GANDHI’S VISION OF DEVELOPMENT: RELEVANCE FOR 21ST CENTURY

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Development through the use of state apparatus is integral to the notion of freedom, and poverty becomes a problem of politics and power. This process confers rationality and acceptability of practices and techniques of the government (and its agents) among the individuals in society. Mahatma Gandhi was deeply suspicious of the power of state to influence growth, and hence relied on the self-control of an individual as the force that could transform the society. He believed that there was no need to have a society based on the Western notions of greed and wealth but on moral individuals who cared for each other and followed their spiritual goals. This translated, in his vision, to a more equal society based on different religious groups showing tolerance towards each other, and engaged in small-scale economic activities.

INTRODUCTION

TO SAY that the state exists to help the poor is a statement that is often considered to be self-explanatory. However, this notion of state action has a historical basis even before India’s Independence. Even though it is reflected in post-Independence, certain governmental institutions and practices; it was not without contestation between the competing visions of architects of modern India: Gandhi and Nehru.

The evolution of ideas of development are traced here in the sense of objectives of state action during the nationalist struggle for Independence, role of Gandhi and Nehru, and reasons for eventual triumph of Nehruvian idea of rational planning with the bureaucracy as the agent of pro-poor growth in Independent India. It is relevant to note here that while development has failed to reduce poverty in India, it has also led to expanding the state power because it has become self-perpetuating.

The genesis of pro-poor development can be found in the social reality
of the so called ‘Third World’ which had a vast majority of poor, who needed to be assisted by the state through specific interventions and development agencies, reports, surveys, schemes and programmes. One can find this idea resonating during the freedom struggle in what Nehru saw in India’s image as ‘naked, starving, crushed and utterly miserable’. Without exception, all political leaders promised change in the lives of ordinary people as they challenged the colonial rule, which translated into expectations of relief from poverty and hunger, medical care, education and advanced standards of life once India gained Independence.

There was a broad understanding that British rule had led to drain of wealth due to transfer of profits to Britain besides taxes, expenditure of government, killing of Indian industry and continuance of poverty and famine. The British, on the other hand, blamed the continuance of poverty to Indian people, its hot climate, and lack of modern attitudes. The Karachi session of the Indian National Congress (1931) spelt out in detail the concept of Swaraj that could provide economic freedom to the ‘Starving Millions’ towards a more egalitarian society. While there was a consensus on the ultimate objective of Swaraj; how it was supposed to be achieved was an area polarised between the visions of Gandhi and Nehru.

Roles of Gandhi and Nehru in Development Discourse in India

It would not be inappropriate to concentrate on Gandhi and Nehru, the two most important leaders, who articulated their visions of independent India in contradictory ways. As described later, Gandhi and Nehru had very different ideas of development though both agreed, in their own ways, that the Swaraj meant moral, social and political regeneration of the country. While Gandhi was a traditionalist, Nehru was a Western in his beliefs. What were the alternatives available to both of them and why did Nehru’s vision finally prevailed as the dominant rationality of state action? Was there any resistance to this vision? Was it only because as Prime Minister, Nehru had the opportunity to create Institutions and impose his vision of planned development or was it deriving its legitimacy from the contemporary world view? Why the Gandhian vision of development got marginalised in Independent India? These are some of the issues that are examined in their historical context.

That Gandhi and Nehru were different personalities could be one obvious explanation. They were separated by almost a generation and their origins and political experiences were different. Gandhi was older and compared to Nehru, had a commoner background, having braved the racial discrimination in South Africa. Nehru had an elitist background and had no personal experience of discrimination besides having, unlike Gandhi, no pronounced religious beliefs. What brought them together was their
mutual need. While a broad-based nationalist movement was unthinkable without Gandhi, Nehru was the articulate and suave new generation for Gandhi. And, both desired independence and change in the lives of Indians.

While their respective personalities and experiences did shape their visions of development, it would, nonetheless, be instructive to underline the difference between Gandhi and Nehru in the way they articulated their visions of the new India. In ‘Hind Swaraj’ (1910) and also after his return to India in 1915, Gandhi made it clear that true self-rule was not merely political independence by Indians. It meant a change in the economic pattern and political power through moral revolution of the individual upwards through society as a whole. He believed that there was no need to have a society based on the Western notions of greed and wealth but on moral individuals who cared for each other and followed their spiritual goals. This translated, in his vision, to a more equal society based on different religious groups showing tolerance towards each other, and engaged in small-scale economic activities. He distrusted large-scale means of production since it led to an increase in inequality and non-harmonious relations between the members of society. Furthermore, Gandhi was deeply suspicious of the power of state to influence growth, and hence relied on the self-control of an individual as the force that could transform the society. To formulate his theory, he delved not only into Hindu and other Indian religions but also the contrarian Western thoughts which asserted that industrialisation had led to spiritual and social decline of the Western society.

In sharp contrast to Gandhian ideals is Nehru’s vision. These have been attributed to his education in England, travels in Europe, visit to Soviet Union (1927) and imprint of prevailing Western socialist ideologies. His proximity to Gandhi did not prevent him from advocating, in his pamphlet entitled ‘Whither India?’ (1933) and Autobiography (1936), a powerful modern state to redistribute resources more equitably and to manage the modern economy once India gains Independence. He harboured little belief in the Gandhian route to radical change through moral change of heart.

Gandhi was openly critical of the manner in which the provincial governments before Independence had abandoned his constructive programmes to renew the nation. He blamed them of functioning just like the British. It was not surprising, then, that after his assassination; the Indian state merely abolished untouchability and allowed encouragement of cottage industries alongside large-scale industrialisation. Nehru remained India’s Prime Minister till 1964 and despite having followed planned development genuine land reforms could not be achieved that could have redistributed resources and altered the economic situation, which was
otherwise marked by scarcity of food and poverty. The Congress political party remained a predominantly upper-caste party with vested interests of landed elites and professionals to protect. While this ideological compromise kept the party intact, it was not suited for radical socio-economic changes. The instrument of planned development, bureaucracy, too remained status-quoists and resistant to change. While Nehru’s socialist ideology of development eventually dominated, it was not without contestation, even after he had been prime minister for some years.

**Reason for Triumph of Nehruvian Vision**

It is necessary to examine why the Gandhian vision of moral development had to cede the ground to Nehru’s vision of planned development through the agency of state. For this, we need to contrast their visions on three key elements of their views on the state, modern civilisation, and the connection between morality and Swaraj/Swadeshi.

Gandhi considered the state as essentially an instrument of violence as it destroyed individuality ‘which lies at the root of all progress.’ He also felt that the voter was too distanced to take an informed interest in issues pertaining to the nation. Hence, he conceived of successive layers of communities, which could be self-governing. The country could be organised like ‘oceanic circles’ marked by unity, identity and self-sustainability.

It is on the nature of colonialism that Gandhi and Nehru differed conspicuously. Gandhi’s comment in *Young India* (1926) appears prescient now: “...to make India like England and America is to find some other races and places of the earth for exploitation...the fact is that this industrial civilisation is a disease because it is all evil. Let us not be deceived by catchwords and phrases...” In sharp contrast, Nehru wrote: “What is society in the so-called advanced countries like today? It is a scientific and technological society. It employs new techniques, whether it is in the farm or in the factory or in transport. The test of a country’s advance is how far it is utilising modern techniques”.\(^1\)

It would be incorrect to infer that Gandhi did not admire the spirit of scientific enquiry. He questioned its refusal to recognise the limits of reason and the excesses it promoted. Unlike Nehru, Gandhi had no desire to see India as a replica of Britain, which for all its concepts of progress and modernity signified “the exploitation of the weaker races of the earth [which]...is to dethrone God and enthrone Materialism”.\(^2\)

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It is not, therefore, surprising that Gandhi found the modern civilisation, for all its achievements, fundamentally rooted in the pursuits of ever-increasing wants with its harmful consequences. He was forewarning the imbalance that modern civilisation causes between human beings and the environment. “It may be considered a heresy, but I may be bound to say that it were better for us to send money to Manchester and to use flimsy Manchester cloth than to multiply mills in India. By using Manchester cloth we only waste our money; but by reproducing Manchester in India, we shall keep our money at the cost of our blood, because our very moral being will be sapped, and I call in support of my statement the very mill-hands as witnesses” (Hind Swaraj:58).

Ruskin’s influence on Gandhi is reflected in his rejection of Western economics which were utilitarian and not based on any moral and ethical concerns. This led him to state: “Real home-rule is self-rule or self-control” (Hind Swaraj: 64) since he saw morality and freedom as inextricable from each other. He famously said:

“Neither railways nor hospital are a test of a high or pure civilisation. At best they are a necessary evil. Neither adds one inch to the moral stature of a nation. Nor am I aiming at a permanent destruction of law courts, much as I regard it as a ‘consummation devoutly to be wished.’ Still less I am trying to destroy all machinery and mills. It requires a higher simplicity and renunciation than the people are today prepared for”.

*Marginalisation of Gandhian Discourse*

While Gandhi’s thoughts on development were clairvoyant more so in hindsight, these were rejected paradoxically for the same reason. What tilted the balance was Nehru’s invocation of ‘modernity’ that appealed to the imagination of a country unshackling itself. Gandhi’s vision were seen to appeal too much to the moral and spiritual side rather than to ‘modernity’, and hence growth.

Gandhi’s thoughts on economy were intertwined with his views on morality, which were not ‘elegantly structured’ and lacked ‘theoretical rigour’; and ‘Gandhi’s insistence on pure theory was not always translatable into action’ (Misra 2005). He was further seen as against technology even though he was more concerned with technology that was appropriate to the context and which did not come in the way of self-development. Gandhi has been further criticised for his ideas of trusteeship to mean that he was not in favour of change on the class relations and for this reason, he sympathised with the capitalist ideology. Even Nehru was not so comfortable with Gandhi’s use of religion and religious idioms either.

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3A Word of Explanation Written in 1921 for ‘Hind Swaraj’.
Nehru, with age and charisma on his side, widely read and armed with Western education, had a non-religious and empirical world-view. As the longest-serving Prime Minister of Independent India, he could exercise the imagination of the country. However, it was not without contestation by the elites. We must also realise that the elites often buy into the dominant discourse in order to serve their strategic interests even if they are not fully convinced. This may be the reason for the perpetuation of poverty and the further expansion of state action towards development.

Despite having a close relationship with Gandhi (he was chosen as his heir), Nehru was enamoured with the idea of planning and industrialisation for development and removal of poverty. He viewed planning as ‘a living, moving process’ that enabled ‘all the People of India to build up economy by solving problems of poverty and unemployment in a democratic way’. More significantly, from his nation-making ideal, he endowed central planning with a virtue of dealing with ‘fissiparous tendencies and parochial outlook’ (Nehru, 1955).

While Gandhi drew intellectual inspiration from Ruskin, Tolstoy and others of the 19th Century, Nehru was more modern in drawing inspiration of planned economy from writings of G.B. Shaw, Tawney, Webb and the Russian experiment, etc. These had the effect of giving legitimacy to his ideas of planned development which could bring about social change. This lent, in turn, legitimacy to the state investing it with the powers for development, which is considered as self-evident.

Thus, along with the idea of a powerful nation state grew the idea of top-down state-sponsored planned development exercise conducted by technical persons leading to industrialisation, Green Revolution and redistribution in a democratic manner. Very soon the idea of planning leading to development and removal of poverty and unemployment became the rationality of post-independence India. It is another matter that planning went through ups and downs, that it lacked instruments and specialised agencies for effective planning and that it had to encounter the obstacle related to federal structure since many fundamental changes required action by the state governments.

*Tracing Planning in India*

It would not be correct, however, to credit Nehru alone with the idea of planning for economic and social transformation because it had gained prominence in India from the early 30’s. The All India Congress Committee had resolved in 1929 that “in order to remove the poverty and misery of the Indian people and to ameliorate the conditions of the masses, it is essential to make revolutionary changes in the present economic and social structures of society and to remove inequalities”. During the “1931 Karachi
session, Congress resolved that the state needs to control key industries and services—a resolution which Nehru drafted in consultation with Gandhi.

M. Visveswarayya had published a Ten-Year Plan with the objective of doubling the national income in 1934. More significantly, however, were the resolutions passed in 1938, at a conference of provincial ministers of industries held under Subhash Chandra Bose, who was the then Congress president. The resolution stated that industrialisation was essential for meeting the problems of poverty, unemployment, national defence and economic regeneration, and a comprehensive scheme of national planning had to be formulated as a step towards such industrialisation. Interestingly, the Conference also recommended that a commission called All India National Planning Commission should be approved for this purpose and it should consist of representatives of government of provinces and states, the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and All India Village Industries Association. During this time, Nehru was also critiquing Gandhian ideas of development which is particularly revealing in his views on Khadi. He invests Khadi with the traditional life of India with its peasant structures, though having a role in the national movement, as “an out of date form of production, not possible to raise the standards of living of masses.” This was to underline his belief that only industrialisation can improve the standard of living of Indians. He was also moving towards socialism. In his address to Lucknow session (1936), Nehru said: “Socialism not in a vague humanitarian way but in the scientific economic sense. I see no way of ending the poverty, the vast unemployment, the degradation and subjection of the Indian people except through socialism.”

The Gandhian ideas of development were further marginalised when a National Planning Committee was made by the Congress President in 1938 with Nehru as its chairman. The Committee discussed basic issues concerning economic policy and planning and appointed 26 sub-committees to study and report on different sectors of economy and on certain specific problems relating to national planning. Gandhi was not happy with it. He termed it as wastage of money and labour. The task of the committee was, however, interrupted by the outbreak of the World War II in 1939 and arrest of Nehru and others. Reports of the Committees were submitted in 1939, 1940, 1945 and 1946, all of which led to considerable discussion.

In 1944, eight prominent businessmen published “A Brief Memorandum Outlining a Plan for Economic Development of India” which highlighted economic planning in India, the general lines on which development should proceed, and the demands that such a planning is likely
to make on country’s resources”. They emphasised the importance of planning for the betterment of country.

As if everyone was making a plan, M.N. Roy led the People’s Plan prepared by Indian Federation of Labour while Shriman Narayan made the Gandhian Plan. In 1946, a Post-War Reconstruction Committee was appointed which consulted public opinion through reconstituted provincial and district rural development boards and prepared development plans having as many as 226 different schemes totalling Rs. 91.4 crore. Concessions were made to the Gandhian beliefs in giving utmost importance to the agricultural group having a variety of schemes to expand production of more food and increase rural wealth. Second group consisted of ‘nation-building’ services like education, medicine and public health. Third group comprised of power and industry, with a village as focal point for Plan and rural development. The committee, however, stated that “the sole criterion by which any scheme will be judged is the concrete contribution it makes to the physical and moral well-being of the people….that people develop a sturdy self-reliance and work whole-heartedly for the advancement of their own happiness, prosperity and moral uplift”.

During this time, a number of other reports were prepared: Burns Memorandum on the technical possibilities of agricultural development; Report on location of industry in India, Report of Bhore Committee on medical and health programmes, Sargent report on educational development, etc. Hence, the professionals and experts had begun stirring into action with their visions of new India. In 1944, Government of India created a planning and development department for coordinating work of post-War reconstruction. The Interim Government under Nehru appointed an Advisory Planning Board with K.C. Neogy as Chairman in 1946 to review work already done and to make a recommendation for future machinery for planning. The board recommended a Planning Commission, a non-political body having experts, which was to be advisory in nature. The idea that a planning organisation was needed gathered momentum and during the November session in 1947, All India Congress Committee passed a resolution about ‘planned central direction’. Nehru headed Economic Programme Committee which in 1948 recommended a central planning commission. Dr. Solomon Trone, an American expert, advised Prime Minister for a small expert body to make five year plans under his supervision. This proposal, however, found little support in the official circles and was branded as ‘fundamentally totalitarianism, largely inapplicable in a democratic India’ (Paranjape, 1964).

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4The Preface to the 1946 Review of Post-war Reconstruction Plan Press Note June 1946.
In 1949 Nehru advocated ‘an urgent necessity of organised planning’. When it was opposed in the cabinet, more so by Dr John Mathai, Finance Minister, Nehru ingeniously took the plea that it was approved by the Congress Working Committee, whose chairman was Nehru himself! The 1950 presidential address to the Parliament mentioned that a Planning Commission would be established ‘so that the best use can be made of such resources as we possess for the development of our nation’. Around to this time, Central Statistical Organisation also came into existence.

On March 15, 1950, Planning Commission was established by a resolution of the Government of India to raise standards of living by planned development. It was linked to the Directive Principles of State Policy in the Constitution that “the State shall strive to promote welfare of the people by securing a social order based on social, economic and political justice and by directing its policy towards securing, among other things, that the citizens should have the right to an adequate means of livelihood.” According to Professor Mahalanobis, “Nehru was persuaded to become its chairman”. Although Nehru took great interest in setting up of Planning Commission, and he re-wrote a considerable part of the draft, he could not take adequate interest in the detailed working of the commission. Subsequently, he abhorred the way in which it developed bureaucratic tendencies and became involved with normal routine of official procedures, etc. (Paranjape, 1967).

Thus, from the very beginning, planning appealed to Nehru as “the mighty theme of a nation—building itself, remaking itself and all of us working together to make a new India that people should support by additional efforts and sacrifices as the mighty task demands fullest cooperation from the masses of our people” (1959, quoted by Pranajape, 1967:13). However, Nehru also said that “the plans have been accepted by most sections of the population as based upon broad popular consensus and as a basic function of administrative units” (Paranjape, 1967:160).

After Nehru

We are all familiar with ‘Garibi Hatao’ slogan of Indira Gandhi, nationalisation of banks, scrapping of Privy Purse of princes, new welfare schemes, and use of mass-media, etc. to appeal to new audiences. This has been termed as populist whereby appealing directly to the masses on poverty, Indira Gandhi wanted to take on the vested interests in the system.

However, by 1980s the emphasis shifted to ‘growth first’, giving a pro-business orientation to the government policies and underplaying the significance of economic planning and the Planning Commission. Since 1991 with liberalisation, the trajectory of development has further shifted.
Development as Rationality of Government

It has been shown that development through the use of state power is integral to the notion of freedom, and poverty becomes a problem of politics and power. This process confers rationality and acceptability of practices and techniques of the government (and its agents) among the individuals in society. The poor become subjects, who need to be cared for, and political class vows for their upliftment and welfare in order to wrest power, and this business of poverty-alleviation aligns economic, social and political conduct with the objectives of becoming a developed nation. In order to achieve these objectives, the state and its agencies prepare statistics, conduct census, make policies, and formulate schemes as ‘specialised truth’ to be peddled by different actors. In short, invocation of state’s duty to remove poverty generates practices, rationalities and technologies through which subjects are governed and society is rendered governable (Foucault). “The notion that we have to depend on the government to assist the poor has acquired the status of revealed truth” (Lee, 1985:17).

However, in reality, such conducts are never properly aligned and often work contradictorily, as a ‘congenitally failing operation’ (Gane ed., 1993:84–85), when solution of one problem becomes problem for another. Take example of National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in India. While it is credited with increasing the rural wage rates, it leads the farmers to claim higher procurement prices for wheat/rice because farm labour has become much more expensive and towards this, the government has to provide more subsidies leading to fiscal deficit.

The techniques produce unexpected problems. These are appropriated by those who are supposed to operate it disinterestedly, leaking to rent, corruption, etc. Never are all conditions present to make such schemes work effectively and the reasons cited are faulty surveys, unreliable statistics, unclear line of command, contradictory regulation, overlapping, etc. Then, it is all blamed on people! As Nehru said (1954), “We have been groping in the direction of planning. That was inevitable because we did not have and we could not have all the information, data, statistics which are essential for planning”.

CONCLUSION

We have seen how the notions of development took shape during the freedom struggle with the ideas of Gandhi and Nehru vying with each other until it linked poverty removal with planning. Thus, politics of nationalism in pre-Independence India gave place to politics of population with problematisation of poverty as the rationality to govern the activities
of state through schemes, institutions, data and surveys.

We may wonder, in retrospect, what if India had not followed the Nehruvian planning model of development since Gandhian vision appears so relevant today. However, it was clear to Gandhi that his ideas were not shared by other leaders during the freedom struggle itself while Nehru’s invocation of modernity and scientific progress was extremely appealing to all. Nehru’s vision of planned development leading to eradication of poverty was responding to the contemporary discourses on the development. He was no prophetic visionary like Gandhi but his vision found acceptance among the multiclass Indian state. It was not only because he wanted to have a strong and united India but because his vision of planned development in a democratic manner enabled the elites to capture the state power without fundamental change in the state structure of pre-Independence India.

REFERENCES