Unit 8

Gandhian Perspective on Development

Contents

Learning Objectives

After going through this unit, you will be able to explain:

- Gandhian concept of development;
- the importance of indigenous technology in the process of development; and
- the difference between material progress and meaningful development from Gandhian perspective.

8.1 Introduction

Gandhian perspective on development is distinct on two counts. It prioritises (i) self-development over material prosperity; and (ii) development of villages, rural industries and working at the grass roots over modern machinery, technology and mills. Gandhi toured the entire country extensively using different modes of transport ranging from bullock carts to trucks. He is also known for traveling long distances on foot. Thousands of people would collect to hear him or even to get a glimpse of him. Most of his endeavours were geared towards social and economic uplift of the downtrodden, the poor and the helpless.

In this unit, we will begin with Gandhi's ideas about machinery in a general sense and khadi and village industries in a specific sense. We then move on to the concept of education and what meaningful education should consist of. This leads us to the concept of material progress and development. Gandhi makes a distinction between material progress and "real progress". For him "real progress" is rooted in *swadeshi*. It may be understood that machinery, education, and economic uplift are the core issues of development. We end with an alternative viewpoint, which questions Gandhian perspective of development.

8.2 Khadi and Village Industries

Gandhi firmly believed that the essence of *swadeshi* consisted in producing enough cloth to wrap each Indian, which would be possible through spinning and weaving by the masses. The people needed to pledge themselves to the use of *swadeshi* cloth only. He added that the use of Khadi cloth for covering the body has greater implications. In his own words, "Khadi must be taken with all its implications. It means a wholesale *Swadeshi* mentality, a determination to find all the necessaries of life in India and that too through the labour and intellect of the villagers. That means a reversal of the existing process. That is to say that, instead of half a dozen cities of India and Great

Britain living on the exploitation and the ruin of the 7,00,000 villages of India, the latter will be largely self-contained, and will voluntarily serve the cities of India and even the outside world in so far as it benefits both the parties" (Gandhi 1968: 289).

The potential to produce khadi lying at the fingertips of an individual makes him/ her empowered and proud of the identity. For Gandhi, khadi was a means of uniting the Indians, of acquiring economic freedom and equality. More importantly, khadi marked the decentralisation of production and distribution of the "necessaries of life".

Box 8.1: The Spinning Wheel

"If we feel for the starving masses of India, we must introduce the spinning wheel into their homes. We must, therefore, become experts and in order to make them realise the necessity of it, we must spin daily as a sacrament. If you have understood the secret of the spinning wheel, if you realise that it is a symbol of love of mankind, you will engage in no other outward activity. If many people do not follow you, you have more leisure for spinning, carding or weaving" (Gandhi 1968: 336).

The spinning wheel was a means of the economic upliftment of the poor and the despised on the one hand, while on the other it afforded considerable appeal on moral and spiritual grounds. The towns in the country that had flourished at the expense of the villages now had the opportunity to compensate the villages by buying cloth, which was spun and woven in the villages. This initiative went a long way in knitting economic and sentimental ties between people in the villages and in the towns. The spinning wheel became the centre of rural development. Anti-malaria campaigns, improvement in sanitation, settlement of disputes in villages and several other endeavours for enhancement of the quality of life in villages revolved around, in one way or the other, the spinning wheel. It provided an alternative means of livelihood to the underemployed and the unemployed people. For Gandhi, its adoption by the common people marked the protest against industrialism and materialism (Nanda 1958).

More importantly, the use of khadi reflected the faith and commitment of the masses to the practice of obtaining the necessities of life through the labour and intellect of the villagers. This marked the empowerment of the people in villages by making them self-sufficient and generating the confidence and the potential in them to overthrow their exploitation by the city dwellers. The use of khadi also ushered in the process of decentralisation of production and distribution of the basic necessities of life. Gandhi urged congressmen to promote khadi rigorously.

Gandhi said that other village industries stand apart from khadi primarily because they do not involve voluntary labour in large numbers. These industries may continue as a "handmaid of khadi" but they cannot exist without khadi. It may, however, be added that Gandhi did agree that the village economy could not be complete without the operation of village industries — those of hand-grinding, hand-pounding, soap-making, paper-making, tanning, oil-pressing and others of this kind. What lay at the core of this thought was the urge to make the villages self-sufficient.

He maintained that impoverisation of India was inseparably linked with the increasing use of machinery. He noted that hand weaving as an occupation continued to thrive well in Bengal and other places where cloth mills were not established. On the contrary, the condition of workers, particularly that of women workers, was deplorable in Bombay (present-day Mumbai) and other cities where mills were set up. As a corollary, a boycott of machine-made

goods in favour of hand-made goods would infuse new life in the social and economic condition of the country. He added that since it was not easy to close down the established, functioning mills, it was appropriate to register resistance and protest at the time they were being set up. He was deeply convinced about the ability of the village people when he argued that no machinery in the world was a match for the willing hands and feet of the village people and of course the few simple wooden instruments that they make themselves. Gandhi was convinced that agriculture did not need revolutionary changes. The Indian peasant required the introduction of the spinning wheel, not the hand loom. This was because the handloom could be introduced in every home unlike the handloom. The restoration of the spinning-wheel would solve the economic problems of India at a stroke.

The All-India Village Industries Association (with headquarters at Maganwadi) supported those industries in villages that did not require help from outside the village and could be run with little capital. It was hoped that such industries in the villages would generate employment and purchasing power in the villages. Interestingly, the Association took upon itself the responsibility of training village workers. It published its own periodical, the *Gram Udyog Patrika* (Nanda 1958).

Reflection and Action 8.1

What is the importance of the spinning wheel in Gandhi's scheme of development?

8.3 Education

Gandhi firmly believed that basic education was an important means to develop the body and the mind. This stood out in sharp contrast to the common understanding of the concept and function of education as knowledge of letters, and of reading, writing and arithmetic as the basic constituents of primary education. He said that there was a need to improve all our languages. India should adopt Hindi as the universal language for the country with the option of writing it in Persian or Nagari characters. Further, the English books that are indeed valuable need to be translated into different Indian languages.

Box 8.2: Gandhi on Religious Education

"My head begins to turn as I think of religious education. Our religious teachers are hypocritical and selfish; they will have to be approached. The *Mullas*, the *Dasturs* and the Brahmins hold the key in their hands, but if they will not have good sense, the energy that we have derived from English education will have to be devoted to religious education. This is not very difficult" (Gandhi 1968: 155).

Gandhi was convinced that excessive emphasis on English education would enslave the nation. He was sure that those who have received education through a foreign tongue could not represent the masses because the people do not identify themselves with such persons. In fact, they are identified more with the British than with the masses. It is commonly believed that people educated in the foreign tongue are not able to understand the aspirations of the masses, and therefore cannot speak on their behalf. On the contrary, instruction imparted in vernaculars leads to enrichment. Gandhi went to the extent of saying that the problems of village sanitation and others would have been resolved long ago and the village panchayats would have been a living fore suited to the requirements of self-governance. He did accept, however, that it was not indeed possible to do without English education altogether, at the same time adding that all those who have studied English needed to teach morality to their children through the mother tongue. Those who confine themselves to education in foreign languages undergo

strain and often commit themselves to imitating the west. This has far-reaching results on both, the body and the mind. Ideally, the school should be an extension of the home, which means that there should be no gulf between the impressions which the children gather at home, and those in the school. What he was asking for was continuity in terms of the social environment and value system at home and in the school.

For Gandhi, education did not imply spiritual knowledge or spiritual liberation after death. In essence, knowledge consists of all that is imperative for the service of the humankind; and for liberation, which means freedom from enslavement to domination and from the ambit of one's own created needs. Education, therefore, has to be geared in this direction. According to Gandhi, our ancient system of schooling and the education imparted in those schools was enough because character building was accorded the importance it deserves. For Gandhi, character building was basic in any educational system.

The basic objective of meaningful education was to generate the potential in children to create a new world order. This, Gandhi felt, was possible by way of engaging in socially useful labour, i.e., labour in the service of welfare of humankind. The idea formed the basis of his *nai-talim, which* was conceptualised in a way that would involve a harmonious development of the body, mind and soul. The process incorporated involvement in craft and industry as a medium of education. The hub of his ideas on education rested on the mission to place learning of a craft at the centre of the teaching programme whereby, spinning, weaving, leather-work, pottery, metal-work, basket-making, book-binding and other such activities that were often associated with the lower caste people or 'untouchables' were performed by upper caste pupils and literacy and acquisition of knowledge which were the prerogative of the upper caste people were available to the 'untouchables'. He wanted the schools to be self-supporting or else providing education to all the children would never become a reality. Further, financial independence would bring with it freedom from intervention by politicians and political parties.

The issue of adult education was crucial to Gandhi. Through adult education he envisaged to open the minds of the adult pupils to the greatness and the vastness of the country and to generate awareness about the ills of foreign rule by word of mouth. It was widely realised that several villages were ignorant of the evils of foreign rule and of the means to overthrow it. He sought to combine education through word of mouth with literary education.

8.4 Economic Progress and 'Real Progress'

In a speech delivered on December 22, 1918, at the Muir College Economics Society, Allahabad, Gandhi candidly addressed the question, "Does economic progress clash with real progress?" Economic progress largely refers to material growth and advancement, often without a ceiling.

What is commonly argued in favour of material growth is the necessity of providing for the daily wants of people much before thinking or talking about their moral welfare. Moral progress is wrongly believed to come along with material progress. There is no denying that the requisites for survival are food, clothing and shelter but for this, there was no need to look up to economics or its laws.

Box 8.3: Gandhi on Material Progress

I should not have laboured my point as I have done, if I did not believe that in so far as we have made the modern materialistic craze our goal, in so far are we going downhill in the path of progress. Hence the ancient ideal has been limitation of activities promoting wealth. This does not put an end to all material ambition. We should still have, as we have had, in our midst people who make

the pursuit of wealth their aim in life. But we have always recognised that it is a fall from the ideal. It is a beautiful thing to know that the wealthiest among us often own that to have remained voluntarily poor would have been a higher state for them. "You cannot serve God and Mammon is an economic truth of the highest value. We have to make our choice. Western nations are groaning under the heels of the monster—God of materialism. Their moral growth has become stunted. They today measure their progress in pounds, shillings, and pence. American wealth has become the standard. She is the envy of other nations. I have heard many of our countrymen say that we will gain American wealth but avoid its methods. I venture to suggest that such an attempt, if it were made, is foredoomed to failure. We cannot be wise, temperate and furious in a moment. I would have our leaders to teach us to be morally supreme in the world" (Tendulkar 1982: 196).

He firmly believed that working for economic equality called for abolishing the conflict between capital and labour. In operational terms, this means bridging the wide gulf between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have–nots. Gandhi adhered to the doctrine of trusteeship.

Unemployment and underemployment in villages were because of acute pressure on land and absence of supplementary industries. He realised that the decay of the village industries tightened the noose of poverty around the neck of *Harijans*. Removal of untouchability and economic amelioration, therefore, were inextricably entwined with each other. Against this backdrop, *swadeshi* acquired new urgency. He asserted that it was not enough that an article of use was being made in the country, it was important that the article was made in the village. He explained that some articles produced in villages might cost more than those produced in towns and cities, but one should still purchase them because purchase of these articles distributed wages and profits to the poor and to those in dire need (Nanda 1958).

Reflection and Action 8.2

From Gandhian perspective, what is the difference between material progress and real progress?

The Gandhian approach to development in the real sense was directed at the poorest of the poor for whom acquiring two square meals a day was uncertain. In one village, he said, "Empty your pockets for the poor". This was his one line speech. Money spent on all that exceeded the bare requirements for survival was treated as wasteful. Alternatively, it could be used for providing meals to the poor.

Box 8.4: Gandhi on Non-Possession

"The rich have a superfluous store of things which they do not need and which are therefore neglected and wasted; while millions are starved to death for want of sustenance. If each retained possession of only what he needed, no one would be in want, and all would live in contentment. As it is, the rich are discontented no less than the poor. The poor man would fain become a millionaire, and the millionaire a multi-millionaire. The rich should take the initiative in dispossession with a view to a universal diffusion of the spirit of contentment. If only they keep their own property within moderate limits, the starving will be easily fed, and will learn the lesson of contentment along with the rich" (Gandhi 1968: 191)

8.5 *Swadeshi*

Gandhian perspective on development hinges on the concept of *swadeshi* or home economy. In operational terms, *swadeshi* called for self-governance, self-reliance, and self-employment of people, particularly those in villages. Economic and political power in the hands of the village assemblies would significantly reduce their vulnerability to the outside market forces and enable the villagers

to develop a strong economic base and give priority to local goods and services. The village community, then, would emerge as an extension of the family with cooperating individuals who share a common bond rather than competing individuals each of whom seeks to establish himself/herself over others.

Box 8.5: Gandhi's Village of Dreams

In one of the letters to Jawaharlal Nehru wrote, "The village of my dreams is still in my mind... my ideal village will contain intelligent human beings, they will not live in dirt and darkness as animals. Men and women will be free and able to hold their own against anyone in the world. There will be neither plague, nor cholera, nor smallpox; no one will be idle, no one will wallow in luxury. Everyone will have to contribute his quota of manual labour" (Nehru cf Gandhi 1968: 99).

The principle of *swadeshi* implies the use of indigenous products and services. Gandhi explains the articulation of *swadeshi* in different spheres of life. One who follows *swadeshi* restricts himself/herself to the ancestral religion, that is, use of the immediate religious environment. Similarly, in the domain of politics, *swadeshi* implies making use of indigenous institutions; in the domain of economics, *swadeshi* implies the use of only those things that are produced indigenously. Now, in stressing on the use of home-grown and home-crafted products, Gandhi in no way implied that defects and deficiencies in these should be overlooked or allowed to be perpetuated. Instead, he stressed that the defects and deficiencies should be rooted out.

He felt that much of the poverty of the people could be removed if the spirit of *swadeshi* was followed with rigour in "economic and industrial life". It was his conviction that "if not one article of commerce had been brought from outside India, she would be today a land flowing with milk and honey". He clarified that it was a delusion to suppose that the duty of *swadeshi* begins and ends with spinning the wheel. In fact, *swadeshi* is a whole philosophy of life which involves dedication to the service of others. Communities practising *swadeshi* would not hanker after unlimited economic growth that becomes a limiting factor to self-development. Gandhi said that creation of unnecessary wants hampers self-growth. Moreover, the race for unprecedented economic growth leads to competition and strife, which are destructive. *Swadeshi*, on the other hand, is the way to peace with oneself, with neighbours, and with nature. It then is a kind of religious discipline to be undergone with total disregard of the physical discomfort it may cause to individuals. A person who is committed to *swadeshi* is not excessively concerned if a particular article that he/she needs is not available because it is not produced indigenously. The person learns to do without it and without several others which he/she may consider unnecessary.

Box 8.6: Who is a *Swadeshi*?

"A votary of *swadeshi* will carefully study his environment, and try to help his neighbours wherever possible by giving preference to local manufactures, even if they are of an inferior grade or dearer in price than things manufactured elsewhere. He will try to remedy their defects, but will not because of their defects, give them up in favour of foreign manufactures" (Gandhi 1968: 215).

8.6 Alternative Viewpoint

Development and progress as goals are based upon an ideal world of buttons as solutions wherein increasingly impressive and complex tasks are accomplished by the push of a button or the switch of a lever. Gandhi argues, however, that the technologies of creation of comfort are also able to generate discomfort and destruction. He points out that what is good for saving lives may lead very quickly to a spin-off production that ends lives. The mechanical principles that

allow the construction of ambulances and trains are also the basis for construction of guns capable of killing thousands in the most minor of border skirmishes. In the case of lawyers, for instance, conflict resolution is so painless and so sanitised that motivated lawyers "advance quarrels instead of repress them" (Gandhi 1938: 59). Similarly, doctors become so good at cleaning up the damage, one can sustain, that people stop being careful or coping with their pain. As Gandhi put it, "I am cured, I over-eat again, and I take his pills again" (Gandhi 1938: 63). In both examples, modern civilisation first presumes a competitive, unkind, and disconnected subject, then designs a system to treat that subject. It is here that the myopia of modern civilisation becomes apparent. While particular acts may seem justifiable, for example "one man ploughs a vast tract by means of steam engines, and can thus amass great wealth" (Ibid: 35), in a broader context it may be less so. Mass mechanised farming may produce "more", but it may also destroy crop diversity, flood the local market, displace workers, cause pollution, and be unsustainable; only within a very limited short-term context would it seem scientific and even optimal.

Gandhi opposed what he considered a colonial attempt at reducing the world to its component parts. As he prophetically complained, "they wish to convert the whole world into a vast market for their goods"(Ibid: 41). For him, this would be to rob the world of its important spiritual and personal content, to enslave it into being a commodity. Against this perception, Gandhi offers the model of 'real' civilisation as rooted in spiritual and intellectual tradition (Ibid: 69-71). Gandhi does not advocate simple destruction of the edifices of modern civilisation, but contests and opposes its ideological tenets calling for change in our mentality, the way we think.

Of course, Gandhi's critique was not without ample, though often meaningless, responses from defenders of development. The retorts usually focused on both the comparative failures of Gandhi's paradigm to produce "more" and on the ignorance and anarchy associated with the traditional. These arguments are classically symptomatic of the kind of myopia and paranoia of modern civilisation's assessment of others. For Gandhi, one of the dangers of this discourse was its ability to convince people to think within the framework of development, progress, and 'civilisation' (Gandhi 1938: 35). This encouraged a kind of orientalism in them wherein no one is superior to the promethean defenders of development and all others are judged by the internal standards of technology. Many claimed the village was a bastion of ignorance and violence. Gandhi's rejoinder is simple: just to criticise modern civilisation is not to endorse all things that are not modern civilisation — an enemy's enemies are not necessarily our friends. Rather, Gandhi supported the idea to prevent ignorance, poverty, and viciousness in the village, but not going about doing this by the means of modern civilisation (Ibid: 71). While critics could understand that Gandhi's vision of *Hind Swaraj* was not interchangeable with savagery, they did think that it both encouraged primitivism and that modern civilisation was a better solution to these problems than what they considered 'realistic' alternatives. To an extent others did agree with Gandhi, it was often because they thought they had found a useful tactic, a strategic tool they could salvage from Gandhi's thoughts. This fundamentally misses the point of the critique because it tries to incorporate its conclusions back into the system it critiques.

Instead, the real source of the impasse between Gandhi's critique and modern civilisation's defenders was the incommensurability of their discourses. Gandhi considers Nehru as a political ally, as the best of the options and a personal friend (Chandra 1975). However, they never saw eye- to- eye on issues of development and technology – Gandhi described this as a "big difference of opinion" between them (Ibid). Instead, Nehru took Gandhi's criticism as "an

obscurantist text" (Ibid) and restated the tenets of modern civilisation. He felt it might not be perfect, but if we can provide better homes for more people, then we 'must' do that. Nehru deployed the typical demand of almost orgiastic immediacy as a requirement for practice of the theory, "Congress should not lose itself in arguments over such matters which can probably produce great confusion in people's minds resulting in an inability to act in the present" (Ibid).

8.7 Conclusion

It may be understood that the Gandhian perspective on development is holistic in the sense that it encompasses social, economic and spiritual growth in synchrony. The two major themes that were undercurrents in some of his most influential writings and speeches in the context of development were, (i) the use of the spinning wheel and the importance of khadi; and (ii) local self-governance and self-reliance for social and economic development.

What is more important to note is the fact that it does not emphasise material progress and growth. Instead, it argues in favour of 'self-development', and self-reliance through decentralisation of control. He was sure that empowering of the village people and strengthening the village economy were critical factors in the process of development. In fact, meaningful development was one in which the principles of *swadeshi*, among others, were adhered to.

8.8 Further Reading

Gandhi, M.K. 1938. *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule.* Navajivan Trust: Ahmedabad

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