

Ethics in Politics: The Gandhian Perspective

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Abstract: Politics is an activity centred around power and very often deprived of morals. It pushes an individual into immoral and antisocial conduct. But Mahatma Gandhi believed that politics should be laced with ethical principles. He was a proponent of politics intrinsically imbued with values and high moral conduct. He wanted to upraise the nature of politics to sacred politics. He advocated spiritualization of politics and made an intense bid for ethicizing the political domain. Gandhi was of the view that righteous means should be solely used for attaining political objectives. The present paper seeks to highlight the ethical and moral standards prescribed by Mahatma Gandhi for cleansing politics and his emphasis on purity of means and ends.

Index Terms: Politics, Ethics, Morality, Spiritualization, Ends and Means.

I. INTRODUCTION

Politics is a comprehensive term which is associated with composition and operation of state structures as well as its interrelationship with other states. The genesis of politics can be traced from Greek word 'polis' which is suggestive of the postulates and usages that steered the administration of the Greek city states. Politics is an indispensable human activity – vital for erecting societies and communities based on laws, rules and an equilibrium of opposing interests. It is complicated and onerous phenomenon as it stipulates an extraordinary responsibility and dedication from citizens, political parties, parliamentarians, administrators, juridical set up, media, business, non-governmental organizations, religious and educational institutions. But in general, the wider perception of people towards politics and politicians is not positive and is characterized by trust deficit. They believe that it is an activity centred around power and very often deprived of morals. Power is recognized as the nucleus of politics- power to rule, power to govern, power to command. A streak of negativity has crept into the minds of public regarding politicians who are largely looked upon as self-centred and unscrupulous power players, hankering after their petty interests instead of common welfare.

Ethics, on the other hand, is an offshoot of philosophy that involves organizing, safeguarding and endorsing the concepts of virtuous and erroneous behaviour. The term ethics is deduced from Greek term 'ethos' which means attitude, habit or disposition. Ethics is a set of upright tenets and principles admissible in society. Ethics direct human conduct and restrain people from taking decisions and actions detrimental to the society. They act as self-determining framework to strike a balance between human self-interest and social welfare. Ethical options promote social and human well-being by being unbiased. Ethical principles are based on normative judgements and have a universal applicability. They prescribe obligations and virtues for everybody in a society. Ethics are of prime significance not only in commercial sector and political arena but in every sphere of human ingenuity. They deal not with what is but what ought to be. Ethical norms might not be legally enforceable but they command more influence than law because they are backed by social sanction. The virtues of fairness and integrity are inherent in ethics.

The relation between ethics and politics has been a key theme of contemplation in political philosophy in all ages. So far as modern age is concerned, the inclusion of ethics in politics seems to be a contradiction to many contemporary political philosophers but for Gandhi, there is no dichotomy between ethics and politics. His contention is, "human life being an undivided whole, no line can ever be drawn between its different compartments, not between ethics and politics."^[1]

II. GANDHIAN CONCEPTION OF ETHICS IN POLITICS

Mahatma Gandhi condemned the trend of divorcing politics from ethics and opined that goodness of politics cannot be ensured without ethical principles. He was a blended version of saint and a politician who visualized politics as a tool to elevate mankind socially, economically, morally and spiritually. Gandhi was acutely absorbed in advocating the need for spiritual and moral politics as he felt that politics without principles would ultimately lead to violence and decadence. For him, principles were the expression of perfection without which it would not be possible to have a fair and square ruler. Gandhi disavowed the classical connotation of politics which introduced a wider domain of power in which the division of public and private morals contracted, religious values and public morals got shrunk and ethical principles and political expediency got minimized.

Gandhi was a political activist with unwavering and deeply held religious beliefs. In his words, "I can say without slightest hesitation and yet with all humility, that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means."^[2] To him, politics itself was his religion. He showed no reluctance in admitting that, "my politics and all other activities of mine are derived from my religion."^[3] He wanted to uplift the present state of politics to sacred politics. By sacredness, he meant that it should be purged of vicious tendencies and narrow mindedness. This politics should be prerogative of all. Gandhi was not prepared to accept any rigid conviction or instinctive approach towards either of politics or religion. Gandhi had a dream of remodelling the socially and ethically debased and segregated humans in a mode where they exhibit unselfish concern for other people.

Gandhi discovered that the entire gamut of politics had been misguided and moving on a wrong track. But to him, as in other spheres of life politics should be a pursuit for truth and this search must be for lifting up the general conscience of people. Every individual must be liberated from agony of hunger and must avert exploitative and oppressive behaviour. He would then be in a position to work for his own development through the performance of obligations. An inclusive morality would surface which would catalyse an environment for healthy political life. Gandhi asserted, "For me there is no politics devoid of religion, not the religion of superstitious and the blind, religion that hates and fights, but the universal religion of toleration. Politics without morality is a thing to avoid."^[4] Furthermore, he emphatically stated, "For me, politics bereft of religion is absolute dirt, ever to be shunned. Politics concerns nations and that which concerns the welfare of nations must be one of the concerns of a man who is religiously inclined, in other words a seeker after God and truth. Therefore, in politics also we have to establish the Kingdom of heaven."^[5] By spiritualization of politics, Gandhi implied merging of values in politics to generate goodness and purity in so called politics of power. He tenaciously held that successful outcomes in politics should be attained only by honest means. Thus, Gandhi transformed politics by incorporating the doctrines of ethics and religion in it.

Gandhi did not consider grabbing of office as the principal aim of political activism. According to him the fundamental objective underlying political action was eradication of violence. Gandhi's main purpose was to internally ennoble modern politics by erasing acrimony, antagonism and coercion. His politics of non-violence was a mode of mustering collective power in a way that it manages its own moral education in a perfect and novel manner. The core of our civilization is that we give a preeminent position to morality in all our affairs public or private. Gandhi manifested that integration of ethics and politics can generate a life of excellence and function as transformative power.

Gandhi insisted on cultivation of a devoted and earnest political mindset which did not give credence to the indispensability of dirty hands in politics. He proclaimed on July 3, 1940, "I have always derived my politics from ethics or religion and my strength is also derived by deriving my politics from ethics. It is also because I swear by ethics and religion that I find myself in politics. A person who is lover of his country is bound to take an active interest in politics."

The Gandhian endeavour towards pacifism in politics was aimed at ethical reconstruction of citizenship. He was keen on rearing a culture of principled action on the part of citizens and introducing a component of ethical obligations in their conduct. Gandhi contemplated that politics should be based on empathy and not mere rationality. The crux of Gandhian political discourse is that politics should be shaped by inner rightmindedness rather than judicious aggressiveness. This orientation of Gandhian philosophy is akin to the words of French Philosopher Blaise Pascal who says "The heart has its own reasons which reason itself does not know." Similarly, Gandhi adhered to the belief that morality is stationed in heart and not in reason. He wrote in Harijan on June 8, 1940, "Morality which depends upon the helplessness of a man or women has not much to recommend it. Morality is rooted in the purity of our hearts." Gandhi postulated that besides productive work, a society also needs to be enabled deep down inside since human beings are endowed with a potential for love, friendship, solidarity and empathy. For Gandhi, violence was a symbol of the breakdown of legalized political strength.

The essentialness of ethical and spiritual code in Gandhi's thinking outpoured in shape of critique of the modern civilization. He felt that under the impact of modern civilization man was being fended off from God. It did not pay any attention to religion and did not seek to upraise the moral being. Non acceptance of religion, inferred notably as the quest for truth and service to humanity was unacceptable to him.

Gandhi thought in terms of long-lived social equilibrium and harmony among nations. So, he made a sustained and vigorous effort to launch non-violent politics. In a speech at All India National Education Conference on January 13, 1930 he observed, "There are some who think that morality has nothing to do with politics. We do not concern ourselves with the character of our leaders.... If Swaraj was not meant to civilize us and to purify and stabilize our civilization it would be worth nothing. The very essence of our civilization is that we give paramount place to morality in all our affairs, public or private."

Expressing his views in Indian Opinion on January 5, 1907 Gandhi wrote: "It is in the moral nature of man by which he rises to good and noble thoughts. The different sciences show us the world as it is. Ethics tell us what it ought to be. It enables man to understand how he should act. Man has two windows to his mind: Through one he can see his own self as it is; through the other, he can see what it ought to be." Correspondingly, Gandhi reiterated the independent character of the moral act. His conception of morality was not a rebuttal of politics. Contrarily, Gandhi's moral idealism was capped by a political realism which desired the erection of a democratic society. He wrote, "I feel that political work must be looked upon in terms of social and moral progress."^[6]

Gandhi expounds that a nation devoid of ethics becomes an instrument for few people to serve their self-interests. The representatives of the people start managing their personal concerns and show absolute indifference towards well-being of general community. The height of perverted politics is reached when they start making laws for their own advantage under the façade of public welfare and commitments. It is not possible to change the self-centred, rivalrous and wobbly body politic into a secure, legitimate and understanding one until it is constructed on the edifice of ethical values. Governance bereft of moral canons like justice, honesty, truth and peace inescapably leads to weak rule and sham democracy. "Unless the moral and spiritual qualities of the people are appropriate, the best of political system and constitutions will not work." Within the ambit of nation building, there is an appalling need to infuse ethical principles which should be religiously adhered to by national and international actors. The moral attributes stimulated by Ahimsa, Satya and Citizenship should be the foundation of legitimacy.

Gandhi rejected the utilitarian view in favour of absolutist ethics and repudiated the pragmatic perspective of politics and the prevailing belief of double standards which calls for clear differentiation between moral consideration applicable to individual

conduct and those applicable to political action. He urged for spiritualization of politics and made a fervent appeal for moralizing the culture and operational dimension of politics. Gandhi was an empirical person who consistently endeavoured to maintain a balance between political realities on ground and his moral ideological pursuits.

The benchmark of conscientiousness and goodness that he laid down for himself portray his steadfastness and dedication to eternal principles. Gandhi is commended for evolving an ideology and way of life which was impregnated with ethical, moral, spiritual perceptions and factual truths. Gandhi's arduous work in South Africa and aggressive campaign subsequently in India for mass consciousness and political liberation genuinely restored the deep association between spiritual and the material, the ethical and moral texture of our civilization. He used several indications and notions in his lifework to precede as a harbinger of clean politics and sequential development.

The Satyagraha articulated by Gandhi sought to assimilate cardinal virtues and was never used by him to gain political mileage. Satyagraha movement focussed on principles and attuned people to higher self. It was not a strategy based on force or coercion. Gandhi had the guts to recede his movement, when he discerned that unscrupulous elements would penetrate and harness the base for self-concerned and opportunistic ends.

Gandhi tried to incorporate an element of idealism in every sphere of human activity inclusive of politics. He garnered the reputation of a glorified soul striving to spiritualize politics. "Gandhi's approach was deductive, empirical and pragmatic. He deduced certain conclusions from his basic assumptions- metaphysical and ethical. Metaphysics, Ethics, Economics, Sociology and Politics were intertwined. He was for, in Toynbee's language, 'etherialisation' that is spiritualization of politics."^[7] His axiom was to remove tears from every eye and establish a society called Ram Rajya. His Ram was the eternal God who led his way to benevolence and whose existence could be perceived everywhere. Truth, dharma and justice were to be the salient features of such a society. The disadvantaged would be given equitable voice in governance and no one would be discriminated against. Sarvodaya was Gandhi's vision of a just, egalitarian, morally and spiritually strong citadel of individual liberty.

Gandhi enlisted Seven Social Sins that militate against the ethical code and thereby weaken the social structure.

- Wealth without work which means resorting to unfair means or short cuts to amass money without putting in actual labour.
- Pleasure without conscience which implies happiness earned at the cost of others.
- Knowledge without Character means that absence of strength and integrity of character knowledge may prove disastrous.
- Business without morality meaning thereby use of unethical trade practices and lack of integrity in business dealings with stakeholders.
- Science without humanity which connotes use of technological advancements for anti-humanist activities like war and terrorism.
- Religion without sacrifice means that religion is reduced to mere ritual without restraint on personal desires and sacrifice of personal comforts.
- Politics without principles implies politics driven by greed and opportunism rather than principles.

Gandhi condemned the contemporary civilization for extending tentacles of immorality and scant regard for spiritual roots. He described the evolving civilization as insensitive and diabolic.

Mahatma Gandhi was a straightforward person devoid of pretensions or hypocrisy. He never asked others to do anything which he did not practise. He never extended any privileged treatment to his own progeny. Their upbringing in his Ashram settlements was similar to that of children of other inmates. They were raised along with other children and were entitled to similar food and educational facilities. Gandhi gave up a scholarship which was offered to one his son to be sent to England for higher education in favour of some other boy. The voluntary renunciation of hefty income from legal practice, opting for simple life and his fervent desire for equality of all men unfolded the moral characteristics of Gandhi who rose to a level of Mahatma.

III. GANDHIAN PHILOSOPHY OF ENDS AND MEANS

The relation between ends and means has been matter of concern for scholars at different points of time. There are differing schools of thought with regards to this issue in political discourse. While some intellectuals justify the employment of any sorts of modes for attaining the target, others consider right means as pre-requisite to arrive at fair goals. Mahatma Gandhi appears to be a lone crusader among the gamut of social and political masterminds in his unyielding non-acceptance of the ends and means as mutually contradictory entities and his utmost moral engrossment with the means.

The correlation between ends and means is the essence of Gandhi's interpretation of society in terms of ethical values rather than empirical relations. For Gandhi, means and ends are intricately connected. His contention was, "For me it is enough to know the means. Means and ends are convertible terms in my philosophy."^[8] Gandhi counters the assertion that ends vindicate means. If the means engaged are unjust there is no possibility of achieving satisfactory outcomes. He opined, "The means may be likened to a seed, the end to a tree and there is just the same inviolable connection between the means and ends as there is between the seed and the tree."^[9] He did not see eye to eye with those who assumed that means are after all means. Gandhi had a firm conviction that means virtually matter the most. The nature of end rests upon the type of means employed to reach it. To quote the words of Gandhi, "I have often said that if one takes care of means, the end will take care of itself."^[10] He undertakes to assert that moral means are essentially an end in itself because goodness has its own rewards. Gandhi chorded with Huxley in believing that dishonest means

certainly elicit amoral ends. In the same vein, Gandhi concurs Tolstoy's assertion that when violence is inserted into non-violence, the later becomes redundant and ceases to lead the way. In *Hind Swaraj*, when the Reader emphatically advocates the forcible ouster of British rule from India, the Editor quotes Gandhi's urging on the significance of ends and means. "Your belief that there is no connection between means and therefore the end may be of great mistake. Through that mistake even men who are considered religious have committed grievous crimes. Your reasoning is same as saying that we will get a rose by planting a noxious weed. If I would like to cross an ocean, I can do so only by means of a vessel; If I were to use cart for that purpose, both cart and I would soon find the bottom... I'm unlikely to get the result flowing from the worship of God by lying myself prostrate before Satan... We reap exactly as we sow."^[11]

Gandhi's insistence on application of chaste and rightful means for furtherance of political ends was deeply inspired by *Bhagavad Gita* which enunciates the profound philosophical gospel that one must work constantly with pure intent. He was unshakable in his belief that a passionate absorption in the task in hand can and must be accompanied with a degree of unconcern and freedom from apprehensions about the future outcomes. If we are certain of purity of means used by us, our strong conviction will enable us to overcome all our fears and quivering. Detachment with results does not imply that we should be ambiguous regarding the ends to be achieved. Rather both the cause and the means have to be fair and clear. In the words of Gandhi, "By detachment I mean that you must not worry whether the desired result follows your action or not, so long as your motive is pure your means correct. Really, it means that things will come right in the end if you take care of means and leave the rest to Him."^[12] It is pertinent to acknowledge that impurity of means inevitably results in impure ends, truth cannot be achieved through unrighteous means, justice cannot be secured by employing unjust methods, deliverance is not possible through oppressive acts, equality cannot become a reality through coercive means and eternal peace cannot be acquired through war. The man who exercises might has no feeling of apprehensiveness about the means and yet imprudently anticipates that this will have no bearing upon the end he pursues.

CONCLUSION

Mahatma Gandhi claims worldwide adoration for expounding his principles of morality and spiritualism in politics. His eternal legacy can help to overcome the democracy deficit in contemporary world. In an epoch of 'globalization of self-centeredness' there is a pressing necessity to comprehend and emulate the moralistic dimension of Gandhian thought and re-evaluate the concept of politics. The shared humanity needs to make all out efforts to get rid of its ethical flaws in order to survive amidst global challenges.

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