Towards Creating a Socially Sustainable Society amid COVID-19 Pandemic: A Gandhian Perspective

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Abstract
The current coronavirus pandemic has emerged as a threat to the entire humanity. It has affected society at large and has created a lot of chaos and uncertainty in the world. This has created the need to restore and establish social sustainability in the society. Social sustainability is viewed as a process for creating successful places that promote people's well-being by understanding people's needs and wants. Here, Gandhi's comprehensive vision for society can be related to the sustainable development approach and the social dynamics prevailing in the society amid the pandemic. As the three pillars of sustainable development- environmental, economic, and social- are interlinked, Gandhi's ideas and principles of value-based approach and ethical living hold good in sustainable development discourse. However, though Gandhian principles and concepts have been often viewed in environmental sustainability, it is least analyzed and understood in terms of social sustainability. Therefore, the paper tries to fill this gap by focusing on building a social aspect of sustainability amid the pandemic through Gandhian perspective. This paper analyses social sustainability in terms of (a) social equity, (b) social well-being, and (c) participation by all. In this context, his idea of "Sarvodaya" is significant as it deals with social welfare, which holds importance in current pandemic days. Apart from "Sarvodaya," Gandhi also developed an integrated view of the individual, society, and state by focusing on social harmony based upon the moral principles- love, truth, justice, and non-violence, which hold importance even today.

Keywords: Coronavirus pandemic, social sustainability, social equity, social well-being, Gandhian perspective

Introduction

The current COVID-19 pandemic is not just a health crisis; instead, it is a human, social, and economic crisis (UN, 2020). COVID-19 Pandemic has brought everything to a standstill. The subsequent lockdowns amid the pandemic have brought hardships in the lives of millions. While some lost their jobs, others struggled hard to sustain both their lives and livelihood amid the pandemic. Also, the pandemic has affected all aspects of sustainability. However, the intensity at which it has affected sustainability's social dimension has never been seen before humankind in previous pandemics. Moreover, it is important to emphasize that the social dimension of sustainability has also been ignored for decades in the discourse of sustainable development (Woodcraft, 2012). However, the importance of social sustainability arises from the fact that it

places people at the centre of the sustainability debates. It becomes more significant in coronavirus pandemic times as the pandemic has affected the societies at the core (UN, 2020). Thus, it has highlighted an urgent need to create and restore social sustainability so that people from all sections of society could sustain these difficult times irrespective of their social and economic background. Social sustainability includes various themes like- basic needs, human rights, gender, poverty, social capital, social justice, well-being, happiness, empowerment, and participation (Colantonio, 2007). Here, Gandhi's relevance emerged from the fact that Gandhi's broader vision for the society can be related to the social dynamics that have emerged in the society amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the current paper urges the need to create a society that is socially sustainable from the Gandhian perspective in terms of indicators of social sustainability like- (a) social equity, (b) social well-being, and (c) participation by all amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Gandhi's value-based approach, ethical living, and positive attitude of leaving no one behind hold critical importance in today's time. Gandhi analyzed the various economic and social flaws that persisted in society and developed a constructive social program to minimize such flaws. Moreover, the concept of social sustainability was also prominent in Gandhi's thoughts and ideas. The constructive program developed by Gandhi was comprehensive in transforming people and reconstructing society (Parekh, 1989). Most importantly, the program's central character was its non-violent nature through which it envisages to bring social, economic, and political change in society. It was based on unity, knowledge on health and hygiene, women, labor, and economic inequality. These comprehensive programs' objective was to realize Swaraj and Sarvodaya based on political, economic, and social upliftment of all sections of Indian society. This comprehensive program's social aspect was to attain the goal of gender equality, the inclusion of all sections in national development 'peaceful coexistence, self-reliance, equality, and justice. The comprehensive program holds quite significant even today as similar programs are very much needed in today's pandemic times when vulnerable groups like migrant workers, marginalized women, and poor people are facing the existential threat during the pandemic. Further, we can observe how in the pandemic time, the focus of the masses is on maintaining health, safety, and hygiene to protect them from the virus, which was focused by Gandhi long back. This shows how Gandhi was ahead of his times by prioritizing health and hygiene in his programs. Gandhi formulated the programs with fundamentals like- voluntariness, self-reliance, and building from the bottom, which are also needed in pandemic times.

Social Equity

The current COVID-19 pandemic has deepened the existing inequality in society. In the COVID-19 pandemic context, not everyone in society is placed in the same position when it comes to combating the ill effects of the virus. We have to understand that some sections of society are more vulnerable than others in times of pandemic. Marginalized women, migrant workers, and poor people can't sustain in the same way as the well off people could during COVID-19 times. Thus one can't deny the fact that the virus has accentuated inequality in sections of our society. Here, Gandhi's thought became essential as he raised the voice for the vulnerable and weakest sections of society who comprised people dealing with low income and other issues like- social stigma, gender disparity, and locational disadvantages. Gandhi viewed that the progress of a society should be determined by the state of the most vulnerable and the weakest ones. Gandhi also emphasized that the majority should take the initiative to inspire and motivate minorities. For him, adjustments could be possible when more powerful people take the initiative rather than the other way around (Gandhi, 1947). All of these initiatives are also essential in COVID-19 times.

Today, the well off people of our society need to come together to support the most vulnerable sections of society so that they could sustain in these difficult times. Also, it becomes imperative that the government and public health interventions have to follow the principle of equality and equity in today's context. There have to be special safeguard measures for the vulnerable to survive in COVID-19 times. There is a need for positive discrimination. Similarly, when it is seen that the current pandemic has led to the deepening of poverty, it reminds us of the doctrine of trusteeship, as envisioned by Gandhi, which focused on the economic and social welfare of the poor. Therefore, in current times, learning from Gandhi, it is the government, civil society, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and individuals' duty to come forward and work for the poor and the needy people who have suffered exponentially in these pandemic times. Also, the COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the need for what 2030 Agenda has even talked explicitly about bringing "transformative" changes that include the changes that need to be brought in the way we live, the way we produce and consume. The current pandemic has further displayed the need to bring transformative changes in our day to day life. Here, it is imperative to note that Gandhi himself was not less than an epitome of sustainable production and consumption. On similar lines, when gender equality has become a central issue in the pandemic times, that got reflected in the number of domestic violence instances and other gender-based violence that got increased considerably amid the pandemic. Gandhi's ideas about gender equality become significant here. Gandhi opined that women are not inferior to men. He strongly advocated for their education and social positioning. Thus, the Gandhian perspective still shows us the path for promoting gender equality through social positioning that we need today. If women had given a better social positioning as envisioned by Gandhi, the chances of gender-based violence that took place during the current pandemic would have reduced significantly.

Social Well-being

The coronavirus pandemic has affected the economic, social, emotional, and psychological well-being of the people. With prolonged lockdown and mobility restrictions, while some have gone through anxiety, stress, and depression, while many lost their livelihood. Fear of contracting the virus, its direct and indirect repercussions on their lives, and relations concerns have a detrimental effect on the masses' overall well-being. Thus to ensure the well-being of all is of utmost importance today. Here, the Gandhian conception of social well-being guides us to deal with the present crisis. Gandhi's outlook on social well-being and welfare was quite different from that of the western perspective. For Gandhi, happiness is not just economic prosperity and physical pleasure alone. Gandhi opposed the utilitarian concept that happiness means the greatest good to the maximum number of people. For Gandhi, an individual's happiness lies in society's happiness with a prime focus on its moral standard rather than physical or economic well-being. His idea of 'Sarvodaya' becomes important here, which implies the greatest good of all through the means of truth and non-violence. Sarvodaya became a fundamental goal of social welfare for him. For him, it represents economic emancipation, social upliftment, and the moral resurrection of all. Sarvodaya is a vision, movement, and ideal in Gandhian philosophy, dynamic in its outlook, based on the notion of care and humanity's upliftment. To achieve this objective, he opted for an integrated view of life and disagreed in viewing an individual's life in different compartments. Simultaneously, Gandhi didn't consider the individual as a separate entity; instead, for him, an individual is a constituent unit of the society. He believed in the well-being of all, irrespective of rich and poor. The welfare of others was a crucial part of Sarvodaya. Thus on one side, Sarvodaya tried to reorient the human mind, and on the other side, it talked of

reconstructing human society as well. Therefore it is broader in its outlook. Thus, deriving key points from Gandhi, the notion of 'social well-being' seems quite essential in today's pandemic times, where we have to ensure the well being of all sections of society irrespective of whether one is rich or poor. Wellness of everyone matters in today's pandemic times. Simultaneously, there is an urgent need for reconstructing human society. It is so because the current cataclysmic event has visualized the invisibilized sections of society. As the pandemic has revealed the pre-existing inequality in society, which has been amplified by the current epidemic, there is a need to re-evaluate the measures and restructure the society where the poor's life chances can be enhanced. Further, talking from migrants' workers' perspective who faced the multilayered vulnerabilities amid the pandemic, Gandhi's efforts regarding them are quite significant even today. He tried to restructure the existing social structure by calling laborers as "Mahajans," which was normally used as a title to show respect to elites. This resulted in enhancing the pride of laborers and workers (Modi, 2019). He also formed the 'Mazdoor Mahajan Sangh' for the workers' rights. Thus, adhering to Sarvodaya's Gandhian idea, which primarily focuses on the development of all, could have mitigated the pain, difficulties, and miseries faced by the migrant and the poor people amid the lockdown. Looking from well-being perspective, Gandhi not only fought for the well-being of the marginalized sections of the society, but at the same time, Gandhi also wanted the well being of the entire earth, including flora and fauna. Also, in current times, when the individual's wellness is considerably dependent on health, hygiene, and cleanliness, one can't underestimate the significance of Gandhi here as he gave utmost priority to hygiene and sanitation. For instance, Gandhi took the sanitation work on a priority basis with a set of volunteers during Champaran Satyagraha (Jana, 2020). Also, when the Prime minister of India is advocating the need to become Atma Nirbhar and become Vocal for Local, it is important to note that both of them were part and parcel of Gandhi's life (Baruah, 2020). Gandhi emphasized that everyone should become self-reliant. For this, he promoted the use of local raw materials in the production. Gandhi opined that the real India lives in villages. Therefore, he advocated the promotion of cotton industries and economic decentralization. Gandhi used Khadi, charkha as self-reliant symbols and envisioned to create a society where each citizen has dignity and prosperity. Thus, his development model mainly focused on understanding society and India's culture, which we also need today.

Participation by All

Gandhi was one of the few men in history who fought simultaneously on moral, religious, political, economic, and socio-cultural fronts. Not just the strategy of non-violence, he ensured the participation of all sections of society as the basis of successful struggle against the British rule in India. Rather than adopting a tone of self-congratulation, Gandhi chose to work with the peasants and workers who remained as unrepresented audiences and constituted the majority of the Indian population. Before Gandhi took the central stage, Indian nationalism was primarily an elite phenomenon- creating lawyers, doctors, and landlords. Gandhi transformed intellectuals and professionals' movements into the struggle of thousands of peasants, workers, Muslims, and artisans who participated in it. Gandhi appeared to the ordinary folks as a savior who restores the dignity and autonomy of their lives. Gandhi's influence on the congress and his relations with everyday folks through his attention to home-spun clothes (khadi), peasants' causes, and the abolition of untouchability led to his identity as a more social reformer than as a politician. Similarly, what we require to fight against the present pandemic is support from all sections of society. It is not that only the frontline health workers that include doctors, nurses, paramedical staffs working day and night to save the lives of millions of people at the cost of threatening their

own life have the sole responsibility. Similarly, it is not the only duty of the government and social workers to ensure various policies and interventions. All of us in society will have to come forward by opting for the appropriate steps that are needed. For example- wearing masks, maintaining physical distancing, helping the needy people is the responsibility of all and not just a few. Thus all sections of society have to come forward to fight the virus. As coronavirus will stay for a longer time, it's the duty of all to ensure all local citizens' safety as the current pandemic is the question of both lives and livelihood for many.

Conclusion

Gandhi's primary focus on Swadeshi, Swachhta, local consumption, Sarvodaya, self-reliant, and sustainable living are very critical in current pandemic times. The uniqueness and outstanding characteristics of the Gandhian values show us the path towards prosperity and peace through cooperation, people's participation, and mass awakening (Mehta and Borah, 2020), which is very much needed in pandemic times. When the entire world economy is in shambles, we need to divert our attention towards building a rural economy cherishing Gandhi's dream of 'Gram Swaraj.' Gandhi's way of integrating politics, economics, and technology with ethics can also anchor us in dealing with current precarious times (Dharampal, 2020). The Gandhian principles have become more relevant concerning the social context amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, Gandhi touched a myriad of issues that affected society and called for change and reform. To create a socially sustainable community, Gandhi initiated social reconstruction programs based on his experiences and experiments in society. Similar kinds of interventions and programs could be initiated amid the pandemic to build a socially sustainable society in the longer run.

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