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Gandhi's Views on Social Welfare

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Gandhi has his own unique ways to look at social welfare. On his return from South Africa, he perceived after a year of extensive travel all over India, that if his mother-land wanted to get out of the grinding poverty, political freedom was the foremost requirement. This could come only through the awakening of society. 'Sarvodaya' the greatest good of all through truth and non-violence became the ultimate goal of Gandhi in social welfare.

To Gandhi, nothing was more sacred than truth and non- violence. Originally he believed that God is Truth. Later he changed this a little and maintained that Truth is God. For seeking as well as for finding truth, Ahimsa - non-violence - love for all beings - was a necessity. His concept of Ahimsa is not confined to human beings but includes the entire creation. It is essential to understand the implications of non-violence as Gandhi understood them as it was the creed to which he rendered life-long service.

According to Gandhi, Ahimsa is a necessity for seeking, as well as, for finding Truth. To him both are so intertwined that it is almost impossible to disentangle them. Gandhi's non-violence was not a weapon of the weak and cowardly. It was meant for the fearless and the brave.

It was on these two rock-like pillars of truth and non-violence that Gandhi strove all his life to build the edifice of social reconstruction for 'Sarvodaya'.

To Gandhi, the individual was as important, if not more, than the society, as he firmly believed that the happiness of the individual formed the constituent part of the happiness of the society. So, for him, social welfare meant the conscious submission of the individual and a voluntary contribution of one's possession to the society, which consisted of *all*, not a majority and, in return, the social system, built upon the principles of non-violence and democracy, was to give a complete guarantee for the maximum development of the individual's personality.

Gandhi has a stateless society as his ideal. He is opposed to the State because the State, according to him, is an instrument of violence. He says, "The State represents violence in a concentrated and organised form. The individual has a soul, but as the State is a soul-less machine, it can never be weaned from the violence to which it owes its very existence". The main characteristics of the Non-Violent State are: minimum use of coercion, decentralization of administration and voluntary association.

So far as institutional changes are concerned, Gandhi has made some valuable suggestions for different institutions.



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Family, one of the many social institutions, was sacred to him. He considered family as a 'God-ordained institution'. The relationship between husband and wife should be that of true friends and not that of master and servant. He certainly did not approve of the relationship of husband and wife -one superior and the other inferior -as was the case in majority of Indian families. Both must hold the other's body and soul as sacred as one's own.

Gandhi was totally opposed to **child-marriage**. He considered the custom of child-marriage indicative of physical and moral degeneration. He said, "This custom of child-marriage is both a moral as well as a physical evil." He gave enthusiastic support to the Child Marriage Restraint Bill (1929) passed by the then assembly. This bill legally forbade marriages between boys under eighteen and girls under fourteen years of age, while the Hindus and Muslims were very much against it and opposed it bitterly.

One of the main problems of society and more so in India, which drew Gandhi's attention was the social **status of women**. Gandhi wanted the enlightened women of India to seek relentlessly the repeal of all legal disqualifications and removal of social discrimination against women in India. He considered legislation to remove the inequalities of women as essential... But at the same time, he did not favour women competing with men in -all vocations. He advocated selective education for women, not with any sense of women being inferior to men, but he did believe that they were not identical and that their fields of work were different.

In the matter of **family planning**, Gandhi firmly believed that self-restraint was the only method of family planning. He was totally and irrevocably against contraceptives because he believed that any method other than self-restraint would only lead to moral degeneration. He also believed that for self-restraint not only sex, but all the senses of sight, hearing, taste and touch should be under restraint.

In the question of uplifting the status of women, as in other questions, Gandhi looked at it from the totality and believed that the change should start at the root of social thinking.

Another question that shook Gandhi to the innermost core of his being was that of **untouchability** in Hinduism. He wrote, "Untouchability is not only a part and parcel of Hinduism, but a plague, which is the bounden duty of every Hindu to combat". Removal of untouchability became one of the major missions of his life. He called the untouchables, 'Harijans', which meant people of God. He went and stayed in *Bhangi* colonies, undertook a fast for getting them temple entry, undertook an all-India tour for removal of untouchability and fought relentlessly for them throughout his life, by creating the *Harijan Sevak Sangh*, to help them remove evil habits from their lives with the help of a batch of devoted workers.



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The abject **poverty** in which the majority of his countrymen lived, prompted him to be active in public life. He blamed the rich for the condition of starvation and poverty and considered it immoral to keep such vast numbers under those conditions. Therefore, he suggested, "leveling down of a few rich in whose hands is concentrated the bulk of the nation's wealth on the one hand and the leveling up of the semi-starved, naked millions on the other". But this result had to be accomplished by a non-violent process.

To achieve the above for maintaining some equality and stability, he propagated his doctrine of **Trusteeship**. Trusteeship meant that "the rich man will be left in possession of his wealth, of which he will use what he reasonably requires for his personal needs and will act as a trustee for the remainder to be used for the rest of the society".

He asked the wealthy or the upper middle class Indians to give up some of their comforts and adopt simple lives. This did not mean that Gandhi wanted all Indians to be paupers. According to him, voluntary poverty was an act of nobility which could be achieved only by those who had possessions.

The other major aspect of social welfare which drew Gandhi's attention was that of urban labour as well as that of the landless farmers, constituting rural labour. He believed that the spinning wheel was the answer to many of India's problems. By the spinning wheel, he no doubt meant **Khadi**, but he also meant the revival of village industries.

Thus Gandhi's concept of social welfare was **Sarvodaya** based on a healthy give and take between the individual and society; each contributing to the other's moral, spiritual, economic and social progress, prosperity and happiness, based on the firm foundation of truth and non-violence.

In the *Gandhian* concept there is no giving or receiving. The individual contributes to the society and the society helps the individual.

The *Gandhian* concept has been built up in India, where social welfare was woven in the fabric of its society since time immemorial. Help to the needy was enjoined by 'dharma' for the joint families, communities and kings. Gandhi went a step further and for him, rights and duties went hand-in-hand. Both parties had to co-relate, co-operate and improve the conditions; not merely wait for society to "help them".

The responsibility of *Sarvodaya* rested solely on human effort and on developing the individual along natural and ethical lines to create a better society. For this Gandhi had already formed the eleven vows for the individual. These eleven vows and the items of Gandhi's programme of constructive work, touched every



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aspect of an individual's and a society's life in every minor and major field.

It is difficult to determine Gandhi's concept of social welfare, because, he dealt with all problems from the point of view of a social revolutionary without violence. His humanism and relentless efforts to wipe off injustice in any form, to any person or group such as women, *Harijans*, landless farmers, makes him a pioneer of social welfare through social change with a base of truth and non-violence leading to *Sarvodaya*. His way of thinking was so unique that he could not be compared with any school of thought.

(Source: *Pushpanjali* – Essays on Gandhian Themes)



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