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DEBUNKING STEREOTYPES IN GANDHIAN CONCEPT OF NATIONALISM

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Abstract

To think of Gandhian concept of 'nationalism' is to think of diverse interpretations and ideas as it is not easy to define it in a sentence. Various stereotypes are scattered over the analysis of Gandhian thoughts for years. Scholars weave their ideas on Gandhi by their political interests. They see him through the lenses of their ideological stances. Therefore, Gandhi has become a political narrative which is used by everyone for one's vested interests. The paper aims to uncover the relevant meaning of Gandhian 'nationalism' by debunking its stereotypes in the present context. Many thinkers believe that nation and nationalism are new concepts as they are not too much old. Their emergence deals with erstwhile colonial countries' struggle with the dominant countries. In other words, it seems to come out from the resistance between the subjugated and the imperialist countries. But it is very limited view of defining it as it dismisses the realities of colonies. Their history is put on the margins. They do not have their space in the line of writing their indigenous worldviews. Gandhian philosophy opens up new perspective on this agenda of writing about Nationalism. His critical aroma over these ideas is rooted in ancient India from where he takes up plethora of material to say many more for existence of the subjugated countries. He has a lot of experience from the world countries which makes him more liberal over the conceptualization of his thoughts.

Keywords

Mahatma Gandhi, Nationalism, Political Narrative, Colonial, Imperialist, Indian Politics, Patriotism, Swadeshi Movement.

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To think of Gandhian 'nationalism' is to think of diverse interpretations and ideas as it is not easy to define them in a sentence. Various stereotypes are scattered over the analysis of Gandhian thoughts for years. Scholars weave their ideas on Gandhi by their political interests. They see him through the lenses of their ideological stances. Therefore, Gandhi has become a political narrative which is used by everyone for one's vested interests. The paper aims to uncover the relevant meaning of Gandhian 'nationalism' in the present context.

Many thinkers believe that nation and nationalism are new concepts as they are not too much old. Their emergence deals with erstwhile colonial countries' struggle with the dominant countries. In other words, it seems to come out from the resistance between the subjugated and the imperialist countries. But it is very limited view of defining it as it dismisses the realities of colonies. Their history is put on the margins. They do not have their space in the line of writing their indigenous worldviews. Gandhian philosophy opens up new perspective on this agenda of writing about nationalism. His critical aroma over these ideas is rooted in ancient India from where he takes up plethora of material to say many more for existence of the subjugated countries. He has a lot of experience from the world countries which makes him more liberal over the conceptualization of his thoughts.

The nationalism of Gandhiji is not absolutely limited but, to some extent, wide. In fact, it is the first step to entering Internationalism. Internationalism, as Gandhi realizes is possible only when nationalism become a fact, that is, when people belonging to different countries have organized themselves and are able to act as one man. This unitary membership of the universe is internationalism in the sense of Gandhiji.

Gandhi's nationalism seems simple and straightforward: he wanted an independent Indian nation state and freedom from British colonial rule, But in reality his nationalism rested on complex and sophisticated moral philosophy.

According to him just as the cult of patriotism teaches us today that the individual has to die for the family, the family has to die for the village, the village for the district, the district for the province, and the province for the country, even so country has to be free in order that it may die, if necessary, for the benefit of the world. "My love, therefore, of nationalism or my idea

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of nationalism is that my country may become free, that if need be the whole of the country may die, so that the human race may live. There is no room for race hatred there. Let that be our nationalism.”¹

“Our nationalism can be no peril to other nations in as much as we will exploit none, just as we will allow none to exploit us. Through Swaraj we will serve the whole world.”²

“For me patriotism is the same as humanity. I am patriotic because I am human and humane. If is not exclusive, I will not hurt England or Germany to serve India, Imperialism has no place in my scheme of life. The law of a patriot is not different from that of the patriarch. And a patriot is so much the fewer patriots if he is a Luck-warm humanitarian. There is no conflict between private and political law”.³

“It is not impossible for one to be internationalist without being a nationalist. Internationalism is possible only when nationalism becomes a fact, i.e., when peoples belonging to different countries have organized themselves and are able to act as one man. It is not nationalism that is evil; it is the narrowness, selfishness, exclusiveness which is the bane of modern nations which is evil. Each wants to profit at the expense of, and rises on the ruin of, the other. Indian nationalism has struck a different path. It wants to organize itself or to find full self-expression for the benefit and service of humanity at large. God having cast my lot in the midst of the people of India, I should be untrue to my Maker if I failed to serve them. If I do not know how to serve them I shall never know how to serve humanity. And I cannot possibly go wrong so long as I do not harm other nations in the act of serving my country”.⁴

India embraces Humanity:

“I do want to think in terms of the whole world. My patriotism includes the good of mankind in general. Therefore, my service of India includes the service of humanity..... The whole scheme for the liberation of India is based upon the development of internal strength. It is a plan of self-purification. The people of the West, therefore, can best help the Indian movement by setting apart specialists to study the inwardness of it. Let the specialists come to India with an open mind and in a spirit of humility as befits a searcher after Truth.....”⁵

“I believe in thought-power more than in the power of the word, whether written or spoken. And if the movement that I seek to represent has vitality in it and has divine blessing upon it, it will permeate the whole world without y physical presence in its different parts”⁶

“If I can say so without arrogance and with due humility, my message and methods are, indeed, in their essentials for the whole world and it gives me keen satisfaction to know that it has already received a wonderful response in the hearts of a large and daily-growing number of men and women in the West.”⁷

“With my limitations of which I am painfully conscious, I feel somehow that my experiment must be restricted to a fragment. What may be true of the fragment is likely to be true of the whole..... I am pining for the assistance of the whole world. I see it coming...But I know that we shall have to deserve it before it comes it comes upon us like a mighty flood, a flood that cleanses and invigorates.”⁸

One of the most important concepts of Gandhi’s political views is the concept of Swadeshi. The word Swadeshi literally means belonging to one’s own country’. Gandhi also means, more or less, he same thing by this word and yet this word has assumed in Gandhi’s thought a special significance simply on account of the emphasis that has been laid on it and also on account of its very comprehensive use. Gandhi has applied this notion in almost every sphere of life – social, political and economic.

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Ordinarily Gandhian interpretation of the swadeshi is given a political colour and is taken as the basis of 'Nationalism'. But, in Gandhi swadeshi has both a positive and a negative sense. Positively it provides a political and economic principle which can be viewed as having a nationalistic tinge, negatively it gives out a basis for internationalism.

The broad meaning of swadeshi is 'the use of all home-made things to the exclusion of foreign things'. But, this is too broad a definition of swadeshi. Properly speaking the use of home-made things to the exclusion of foreign things is recommended only under a condition, only when such a use is necessary for the protection and growth of home-industry. If the use of foreign things is beneficial, and does not adversely affect the cottage industry, then, swadeshi will not be insisted upon. Gandhi is aware that even swadeshi, like any other good thing, 'can be ridden to death if it is made a fetish'. That is a danger that must be guarded against. To reject foreign manufacturers merely because they are foreign and to go on wasting national time and money in trying to promote such manufactures for which the country is not suited would be a folly and a negation of the spirit of swadeshi.

Swadeshi, therefore, is not a narrow parochial doctrine, on the other hand, it is based on the recognition of human limitations and capacity for work and service. We have to provide food, work and employment to our immediate neighbors, and therefore, we shall have to work for what can guarantee these to all of us. The Swadeshi doctrine, therefore, is a doctrine employed for the protection of home-industry. It in no way, suggests that the use of foreign goods must be discarded at all cost.

Such an attitude would presuppose a feeling of hatred or at least a dislike for everything foreign, and such a feeling is against the spirit of Ahimsa. Swadeshi is also one of the ways of non-violence and therefore, a true believer in swadeshi will not harbor any ill-feeling towards foreign things. Gandhi would be prepared to buy from any part of the world things that are needed for the growth of his country, but he would insist on the use of swadeshi when such foreign things are sought to be imported that hamper the economic status of home-industry. For example, any article is swadeshi if it protects the interest of the people even if the capital and talents are foreign and are under the effective control of the country. For example, even if Khadi is promoted by the use of foreign capital and talent, it is swadeshi. Gandhi would be prepared to import medicines, useful tools, technical instruments etc. without hesitating even for a second. Swadeshi, thus, is not an outright rejection of everything foreign, it of course is based on a feeling of concern for the economic and political stability of one's own country. Thus the notion of swadeshi raises the question of nationalism and internationalism.

Gandhi's insistence on swadeshi raises a very genuine doubt in the minds of many: is it not a fact that by insisting on swadeshi Gandhi is contradicting himself? On the one hand he asserts that there is an essential unity of everything, and at the same time he is preaching 'love for one's own country', that is, love for only one aspect of mankind. Gandhi is aware of this and he solves this problem in his own way. He says that nationalism and internationalism are not essentially opposed to each other.

The first requirement of love is self-transcendence, going beyond the individualistic considerations of the self. This process goes on extending itself from family to society, from society to nation, from nation to humanity and so on. In fact, Gandhi feels that the act of love has to be particularized in order to be effective. The general love for everything, at least in the beginning, will have no apparent significance unless it is localized. Just as there cannot be a friendship except between this and that individual, so there cannot be any love unless it is for something. Love of the nation, or swadeshi, therefore, has to be there. Nationalism is a merit.

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And yet, it is neither against Internationalism nor does it create any obstacle in the way of love for mankind in general. Gandhi believes that a man can serve his neighbors and humanity at the same time, the condition being that the service of neighbors is in no way selfish or exclusive and does not involve any exploitation of any human being. Talking about his own patriotic feelings or nationalism he says, "My patriotism is both exclusive and inclusive. It is exclusive in the sense that in all humility I confine my attention to the land of my birth, but is inclusive in the sense that my service is not of a competitive or antagonistic nature. In fact, if I do not carry ill-will against any country and if I do not do anything against any country, my nationalism is not against inter-nationalism. Nationalism in itself is neither an evil nor against inter-nationalism, it becomes an evil when it is based on narrowness and selfishness." 9

According to Gandhi, nationalism, in reality is a precondition of inter-nationalism. The question of inter-nationalism arises only when nationalism becomes a fact, that is, only when people have already organized themselves into different nations and are prepared to act as one unit. There must, therefore, be a healthy inter-dependence among different nations, which would be possible only when a feeling of love a sense of inter-nationalism is developed in the different nations. Gandhi says that true inter-nationalism presupposes the reality of national units and also the recognition of the fact that all nations are equal. The moment we start making distinctions between big and small nations, inter-nationalism will be disturbed. Another requirement of inter-nationalism is that every nation must appreciate and realize the value and importance of non-violence. Gandhi recommends that every nation should go for disarmament voluntarily.

Thus, it is apparent that the rule of love which Gandhi applies to man, he applies also to nations. Just as man is asked to be loving, kind and friendly to others, so nations are also asked to be loving and friendly to other nations. Inter-nationalism is an extension of nationalism, which is nothing but the extension of man's self-sacrifice and love. "The individual, being free, sacrifices himself for the family, the latter for the village, the village for the district, the district for the province, the province for the nation, the nation for all." 10

Thus, above described views of Gandhiji entail that nationalism, internationalism are complementary to each others. "Internationalism in the sense of Gandhiji is nothing but the old Indian principle of the Universe as one family-Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam. The Universe, in Gandhiji's view, is one and only one family and different countries are its members." So there must be cooperation, sympathy, tolerance, mutual help among all the countries for the progress and peace and harmony.

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