that it can protect the country by the power of non-violence. An education which does not possess that power is not a queen, but a slave, and will never win her freedom.' (Bhave, 2008)

c) Views about Citizens' Duty towards Society

Gandhi insisted on the duties more than rights of the people. According to Gandhi in society each individual is assigned a particular role and he should execute it dutifully. As he mentioned 'Democracy requires everyone, man or woman, to realize his or her responsibility. This is what is meant by panchayat raj. A single limb of the body ceasing to function properly throws the whole body mechanism out of gear. Similarly, the whole of India is one body and we are its limbs.' (C.W.M.G., Vol. 95), He also cautioned that if people do not perform their duties and claim for rights only, it would lead to chaos. As he explained his stand in this regard, 'If instead of insisting on rights everyone does his duty, there will immediately be the rule of order established among mankind... It is, therefore, necessary to understand the correlation of the rights and duties. I venture to suggest that rights that do not flow directly from duty well performed are not worth having. They will be usurpations, sooner discarded the better... If you apply this simple and universal rule to employers and labourers, landlords and tenants, the princes and their subjects... you will find that the happiest relations can be established in all walks of life...' (Gandhi, 1947)

Vinoba had proposed the idea of 'Gram Seva' to elaborate the kind of duties citizens could render towards village community. Under it he asked the men to devote themselves for service of society. It was his important suggestion to ensure conversion of villages into self-managed units in which citizens would believe in self-help and will not be dependent upon help of government. He said, 'He suggested the idea of 'Gram seva' under which his emphasis was on self dependence. He said, 'The work of 'Gram seva' should be done independently. If we will take the help of government in the work of 'Gram seva' then our aura will be lost. In the work of 'Gram seva' even if our father will extend help, we will not accept it. I don't support the idea that the upliftment of village should be taken up by outsiders. It should be done by the villagers themselves.' (Bhave, 1998)

He had also specified the duties of citizens towards community. He explained, 'now you people live in village like a family. Nobody should speak lie, nobody quarrel with others. All of you lead a cleanly life. Do not be lethargic. Do not get addicted. Help each other and recite god's name always... All of you understand your responsibilities. We will help you to the maximum extent we can... After distribution of land village industries should be increased, sow cotton, ... the clashes of village should not go outside the village. Swarajya cannot be established without it.' (Bhave, Bhoodan Ganga, 1958) His conception of 'Lokrajya' must be mentioned in this regard. He had mentioned, 'Minimum dependence upon government is the feature of non-violent Lokrajya. Depending upon government for each and everything is not a quality of Swarajya. That is why Lok-sevaks community-servants should implement the policies of community service without dependence upon government. It is not proper to put the burden of those policies on the government which are not of expenditure but of income.' (Bhave, 1956)

Conclusion

Gandhi as well as Vinoba both banged on people's participation at local level. They both were aware that unless the citizens at local level participate actively in decision making process, independence and democracy would have no meaning for them. Gandhi strongly recommended decentralised model of democracy with extensive powers granted to the people at grassroots including decision making, implementation and defence. These ideas were converted into program of action by Vinoba through his concepts of Lokniti, Bhoodan, Gram Daan, Gram-Shakti, Gram-buddhi, Gram Seva.

It can be thus concluded that ideas contributed by Gandhi and Vinoba in Sarvodaya have shown a path towards resilient local communities in villages of India. These ideas are immensely valuable and relevant even today when India is facing the problems like migration of rural population to cities, urban-rural gap, problems of urbanisation, unemployment, terrorism, Naxalism, power concentration and centralization.

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