

Gandhian and Marxist Ethics: A Comparative Study

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Abstracts

Gandhi was a great revolutionary thinker. Like Gandhi everybody knows about Karl Marx a great humanist. If we compare the ethics of two distinguished revolutionary thinkers of the world we find that one is antagonistic to the other. While Gandhi gives emphasis on the development of virtues, individual freedom, Marx on the other hand denies the freedom of the individual. Gandhi's ethics tells us that, it is the inherent obligation of man to be moral besides everything else. On the other hand, Karl Marx does not believe in any unchangeable norms. According to him, our social and economic status is always changing according to the law of dialectic. So, the status of morality in Marxist ethics must also be in a state of continuous change. This paper is mainly revisiting the moral view of M. K. Gandhi and Karl Marx, which is very essential in the moral crisis of the present day world. The paper is to show the narrowness of the materialistic view of life with the help of the Gandhi's ethical principle of non-violence.

Keywords: *ethics, non-violence, materialism, religion.*

Introduction: It is absorbing study to us in the present age that a comparison between the ethics of Gandhi and Marx. Lenin is ingested in Marx and the shadow of Tolstoy spreads over Gandhi. Gandhi was a great revolutionary thinker. He tried for a major change in human nature. He believed in the absolute oneness of God and also of humanity. Gandhi subscribed to the theological belief that all life in its essence is one, and the humans are working intentionally or unintentionally towards the realization of that identity. The present world which is shaking under the stabbing of hot and cold wars and is threatened with utter destruction due to the invention of powerful atomic weapons must try to understand Gandhi's moral philosophy. Marxism is radical humanism. In fact Marx was the first philosopher who said that the world needs to be changed. The early Marx anguished by the alienation of men from each other highlighted humanism. Young Marx believed in the predominance of man, in the opposition to all external

authority that frustrates human possibilities, in emphasizing the relational character of human reality. The fundamental difference between Gandhi and Marx lies in their different approaches towards life and the universe. All other differences, whether of ends and means or of ideas about political, social, economic, moral, religious order, arise from this basic difference. The common feature of modern man is to search for justification of morality which leads us to the question 'why should we be moral at all?' To find out a possible solution to this question Gandhian ethics may cope up with this problem. We cannot make a man to be moral by enforcing some rules on him. Gandhi's ethics tells us that, it is the inherent obligation of man to be moral besides everything else.

While Gandhi gives emphasis on the development of virtues, individual freedom, Marx on the other hand denies the freedom of the individual. His only aim is to reconstruct the social order. The former advocates the doctrine which maintains that, life and welfare of society depends upon man's character i.e. his moral qualities, or we can say the individual effort, the self-improvement and the life of an individual is driven under the force of his moral nature. So, the change of social structure will depend upon the human character. The latter view believes in applying force to deprive the privileged classes of their wealth. These opposite creed and ideology is suggested by Karl Marx. But it is true that any change in the social structure should be brought about consistently without perverting the eternal values. The comparative study of this work pivoted on the ideologies of the two great thinkers, Gandhi and Karl Marx known as 'Mahatma' and 'Mahamuni'. One is giving emphasis on spirituality and the other supports the scientific terminology. The ways and method of revolution of both the thinkers are different. One believes in non-violence but the other on violence. The former is better than latter, because the result of it last long.

Ethics:. Karl Marx does not believe in any unchangeable norms. According to him, our social and economic status is always changing according to the law of dialectic. So, the status of morality in Marxist ethics must also be in a state of continuous change. The ever changing nature of history will dictate a new kind of moral view for Marxist. Marx does not believe in absolute ethics, rather he believes in relative ethics. According to him, the moral standard is set by economic forces, operating at the present time. There is no freedom of the will. The mode of production of the material means of existence determines the moral life of man. The aim of Marxist ethics is to the reconstruction of human society. On the contrary, Gandhi wants to construct a new social order on the basis of love and self-sacrifice.

He wants to give equal opportunity to an individual to rise to the height of his personality. He believes in change of heart and voluntary surrender of possessions for the welfare of the poor. There is no place for violence in his scheme of the new social order. Love and non-violence are the foundation of the social structure, what he wants to reconstruct.

According to Gandhi man is a complex being. Man is not merely a physical being. He has consciousness, reason, conscience, will, emotion and similar other qualities. In fact Gandhian conception of the nature of man is based on his metaphysical conviction. Man transcending his own separate will and the common moral entity are interdependent. Thus according to Gandhi the development of the society is only possible by means of the improvement of its individual members. He says unless the freedom of the individual, no social progress is possible. An individual must be a follower of non-violence. In Gandhi's ethics non-violence is the foundation of the social structure.

Principles of ethics : According to Gandhi, ahimsa is the basic principle of ethics. He develops a new outlook of life with the help of the doctrine of ahimsa and tries to solve all social, political and economic problems in the light of this principle. He also tries to solve the problems which face humanity today. His basic principle of life is based on truth. He prefers to say truth is God, rather than God is truth, because we are the sparks of truth. This is the foundation of his religion. The realization of truth is not possible without a complete merging of oneself into the limitless oceans of life. The end of human life is to the realization of God. To achieve this end the principle of ahimsa is the means of life. The purification of self is the first and foremost duty of man to achieve the highest goal. Gandhi was influenced by the principle of Ahimsa preached by Buddhism and Jainism. His ethics become stronger by the influence of Tolstoy's absolute altruism. According to Tolstoy, the true self would be realized by dint of self-sacrifice alone. Moral goodness is identical with altruism.

Marxist ethics is rooted in the dialectical materialism and the class-struggle. According to Marxist dialectic, everything in the universe including society is in the state of constant change. This change helps the society to move upward after the elimination of various social and economic class distinctions. The next social development in history will be the move from capitalism to socialism. This will inevitably changes the moral ideals of society.

Religion: Gandhi was primarily a man of religion. His religion was based on truth, love and non-violence. So according to Gandhi religion is the expression of the permanent nature of man, the permanent aspect is the aspect of divinity- the aspect of essential goodness present in every man. He believed that true religious spirit has the capacity of changing one's nature because it is the expression of the good elements present in man. Religion has the power which enables the individual to promote and develop a sense to the right and the good, and makes him a truly moral man. Religion involves a conscious and sincere love and striving for Truth. That is why Gandhi said that there is no religion higher than the Truth and Righteousness.

Marx saw religion, in the first place, as a reflection of people's actual conditions and realities or the product of alienation in society. It is the dissatisfactions produced by the socio-economic order that rapid to create illusions. According to him, religion arises to meet the need for ideals that would sacrilege and protect the falsified perception of false consciousness and self-alienation created by the inconsistencies in the social order. Religion is the reflection of man's depression on earth, but at the same time it persuades people to accept this miserable present social order by raising their hope of happiness from this world to heaven. As a reflection of social realities, religion in Marx's understanding, is also a mode of acquiescence from the protest against the sufferings and depressions of the capitalist exploitation. In his own words " Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heart less world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless condition. It is the opium of the people."¹ According to him religion acts as an opiate to dull the pain produced by oppression and make the oppressed passive and anaesthetized. It plays a useful but illusive psycho-therapeutic role by bringing consolations that make its believers to forget their dissatisfactions. It is simply a misguided attempt to make life more sufferable.

Spiritualism vs. Materialism: Gandhi is a spiritualist. So, on every aspect of his life there is a deep impact of religion. He is the staunch believer of God. That is why he does not give any importance to the materialistic view of life. On the other hand, Karl Marx does not believe in any unchangeable norms. According to him, our social and economic status is always changing according to the law of dialectic. So, the status of morality in Marxist ethics must also be in a state of continuous change. The ever changing nature of history will dictate a new kind of moral view for

¹ Marx and Engels 1975: 39

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Sarvodaya and Communism: Marx described communism as a form of society which the proletariat will bring into existence through its revolutionary struggle. According to Marx, communism is not only the abolition of private property but also the abolition of state and abolition of classes. It will be a classless and stateless society in which government of men will be substituted by administration of things. Marx imagined communism as the final solution of the conflict between existence and essence, freedom and necessity. Gandhi's Sarvodaya society is based on love, it proceeds on the faith that a sarvodayi will also be prepared for maximum possible self-sacrifice for the good of others. The end of all activities, social or political, has to be nothing else but the upliftment of everybody. The ideas of sarvodaya are against the present social and economic inequalities, worship for money, unhealthy competition and duality in the conduct of people at home and outside. It aims to reconstruct the society on the basis of truth, non-violence, non possession, physical labour, tolerance and equality.

End and Means: According to Marxist ethics, end justifies the means. There is no freedom of will. Man's actions are determined by the economic forces. He is a creature of environment. The moral standard is set by economic forces operating at the present time. The major principle of Marxist ethics includes the theory of equality, theory of freedom, theory of progress, theory of identity of ends and means and lastly the approximation of arm revolt. Marx looks upon violent means as right and indispensable. In Gandhian ethics means are after all everything while in Marxist ethics means and ends are correlated. According to Gandhi, the end is the 'goal' and the means is the 'way' of the realization of the goal. Means cannot be separated from the end like as 'the way' cannot be separated from the 'goal'. Gandhi considered a morally worthy end can be accomplished only by adopting morally pure means. It means a good end cannot justify any or every means. If a good end is to be achieved, it is also necessary that the means adopted for the realization of the end is also good. This is why Gandhi gave great significance to means.

Ideal State: The final aim of both of them is the establishment of stateless and classless society, but their means for achieving the aim are different. Marx thinks violence, war and revolution as the indispensable means for a classless society. But according to Gandhi stateless society can be established by evolutionary revolution and non-violent, non-

cooperation. One is spiritual and the other is materialist in their outlook. Gandhi believes in democracy but Marx believes in the dictatorship of the proletariat. He wants to give maximum powers to the workers. In Gandhian ethics we find the concept of upliftment for all. Gandhi is the staunch supporter of individual liberty, without which social change will be meaningless.

Conclusion: We would find that, non-violence is the best way of life than violence. The human progress is inevitably depends upon the above principle. It is true that humanity cannot be enslaved imperialistic capitalism, with atom bombs and other destructive nuclear weapons, which threaten humanity with extinction. After the comparative study, we come to the conclusion that spirituality is better than the materialistic view of life. Individual freedom and development is the main task of our life. The rejuvenation of the individual to become the guardian of his dignity and self-respect is mainly spiritual in nature as human dignity accrues to man from his soul rather than the body. Gandhi's ethics drifts us to strengthen our will-power, self-determination, self-confidence. This inner power of man is the driving force to bring change in the social, political and spiritual level of life. The broad outlook of Gandhi's ethics is universalistic in nature. Gandhi's ethics strengthen our will-power, self-determination, self-confidence. On the contrary, Marx wants to develop his entire theory on the economic structure of the society. He is a materialist hence he gives materialistic and economic interpretation of history. But man is not limited in the economic arena, he is more than that. That is why there is an urgent need for Gandhian ethics to win over the entire humanity with the power of love. It avoids bloodshed, chaos and confusion. Love is unifying. It gives unity and harmony, a reign of peace and joy of life.

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