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COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FOR RESILIENT GRAM SWARAJ – IDEAS BY MAHATMA GANDHI AND VINOBA BHAVE

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Abstract

Gandhi and Vinoba put forth various ideas constituting 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 is an exploratory portrayal of Sarvodaya ideas offered by Gandhi and Vinoba emphasising necessity of local community engagement in building up resilient Gram Swaraj.

Key Words: Gram Swaraj, Gandhi, Vinoba, Sarvodaya

I. 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 channelizing 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 these two 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, the relevance of these ideas is discussed and in Segment IV 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, research papers and articles written on Sarvodaya philosophy were reviewed.

II. 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 rulling 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 was further expounded by Vinoba through various novel ideas. Their thoughts in this regard could be discussed under the following 2 broad heads:

- a) View on Citizen's Initiative in Policy Making; and
- b) Views about Citizens' Duty towards Community

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 too 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 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 rather expected them to become active and take 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 in fact 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 making. He expressed his hope in the words, 'Today we do not have power to manage our own 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) Vinoba, thus, had firm faith in the power of 'inner strength' of each individual and pleaded to the citizens to realise its power.

(b) Views about Citizens' Duty towards Community:

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 clean 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, Bhodan 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) Vinoba thus pleaded to the citizens at local level to contribute their resources towards the community to become self-dependent and offered a program of action in the concept of '*Lokniti*'.

III. Testimonies of Community Engagement:

The philosophy of Sarvodaya thus put forth a vision of self-reliant villages in India with its thrust on involvement of local communities. The success stories of Mendha (Lekha) village of Maharashtra where the movement of self-rule was carried out by following the motto – 'Dilli Mumbait Amche Sarkar, Amchya Gawat Amhich Sarkar (Our representatives are the government in Delhi and Bombay and we are the government in our village) pertinently show that citizens participation at village level can bring the much-needed development at the village level. (Bokil, 2012) Similar experiment was being carried out through Society for Education, Action & Research in Community Health (SEARCH) which through its Community-based Participatory Approach undertook efforts to bring about social and political change in the lives of poor and marginalized rural and tribal population of Gadchiroli spanning over 134 villages. (SEARCH, Annual Report 2016-17)

Similarly, State of Kerala successfully implemented the experiment of democratic decentralisation with extensive community engagement. It is found that formulation and implementation of micro plans with community participation has produced remarkable changes in the dynamics of local development and in the public management of local governments. (Ramakantan, 2009)

Similarly, as part of the Mitandin programme in Chattisgarh the Panchayat Health Development Index was framed. It is found that it proved successful as it mobilized local community health workers. (Nandi and Schneider, 2014)

Further, Gaitonde et.al. have also discussed the country level success stories of community participation in health and brought out the fact that the community engagement only can bring expected results of the policies to be implemented at village level. (Gaitonde et. al.)

Vettickal T. has shown in his thesis titled, 'Sarvodaya of Mahatma Gandhi: Realistic Utopia' how the 'Centre of Science for Villages (CSV)' in Wardha with the help of technologists and grass-root workers, has undertaken researchers to find ecologically sound and socially just solutions to rural economy through involvement of people. (Vettickal, 1998)

IV. 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 and its implementation. These ideas were converted into program of action by Vinoba through his concepts of Lokniti, Bhoodan, Gram Daan, Gram-Shakti, Gram-buddhi, Gram Seva, Lokrajya.

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, Naxalism, power concentration and centralization. It is found that after Vinoba, the number of staunchly committed followers of Sarvodaya ideology went on becoming thinner. But numerous Sarvodaya activists are constantly engaged in realising the ideas of Vinoba in various villages across the country. (Diwan, 2022) Thus, Gandhi and Vinoba contributed immensely through their ideas and substantial program of action to ensure community engagement for Resilient Gram Swaraj.

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