

Mahatma Gandhi and COVID-19 Pandemic

ALOK RANJAN

Asst. Professor, PG Deptt. Of Pol. Sc., C.M. College, Darbhanga

Abstract— *The hapless COVID-19 pandemic has shaken the entire Humanity and for most parts of last three years, we were faced with myriad challenges ranging from health, socio-economic disparities and forced migrations. Although signs are clearly on a downward trajectory, new strains of Corona keep making recrudescence. In fact, ‘Pandemic era’ is a new phrase making headlines owing to frequent Virus-induced diseases in the Post-Globalised world. The pertinent issue that obviously comes to the fore is scrutiny of ‘development-model’ being followed and championed by ‘End of Ideology’ propagators in the Post-Globalised world. The triumph of the Western model of governance lays stress on material gains based on hollow Utilitarianism devoid of concerns for the whole ecosystem. The resultant outcome encroaches upon the natural balance in the environment leading to crossing over of Viruses to the Human-settlements in general and persons in particular. This Pandemic also exposed our immune system and ancient Indian practices such as ‘Yoga’ and ‘Ayurveda’ were tendered saviors to some extent. The same could also be factored in India’ low mortality rate’ in comparison to other developed countries despite huge population. For a highly populous country such as India, which has 82% of its population in unorganized Sector as per International Labour Organisation’s report of 2016 and considerable number of people living below poverty line, the pertinent question is- Can we abjure chasing growth? Ethically not, but the ways to make progress definitely needs course-corrections. In fact, We are signatory too to UN Sustainable Development Goals, an amalgamation of highly ambitious 17 goals with the theme ‘Leaving No one behind’. The essence of Gandhian philosophy is ‘Spiritual development’. Gandhi has disdain for Allopathy and recommends Naturopathy. Gandhi in his writings cautions us against community-diseases and talks of purity of water, Air and Food. Therefore, in order to recalibrate our development model, Can we find panacea in Gandhian practices? The ensuing paper is a modest attempt to unravel the same.*

Indexed Terms— *Trusteeship, Utilitarianism, Pandemic Era, U.N. Sustainable Development Goals.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The 21st Century is epitomised as an era of Scientific advancement, economic growth and elevation of

Human-potentiality. Whereas these exuberate optimism, there is no dearth of pessimism too on many fronts and mighty challenges galore in front of us. One of the biggest challenges that confronts us is the frequent occurrence of Pandemics during modern times to the extent that the Era itself is being termed ‘Pandemic Era’. The Human inhabitants of this Universe witnessed disastrous experiences in the form of COVID-19 Pandemic caused by Corona Virus in the year 2020, 2021, and to some extent in 2022 too. Just as, the number of Corona positive cases seems on downward trajectory, new strains of it come up. Policy makers across Globe are worried about this situation. Deliberations at public as well as private forums are continuously being undertaken to crack, where lies the problem and how to insulate the future generations from the wrath of Pandemics or at least to minimize the frequency of Pandemics. If we trace history, it is not that the same has been devoid of Pandemics but, in Post-Industrialization Era specially after 2000, the frequency has been seen enhanced. So obviously, one of the focus areas has to be scrutinization of Industrial growth models and therefore ‘Parameters of development’ so to say. There seems a tentative linkage between how we perceive our development and the recurrent Pandemics.

II. MAHATMA GANDHI’S NARRATIVES

Mahatma Gandhi, a great philosopher, writer and India’s leading freedom-fighter, was no immune to Pandemic- induced diseases. In fact, Spanish Flu of 1918 happened at peak of his lifetime. He was direct witness to fighting Plague disease during his stay in South Africa. With his experiences, he knew that during those tough times how common people suffered. Therefore his insistence on the strengthening of villages mentioned in his great book ‘Hind Swaraj’ lured people to again revisit his ideas during the first phase of the pandemic. His Concept of Gram Swaraj Village was at the core of Gandhi’s heart. Gandhi talked about the holistic development of villages. He strongly pitched for village empowerment and opined

that true Swaraj could only be had if we could provide rights and opportunities to the peasants and landless tillers. A large number of village people migrate to cities for earnings to make their ends meet. But during Pandemics, when jobs go waning, the pillars of the economy as they are rightly referred to, have to move back to their villages. The plight of mob reverse-migrating to their villages on feet in heated months, during peak of the pandemic in 2020 was unprecedentedly pathetic to say the least. It added further burden to already saturated productivity of agriculture.

III. GANDHI'S PRAGMATIC IDEAS

Gandhism offers us a very good hope amidst obscurantism. Gandhi advocated for small scale industries based on 'Trusteeship' principle where production for daily use goods was given priority. He was opposed to heavy industries as that would entail migration of people from villages to cities. Gandhi opined that the capitalist model of development has in it, inbuilt malfeasance. It is based upon profit-maximisation and it will lead to economic inequality in Society. Gandhi did not appreciate much the infrastructure works being undertaken by the British such as Railways. He also had his dislike for mass production. Gandhi firmly believed that production on those lines could not support economic equality. The focus would shift away from villages. By extending his views on Village economy, Gandhi suggested a 'Village model' that attempted to fill the gap between the rich and the poor on one side and villages and cities on the other. His opinions were very much in sync with his statement, "We have enough for everyone's need but not enough for everyone's greed". Gandhi's pessimism for Modernity can be seen in larger concerns of environmental aspects too.

IV. GANDHIAN SPIRITUALITY

Gandhi remained essentially a spiritual person. He laid stress on the integration of mind and body. Gandhi observed, "A man who has a sound mind in a sound body is a healthy Man". He considered 'Right Character' as the sine qua non of good health. Corona played havoc on people's psyche and fear for life induced 'Corona-phobia' so to say in many people. In some cases, a magnified version of this psychosomatic disease was observed. Gandhi's emphasis on above

mentioned issues got more credence in that scenario. Gandhi had clear disdain for modern medicinal treatments and had firm belief in traditional Indian ways of Naturopathy. Gandhi talked of purity of Water, Air and Food and how it could influence health. The lines of ideas that Gandhi seemed to be propagating found resonance in India's fight against COVID-19 disease. Despite being heavily populous, the mortality rate in India vis-à-vis Corona positive cases remained low as compared to the so-called developed countries with 'World class medical facilities'. Even though the second wave during 2021 was terrible, overall deaths in proportion to total population remained low as compared to the rest of the world. When West got over-shadowed with pessimism with no ray of hope in foresight, India showed the way. Ayurveda and Yoga were seen as saviors of the day. Many Western newspapers and Magazines were observed citing optimum use of these traditional Indian tools on course of fight against COVID-19.

Gandhi was not very appreciative of education system being promoted by the British in India. He vouched for education in mother tongue. The role of education, he opined, is to make students skilled and independent. Gandhi remained a vocal critique of Modern Civilisation rooted in incessant Utilitarianism. He termed it hollow and devoid of Moral Spirituality. Actually, Gandhi measured advancement in terms of the elevation of Civilization in sync with cultural and religious ethos. It will lead to practice of moral conduct in society. People in these societies would be spiritually strong and would be able to withstand challenging times better. Gandhi's hypothesis was proven right in light of emergence of India as a leader on World Panorama amidst ongoing battle against COVID-19 disease.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Gandhi, the economist was opposed to capitalist model of laissez faire and free trade. Instead, he vouched for blossoming of Village economy. Gandhi, the commentator on health issues, fully supported traditional Indian way of preventive healthcare and healing. Gandhi, the conscience keeper, cautioned against going away from moral conduct and religious practices. And finally, Gandhi the philosopher,

strongly urged to take this civilization forward in sync with Nature. Referencing Gandhi during these Pandemic times, at least in spirit offers policymakers many ideas. In Indian villages, If there could be small startups on the lines suggested by Gandhi, we could reduce 'People's-Migrations'. Many stories of such startups were in news during these Corona times. By doing this, we could prevent undue burden on cities too. However, replicating original 'development-model' as espoused by Gandhi is being too oblivious. Quite a large segment of population live below poverty line in India and industrial growth is a necessity to employ those transiting from agriculture sector. India is signatory to United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, an amalgamation of 17 highly ambitious goals with the theme 'Leaving No One behind'. UN SDGs is a fine blend of narratives that need be, to promote sustainable living with inclusivity. Therefore, the claim that UN SDGs have Gandhian imprint would not be out of proportion. Finally, every adversity has opportunity too. Time is up for reflection and recalibration. If policy makers across Globe could reset the 'Parameters of development' in larger spirit of Gandhian philosophy, the coming generations would remain thankful to us.

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