Nationalism And Mahatma Gandhi

‘Nationalism’ has once again become a rising movement in the world politics with politicians that are considered to be ‘nationalists’ assuming power in many countries; Donald Trump in the United States of America, Narendra Modi in India, Boris Johnson in the Great Britain could be named as examples.

Nationalism is an ideology that emphasizes loyalty and devotion to a nation. It is born from the objective of obtaining and maintaining the nation’s sovereignty upon the assumption of each nation governing itself free from outside interference. Nationalism is a rather modern movement with a history that runs back to the 18th century.[footnoteRef:1] Independent movements led by the former colonies of Empire can be considered as the most significant events that are linked with nationalism. According to Khare, the independence movements of Asian and African colonies against the European rule can be considered as struggles for national identity, unity and self-determination.[footnoteRef:2] Hayes has introduced 4 definitions of nationalism i.e., the name of a historic process; the ideas embodied in that process; the activities of a particular party, and a condition of mind among members of a nation.[footnoteRef:3] Indian nationalist movement is a prominent example for an independence movement that entailed all of the above dimensions and Mahatma Gandhi is an eminent figure of that movement that led India towards its independence from Empire in 1947. [1: Kohn, Hans. The Idea of Nationalism: A Study in Its Origins and Background. New York: Taylor and Francis, 2017.] [2: Khare, Brij B. 'INDIAN NATIONALISM: THE POLITICAL ORIGIN.' The Indian Journal of Political Science 50, no.4 (1989): 533-59. www.jstor.org/stable/41855456.] [3: Hayes, Carlton J. H. Essays on Nationalism. New York: Russell, Russell, 1926.]

Mahatma Gandhi also known as Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, born on 2nd October, 1869 at Porbandar (Gujarat) to an upper class family, started his life as a lawyer in South Africa after studying Law at University College in London.[footnoteRef:4] He had to go through many unpleasant experiences owing to his Indian immigrant status in South Africa. There were numerous moments; such as the time when he was thrown out of a train because he did not comply with the order of a white railway official who had demanded Gandhi to leave the first class compartment even though he has bought a ticket. Such events directed him to fight for rights of Indians in South Africa and to develop the concept of ‘Satyagraha’ or non-violent protest which later becomes Gandhi’s primary tool in the fight against the imperialism.[footnoteRef:5] Gandhi returns to India in 1915 after years of activism in South Africa as a leading Indian nationalist. Upon his arrival, Gandhi joins the Indian National Congress and later, becomes a prominent figure of India’s fight for independence from Empire. [4: Traboulay, David M., 'MAHATMA GANDHI'S SATYAGRAHA AND NONVIOLENT RESISTANCE'. CUNY Academic Works, 1997] [5: Traboulay, 'MAHATMA GANDHI'S SATYAGRAHA AND NONVIOLENT RESISTANCE']

This essay will discuss about Gandhi’s views on Nationalism and how his views on Nationalism influenced Indian independence movement. India’s interpretation about nationalism (specially, during the time period of the independence movement) being heavily influenced by Gandhian philosophy was different from the Western interpretation about Nationalism.

Gandhi’s views on nationalism started to flourish during his time in South Africa where he was discriminated for being an Indian. Thus, Gandhi identified himself as an Indian than a Hindu or a Gujarati. According to Bhosale, popular notion of nationalism “starts with locality and then gradually extend itself to the province and finally to the nation”.[footnoteRef:6] But Gandhi was “first an Indian, then Gujarati, and only then a Kathiawadi”.[footnoteRef:7] Hence, Gandhian nationalism was not based on neither based on race nor on ethnicity nor on religion. [6: Bhosale, B.G. 'INDIAN NATIONALISM: GANDHI Vis-a-vis TILAK AND SAVARKAR.' The Indian Journal of Political Science 70, no.2 (2009): 419-27. www.jstor.org/stable/42743906.] [7: Bhosale, 'INDIAN NATIONALISM: GANDHI Vis-a-vis TILAK AND SAVARKAR.']

Gandhian nationalism further cultivated when he wrote the book ‘Hind Swaraj’ in 1909. In his book, Gandhi talks about 2 concepts of ‘Swaraj’; 1) self-rule and 2) self-government.[footnoteRef:8] With these 2 concepts, Gandhi was reasoning a step beyond the liberation from Empire. He was expressing an idea about ‘self-rule over oneself’ or constant determination to be independent of government control be it a foreign government or a national government.[footnoteRef:9] ‘Swaraj’ for Gandhi meant sovereignty of the people based on pure moral authority. [8: Heredia, Rudolf C. 'Interpreting Gandhi's Hind Swaraj.' Economic and Political Weekly 34, no.24 (1999): 1497-502. www.jstor.org/stable/4408073.] [9: Heredia, 'Interpreting Gandhi's Hind Swaraj.']

According to Gandhi, “Real Swaraj will come, not by the acquisition of authority by a few, but by the acquisition of the capacity by all to resist authority when it is abused. In other words, Swaraj is to be attained by educating the masses to a sense of their capacity to regulate and control authority.”[footnoteRef:10] [10: Prabhu, R. K., and U. R. Rao. The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Mudranalaya, 1967.]

The most celebrated attribute of Gandhi’s fight for independence is ‘Satyagraha’ also known as ‘non-violent protests’. Satyagraha is a combination of 2 words; ‘Satya’ which means truth and ‘Graha’ which means force.[footnoteRef:11] The force of truth or ‘Satyagraha’ was based on 2 principles; truth and non-violence. Gandhi’s practice on Satyagraha began in South Africa where he started his battle against racial discrimination. At first, his method of non-violent protests were called ‘passive resistance’. But Gandhi have distinguished Satyagraha from ‘passive resistance’ for Satyagraha is based on love and rejects animosity.[footnoteRef:12] Gandhi’s faith in Satyagraha over other methods was centered on certain characters of Hindu mythology such as Harischandra and Prahallad who endured a lot and sacrificed a lot in the name of truth without possessing any hatred or hostility towards others.[footnoteRef:13] Gandhi introduced the concept of Satyagraha to India at Champaran in 1917 when he lead a series of civil disobedience movements, demonstrations and strikes against the landlords in Champaran, Bihar. It proved to be a successful method of fulfilling the demands of people as the government established a Champaran Agrarian Committee and approved the demands of the indigo farmers. From that point onwards, Gandhi spearheaded a number of Satyagrahas such as Kheda Satyagraha (1918), Khilafat Movement (1919), Rowlatt Act Satyagraha (1919), Non-cooperation Movement (1920), The Salt March (1930) and Quit India Movement (1942) that eventually lead to the independence from Empire in 1947. [11: Traboulay, 'MAHATMA GANDHI'S SATYAGRAHA AND NONVIOLENT RESISTANCE'] [12: Ibid.] [13: Ibid.]

Gandhi expanded the Indian national movement to include every Indian citizen despite their religion, creed, language or class. The independence movement that was exclusive to the elites and intellectuals of the country was transformed in to a mass movement by including workers,

farmers, ‘the untouchables’ and women.

Sri Jawaharlal Nehru once stated that “Nationalism is in ill odor today in the West and has become the parent of aggressiveness, intolerance and brutal violence.” [footnoteRef:14] [14: Dash, S. C. 'NATURE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF INDIAN NATIONALISM.' The Indian Journal of Political Science 19, no. 1 (1958): 63-72. www.jstor.org/stable/42748895.] Western nationalism promoted hatred towards other nations as well as devotion to one’s nation. But Gandhi often emphasized that he was neither anti- nor he believed that India should discontinue any sort of connection with Raj post-independence. Gandhi on expressing his thoughts said; “My nationalism is not so narrow that I should not feel for (Englishmen's) distress or gloat over it. I do not want my country's happiness at the sacrifice of other country's happiness.”[footnoteRef:15] [15: Prabhu, et al. The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi] Gandhi was not anti-Britsh, he was anti-imperialist. Gandhi’s expression of Nationalism inspired the Indian struggle for independence to take a novel approach. Gandhi’s belief on nation of self-control and self-realization changed India’s path for independence. Instead of leading an aggressive and hostile independence movement, Indians began demanding justice from Raj in a more ‘civil’ way which proved to be more effective than disputing with the government. Furthermore, he engaged with not only the elites but also the middle class and the lower class in order to create a nation-wide effort to win independence. He transformed Indian nationalism from an elite phenomenon to a representation of the whole nation. Gandhi emphasized the importance of unity as a nation than separation as religions, creeds and classes. He created an Indian nationalism that any Indian can identify with.

References

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