



Pandemic India and Gandhi: Probing Gandhi's Ideas in Times of Pandemic

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Abstract

The Corona pandemic has changed everything unexpectedly. This unexpected change needs a special attention for a permanent form of solution or an alternative. Gandhi's aphorisms and his various activities remains a vital matter of concern to face the present challenge. His idea of good health through good food habit, good sanitation, self-discipline (Brahmacharya), physical exercise by doing our own work for ourselves, idea of the amelioration of villages through agricultural improvement, idea of the development of village industries to down unemployment retains much significance against this pandemic situation and its various manifested problems. All his ideas again bring our attention back for an alternative against the problem of unemployment, problem of sanitation and problem of all-round development including health problem in this pandemic period.

Keywords- *pandemic, health problem, sanitation, immune power, employment, model village*

*"He is a healthy man whose body is free from all the diseases; he carries on his normal activities without fatigue. Such a man should be able with ease to walk ten to twelve miles a day, and perform ordinary physical labour without getting tired. He can digest ordinary simple food. His mind and his senses are in a state of harmony and poise."*¹

-M. K. Gandhi

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Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, a man of all-time relevance, remains significant in times of pandemic as well. Gandhiji was against of science. But he was a naturalist. He maintained one of his popular sayings, “My life is my message” throughout his life. This small aphorism has retained its deep significance for all of us in a real sense even today. The severe pandemic COVID-19 was not in the world during his lifetime. He had seen another pandemic situation while he was in Africa and faced that situation in a bold way.ⁱⁱ The current paper lives with only few principles or methods to which Gandhi followed to face the pandemic situation, and certain other needful principles taken from his various important sayings, which retains certain extent its deep significance for the present situation. Therefore, this paper is a humble attempt to look into the pandemic situation that has recently aroused in India and to deal with it in a Gandhian way, which stands in front of us as an alternative and something we really require in the age of pandemic.

Understanding pandemic India through print and electronic media:

At present, the world is going through a very critical juncture. The number of Covid-19 cases is growing on such a large scale that it is beyond people’s imagination. In case of India, the situation is even worse. Now a situation has come, where even the Corona patients are not getting a bed and proper care in hospitals.

In India, large scale people’s migration (around 23 million migrantsⁱⁱⁱ) due to COVID-19, has taken place from urban to rural areas. In rural areas people are living as beggars, without having any job opportunities for the last few months. Girls are not safe in quarantine centres as they are being raped by care takers.^{iv} In addition to that, most of the rural people do not use mask, majority knowingly and a smaller section unknowingly which symbolises a dearth of education or lack of awareness.

Today the nation’s economy is no more in strength. Complete devastation of economy has become a new chapter for us. While the whole nation is running after a permanent kind of solution of the very problem with the help of modern scientific research, a small section of Indians has recently declared Corona, an *Avataar* (incarnation of God) and it will kill every non-vegetarian. They have suggested further that *Gomutra* (urine of cow) will only cure them.^v Similarly, let us consider two other statements, one that came in the *Indian Express* that, Rama temple construction will lead to end of Covid 19^{vi} and another in News18 that, Corona virus will disappear if all Muslims offer Namaz at Mosques on Eid.^{vii} These statements are something

which needs special attention. Long back Periyar had once said looking at the society of India that due to the lack of scientific idea people of our society used to think severe pandemics as a curse of God or Goddess. In a very sorrowful voice he had once said in pre-independent India that despite being a part of modern science and society, there was a section of people in our society who still propagates un-scientific things only to materialise their desired objectives.^{viii} Even after independence the very thing is still visible with an object of the spread of religious fundamentalism immediate back of above stated statements.

Even after 73 years of India's independence, villages are far away from expected level of development. People here even today to some extent understand the concept of village with certain features like lack of health facility or complete absence of modern health care Centre, lack of qualitative educational centres for student's mental development, traditional form of agriculture, lack of employment facility and absence of a sanitized environment and so on. Still the situation of village more or less is same as was outlined long before by Periyar in 1944 in one of his statement in pre- independent India.^{ix} Today corona patients are forced to go town hospitals either to check their health or to be cared. Now, people are really feeling the absence of a modern health caring centre in their village level. We have very limited number of health care centres at the village level. In addition to that there is acute shortage of professionals such as nurse, male health care takers, and doctors.^x Our government does not seem to care much for health care.^{xi}

Rural economy is still characterized by lack of sufficient amenities such as clean air to breath, standard education to learn, good health care facility for good health, and a dearth of employment opportunities. Recently, whoever has backed to villages is staying as beggars due to lack of engagement mediums. This is the reason why educated villagers are leaving their villages and feeling fine to work as slaves in a private company. However, according to the report of the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), in the pandemic around sixty-six lakhs of professionals have lost their jobs. Along with them, around fifty lakhs of industrial labourers have been thrown out of their workplace.^{xii} The report of International Labour Organisation and Asian Development Bank shows that the worst affected fields during the pandemic are agriculture and construction. Youths of 15 year to 24 year are the worst affected age group.^{xiii}

While this is the scenario of India, M.K. Gandhi's aphorism as well as his activities retains much relevance for our study. Though he is not with us, his sayings remain before us as one of the alternatives to stand against the various challenges at present.

Ideas and points of relevance of Gandhi

One aspect of Gandhi's legacy that makes him relevant not only for India in normal times but also for the whole world at the time of pandemic generally consists of some tips to cope with the challenges of a changing world.^{xiv} Even today, his various aphorisms bear importance to a certain extent. Let us have a look on those.

On good health and disease:

The first significant point of Gandhi's relevance of today lies with his tips for good health, when everyone is looking for good health with strong immune power to surpass the present pandemic period. The important thing that he highlighted on the matter of health during his life was that people of the nation should be free or independent from health point of view. He emphasized that all kinds of natural products have different kinds of vitamins and protein. Proper exercise, simple food habit, proper bathing, and exposure to sunlight will keep us well and will help us in the process of enhancing our immune power in our body.^{xv} His tips for good health also included fresh air to breathe, good food to eat and fresh water to drink. Sanitation is a mirage for India even at present despite there being implementation of different sanitation programmes.^{xvi} Similarly, as per his statement, the complete deletion of opium, alcohol, and tobacco from our daily habit list can keep us well.^{xvii} Gandhi even once said immediately after 24 hours of India's independence alcohol must be banned.^{xviii} Luckily the present situation never allows alcohol to be consumed as doctor's committee have declared that there are many possibilities to get infected by the Corona virus for those who have the habit of taking alcohol.^{xix} This saying of Gandhi remains very significant not only for the present situation but also for our future because his suggestion have the potentiality for good immunizing power in human body. Gandhi had dreamt of an India without any severe diseases like plague, cholera, and smallpox in his *Rama Rajya* concept, which only could be fulfilled through good food habits and good environment.^{xx}

On rural economy:

Again, Gandhi's importance on rural economy remains much relevant against a situation of large-scale unemployment at present which has taken a demon form in India. Recently, people have been migrated from urban areas to rural areas in a large scale and have been living as beggar. Gandhi stressed much to the building of national economy on the basis of cottage and small-scale industry. As per his argument people could get large scale engagement only through this kind of economy.^{xxi} He further stated, every good required to be produced in our country not depending upon other. This would bring us independence economically.^{xxii} According to him there is also the possibility of human development for the worker himself. Human becomes resourceful, and becomes successful in elevating his economic status. He remarked that village industries are means of self-expression.^{xxiii} The problem of unemployment could not have become so severe as it is at present, if importance could have been given to those industries.

On Agriculture:

Like the Gandhian form of rural development, his sayings on agriculture retains same sense of its importance to face the demon like unemployment problem. According to him agriculture needs to be developed as a profession.^{xxiv} Organic manures must be used to enhance the fertility capacity of soil. Additionally, in order to keep attention of the farmers towards agriculture, price of agricultural produces needs to be fixed in a balance way. By doing so, India could provide an alternative to the large number of unemployed people, which would ultimately develop the whole region economically.^{xxv} In the matter of food distribution private media needs to be banned and in place of that co-operative societies should be the distributing media. Financial grants must be given to agriculturalists for amelioration and this must be on the basis of land size and need.^{xxvi}

On a model village with sanitation:

Gandhi argued that every village needs to be self-sufficient.^{xxvii} Similarly, Gandhi's concept of Swaraj also involves the concept of self-sufficiency of every town and village from food and cloth point of view.^{xxviii} Gandhi defined the concept of self-sufficiency as a means of economic independence. For him economic independence means the economic uplift of every individual, male and female, by his or her own conscious effort. All will have enough clothing, and enough food, including milk and butter.^{xxix} Gandhi went on to say regarding a model village that:

“An ideal Indian village will be so constructed as to lend itself to perfect sanitation. It will have cottages with sufficient light and ventilation, built of a material obtainable within a radius of five miles of it. The cottages will have courtyards enabling the householders to plant vegetables for domestic use and to house their cattle. The village lanes and streets will be free of all avoidable dust. It will have wells according to its needs and accessible to all. It will have houses of worship for all, also a common meeting place, a village common for grazing its cattle, a cooperative dairy, primary, and secondary schools in which industrial education will be the central factor, and it will have panchayats for settling disputes. It will produce its own grains, vegetables and fruit, and its own khadi. This is roughly my idea of a model village....”^{xxx}

For complete amelioration of India, village industry, cottage industry and home industry need to be promoted. Gandhi saw village industries as a possible means of human development tool for the worker himself. It places him on his merit. The very development brings man's dignity and his independence. Indirectly it says that there would be no requirement to stay as slave under other company.^{xxx} Regarding the matter of village sanitation he stated that the villagers should take the responsibility to ensure proper sanitation at village level. Gandhi once advised that every youth of village level should be given training both on the basis of their interest and their skills. By which they could be engaged in village level.^{xxx} Again, it will help in the matter of reducing unemployment. Had we been a member of a model village, the present problem of unemployment could not have come to existence.

On women protection:

This very point reminds us the present situation of India, where girls are not even safe in quarantine centres. Abusing cases have been marginally increased in the pandemic period. Father of the nation, on the matter of girl's movement made his famous full statement that in India a kind of situation has to be developed in which a young girl could, without danger, move about alone even at dead of night.^{xxx} It will ensure a good atmosphere for girls. Gandhi's advice of conducive atmosphere for girl's movement insists us for an honest life.

On International commercial transaction:

The most significant point of his aphorism was that his idea of opposition to the concept of international level commercial transaction. Behind his very opposition he had certain justifications. Firstly, he was thinking of the enslavement of India by the adoption of international level commercial transaction. And secondly, he had in his imagination that one

severe pandemic will get transferred to another country because of such transaction. This kind of opposition was inevitable for him as he had experienced the disease transfer concept while he was in South Africa in the case of Black Plague and in India in the case of Spanish flu.^{xxxiv} And this exactly what has happened to India initially is that the corona Virus has come from china indirectly through other countries like Italy and Iran.^{xxxv}

Eleven vows of Gandhi: An alternative during pandemic

The below mentioned eleven vows of Gandhi was followed by him when there was no corona at all. These eleven points were not even proposed by him to face any kind of pandemic situation. Side by side these vows do not bear any sense of science. These are very common principles which Gandhi followed, but these principles are uncommon by nature and are difficult to be followed in our life in a strict manner. These eleven points have been simply taken from his various followed principles and countless aphorisms. But still these retain their importance as an alternative during the pandemic. Let us have a look on those vows or principles.

Non-Violence is the first vow of Gandhi and an important locution. It represents no violence. It makes us aware of love. Without love non-violence is impossible. Love is really required in this pandemic situation against a violent or hatred form of environment to which India has recently witnessed.^{xxxvi} People of many parts of rural India have started hating their near and dear those are found Corona positive. But they don't understand that loving care would bring a positive result with smooth handling of Corona matter. **Truth** is the second expression of Gandhi. It suggests us to confess the truth during this critical situation. Confessing of truth will allow us to evaluate our role and self-duty. It is important against a situation where people are apprehending to declare the truth of Corona positive afraid of social boycott. Similarly, **Brahmacharya** is the third vow of Gandhi. It represents self-discipline. In this critical juncture the government of India has formulated certain rules and expects us to be self-disciplined, like using of mask on our face, regular lavation of hands and so on. This kind of vow of Gandhi encourages us to be self-disciplined.^{xxxvii} If this kind of vow would be followed by everyone in this critical juncture than people could keep themselves away from Corona simply.

Fourthly, Gandhi emphasized on **physical labour**. According to him it changes our life style. He used to say, 'Weave your own garments by yourself.' Of course, he had other intention behind this saying. But in general, physical labour ensures good health. To boost immune power in our body physical exercise is indispensable as has been recently proposed by doctors of India.

It is highly required for us for our protection from Corona disease. Another very important thing that he said, that we **don't have to lie** or must not hide our truth. What we see happening in India nowadays is, our people deliberately hiding their symptoms of corona. But this vow will keep away us from hiding the truth. Sixth important vow of Gandhi was **control over food**. In the period of pandemic, we need good and simple food for our bodily protection. Gandhi used to say those who do not have control over their own tongue and look for complex food, generally get affected by different diseases.^{xxxviii} Hence we must be conscious of our food habits. And luckily taking of liqueur has been denounced and people have been asked to not to take outside food.

Gandhi too emphasized the quality of **courage**. According to him, fear brings us a lot of problems. Fear never allows us to think of something or to do something in proper way. Hence at this critical juncture we need to be very courageous to face the challenge of Corona. And even Corona patients are being asked to not to lose patience and live with positive psychology and courage. **Equality among all religions** was another important point of vow in his life. This vow of Gandhi is highly required to stand against Corona disease. Attribution of equality to all religious groups will ensure us a good union. And a good union will ensure us a team work. Hence, we need to stand together irrespective of religion against a chaotic situation that has recently aroused in India, which has been discussed in the pandemic India section, where the task of facing Corona disease has been imposed on a particular religious group by another religious group. **Importance to swadeshi** gives importance to profession along with self-realisation of the power of human resource. The present call of the prime minister of India "*AatmaNirbhar Bharat*" will be fulfilled only through this vow.^{xxxix} Now people have started thinking of the development of rural regions through the turning of each house in rural India into a centre of production.^{xl}

Gandhi's vow against **untouchability** too retains its significance during the pandemic period. Gandhi's personal involvement with the plague patients voluntarily in South Africa with the object of saving their life, instead of hating them remains an exemplary instance for today.^{xli} What is most important today for us in the age of pandemic is voluntary service and loving care because in India at present some Covid 19 patients are facing the problem of boycott or social ostracism by their villagers and their family members even after they have been cured completely. Though physical touch is strongly recommended to be avoided during the existing situation, still touch is allowed rarely only to family members with certain conditions. However,

boycott either by villagers or family members never symbolises a good shine of humanity. But Gandhi's teaching against untouchability indirectly guides us that we need to welcome them and make an attempt to stand against corona.

Non- possession of much wealth was emphasized by M.K. Gandhi for a simple and joyful life. He used to emphasize on this particular thing by saying that being a human we must not hanker for wealth. We have to be satisfied with minimum required wealth. During this pandemic period here, we have a section of people without sufficient food. This shows our economic inequality. Naturally, one might ask the question: do we need so much wealth while a section is still struggling for good food in this precarious situation?^{xlii}

Conclusion:

From the above narration it is obvious to claim that Gandhi's ideas, aphorisms and several performed activities retain their significance to face the challenge of Corona to certain extent and appears in front of us as an alternative for us. In the matter of sanitation, the advice of Gandhi directly relevant in the age of pandemic. Gandhi's idea of a village with good sanitation and again the sanitation responsibilities upon the villagers remains very innovative for the present time. Additionally, tips for good health along with a good immune power to fight against different diseases retain our attention at the time of pandemic. Importance to physical exercise and exposure to sunlight remains another matter of importance not only for the present period but also for the future. Loving care towards patients would be helpful to have a positive mind setup among the patients, which would naturally bring a positive psychology with high curing capacity. Self-discipline or Brahmacharya of Gandhi would bring us consciousness towards disease and would insist us to use mask, keeping of courage and so on.

His idea of village development plan is highly required at present. The current problem of large-scale unemployment at village level due to the economic devastation can be minimized to some extent if the standard of villages could be improved. Moreover, the other professions (village level industries) at village level needs to be given importance. Gandhi's advice for training to the village youths on the basis of skills should be taken care of by the government because even villagers possess a wide variety of educational qualifications and it is the need of the recent time against the demonic unemployment. It could act as a problem-solving weapon against the problem of rising unemployment.

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