



International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal homepage: www.ijrpr.com ISSN 2582-7421

Local Governance in the Light of Gandhi's Political Philosophy: Challenges and Possibilities

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores local governance in India through the lens of Mahatma Gandhi's political philosophy, focusing on the principles of trusteeship, the dignity of labour, and Gandhi's approach to resolving the conflict between labour and capital. Gandhi's vision of Gram Swaraj emphasised morally grounded self-rule, participatory decision-making, and village-level autonomy. His theory of trusteeship proposed that wealth and power should be held in trust for the welfare of the community, offering an ethical foundation for decentralised governance. Applied to local bodies today, trusteeship encourages transparency, social responsibility, and leadership rooted in service rather than authority. Gandhi's understanding of labour placed equal value on manual, agricultural, and artisanal work, recognising labour not merely as an economic input but as a moral practice essential to human dignity. This perspective provides important insights for strengthening rural livelihoods, promoting skill-based industries, and ensuring labour participation in local governance processes. Central to Gandhi's economic thought was his non-adversarial approach to labour: capital relations. Rejecting class conflict, he advocated cooperative production, voluntary restraint, and dialogue as means to harmonise interests. These ideas hold contemporary relevance as local governance institutions confront issues such as informal labour, economic inequality, and the erosion of community-based production systems. The paper concludes that while structural challenges - centralisation, bureaucratic inertia, and elite dominance - limit the realisation of Gandhian ideals, the principles of trusteeship, dignity of labour, and moral conflict resolution offer enduring possibilities for ethical, inclusive, and sustainable local governance.

Key words: *Local Governance, Trusteeship, Labour, Labour-Capital Conflict, Decentralisation, Rural Development.*

Introduction

Gandhi's views on labour are part and parcel of his basic economic ideas evolved from his broad political, sociological and philosophical ideals. These ideals are directed to the moral development of human beings, real economic progress, provision of basic needs for life and existence, economic self-sufficiency and the guarantee of economic freedom, justice and equality (Kumar,2022). Thus, it is desirable to have a background of the basic economic ideas of Gandhi and an introduction to his trusteeship principle. Gandhi's views about labour are scattered in his writings. For the sake of simplicity of analysis, these views will be presented under the sub-heads - bread labour, industrial relations, conflict between labour and capital, dignity of labour, employer-employee relationship, trade unions, rights and duties of labour, strikes, conflict resolutions, wages and profit, working conditions, working hours, child labour, women labour, etc.

- Understand the basic tenets of trusteeship theory
- Explain Gandhi's views on different dimensions of labour
- Understand the Gandhian views on conflict between labour and capital and measures to resolve the conflict.

Economic Ideals of Gandhi

Truth, non-violence and sarvodaya based maximisation of social welfare that invariably includes individual welfare, is the guiding principle of all social action and policy in Gandhi's stream of thought. To him, welfare includes material as well as spiritual. Full employment, economic equality and swadeshi constitute three major objectives of Gandhian economic system (Kandi,2024). Therefore, he advocated reduction in economic inequalities. To Gandhi, wealth does not mean welfare. His is the economics of basic human needs including food, clothing and shelter. He was against the concentration and acquisition of wealth beyond a point. According to him, it was necessary to voluntarily reduce wants particularly when majority of the people are living below poverty line. Gandhian economics is highly interlinked with ethics. "Economics that hurts the moral well being of an individual or nation is immoral, and therefore, sinful. True economics never militates against the highest ethical standard, just as all true ethics to be worth its name must at the same time be also good economics" (Behera,2022). Gandhi advocated decentralised and market-negotiated economic system wherein economic decisions

are taken by individuals. Under such a system, private property exists and production is owned by either private firms or by cooperatives of workers and farmers. Material incentives for the least paid numbers of the society and moral incentives for elite have been recommended as motivating force in the production process. Gandhi was against the use of labour-supplanting machinery in a labour surplus economy like India. Machinery is permissible if it does not deprive masses of people of the opportunity of labour, if it increases efficiency, and does not make people slaves (Khundrakpam et.al,2024). In Gandhi's view, true economics cannot ignore moral values. The basic purpose of his meta-economics was to achieve economic self-sufficiency by restricting meta-needs. His idea was to save the labour force from being de-humanised by the onslaught of industrial civilisation of his time.

When a few who ought to hold the economic power in trust for others from whom they derive it, use it for their own cause, and to the detriment of the rest, the inevitable result will be the deprivation of the few. Under such a situation, Gandhi's advocacy for trusteeship theory and cooperation between employer and employee will not work. In the materialistic worldview wherein maximum consumption, utility maximisation, wealth acquisition and expansion are highly valued, the success of trusteeship theory and Satyagraha appears to be difficult. The caste-ridden social stratification and vote bank politics in the name of caste and religion further widens the gap between different communities making Gandhian way of solving the problems more difficult (Dallmayr,2022). The experiment with truth and non-violence was proposed to be carried out in a system that became explosively violent and aggressive not only during alien rule but also against the internal socio-economic inequalities, exploitation and injustice.

Even Gandhi himself could not control the mob-violence in the case of outbreak of violence in August 1942. In spite of the above arguments, certain Gandhian views on labour are/ will be relevant in the 21st century in the following manner. In the wake of rapid changes in the information technology and consequent speed up of globalisation process, competition has become a key factor for entrepreneurs' survival in the global market. For that bringing efficiency and productivity have become unavoidable for entrepreneurs, which in turn, demand the cooperation between employers and employees (Rai et.al,2021). It is, therefore in the changed context of 21st century challenges that Gandhi's view about cooperation between employers and employees has become highly relevant. Similarly, in order to update the workers with the fast changes in the technology, workers need to be trained and retrained from time to time. The developed countries have opted for the materialistic approach as a way of life and the developing countries are being tempted to move towards that direction. A careful scrutiny of the facts will reveal that this materialistic approach, to a significant extent, has been instrumental in generating the passions for more and more goods. The roots of today's serious problems (like climatic change, environmental degradation, widening gap between the rich and the poor, jobless growth, tensions, etc. lie in adhering to this approach in an unquestioning manner. In such a situation, Gandhi's advice to control the excessive consumption and minimising the wants is the need of the hour and highly relevant. Gandhi was not simply an ideologue (Bal,2025). He was a practitioner and demonstrated the efficacy of non-violence, truth, Satyagraha and cooperation, by putting an end to the labour exploitation of Indigo workers under 'Tinkathia' system in Champaran by way of satyagraha and non-violent means. Organising the labour in Ahmedabad and his several movements in South Africa for the cause of labourers illustrate the working of his ideas in practice. Gandhi's ideas against child labour are relevant and international agencies like International Labour Organisation and UNICEF have passed conventions against child labour. Various NGOs and other national and international agencies have also been working towards the elimination of the child labour. Similarly, Gandhi's views on wages and strikes have been well-endorsed by different organisations and are and will be relevant in the 21st century. 124 Gandhi's Social Thought

Trusteeship Theory

Trusteeship theory is deep-rooted in the 1st verse of Isopanishad and is the guiding principle in the Gandhian scheme of thought to resolve the labour problems. The theory envisages that rich should hold all their property in trust for the poor and expand it for their benefit. Similarly, each labourer should consider himself to be a trustee for the welfare of his fellow labourers. Thus, the trusteeship theory is not unilateral and does not Gandhi's View on Labour imply superiority of the trustee. It is perfectly a mutual affair and each believes that his own interest is best safeguarded by safeguarding the interest of the other. This extension of trusteeship principle is based on Bhagavad Gita's following verse: "May you propitiate the Gods and may the Gods propitiate you, and may you reach the highest good by this mutual propitiation". 'There is no separate species called Gods', according to Gandhi in universe, 'but all who have the power of production and will work for the community using the power, are gods-labourers no less than the capitalists' (Nutall, 2022). To Gandhi, truth and non-violence have been basic means to address labour problems.

Bread Labour

Labour had four components (i) Bread Labour (ii) Intellectual labour, (iii) Labour as an instrument for self-actualisation, (iv) Labour as a method of service to others. The term 'Bread Labour' coined by T.M. Bondaref, (a Russian Writer) and widely published by Tolstoy was well accepted by Gandhi. He stipulates that "man must earn his bread by labouring with his own hands". According to Gandhi, the principle of bread labour is identical to the principle of sacrifice contained in the 3rd chapter of Srimad Bhagavad Gita that '...he who eats without offering sacrifice eats stolen food'. A man does not have the right to eat without doing any physical labour. According to Gandhi, minimum physical labour must be performed by everybody from the philosopher to ordinary labour (Patnaik,2024). Obligation of bread labour by all, in the eyes of Gandhi would obliterate the conflict between capital and labour and the rich would deem themselves only trustees of their property. Further, it also minimises our wants. Intellectual work is important and has an undoubted place in the scheme of life. But physical labour is necessary and nobody should be exempted from it. The performance of labour or work in the spirit of Yajna as depicted in Srimad Bhagavad-Gita leads to self-actualisation. 'Yajna' refers to an act directed at the welfare of others, done without desiring any return for it. Performance of all activities of life in the spirit of renunciation dedicated to the cause of society leads to freedom and immortality.

Dignity of Labour, Labour Rights and Duties

Gandhi had high respect for the dignity of labour and firmly believed that labouring with one's body i.e. with hands and bodies is the law of one's being and there was no reason why one should hesitate and feel dissatisfied with one's labour. A nation may do without millionaires and without its capitalists, but it can never do without its labour. To receive higher wage for his labour is labourer's right and to work to the best of his ability for the wages he receives is his duty. Since Gandhi, during his experiments, found that labour discharges its obligation more effectively and more conscientiously than the master who has corresponding obligations towards the labourers, it becomes necessary for labour to find out how far labour can impose its will on the master (Singh,2023). The best way, in this regard according to him is that, labourers should understand their rights and the methods to get them enforced. For that they need proper education and training. He should remain non-violent even under grave circumstances of provocation. Drinking and gambling must be given up entirely.

Conflict between Labour and Capital

Conflict can broadly be divided into four categories: economic, political, social and methodological. The conflict between rich and poor, between labour and capital, between highly developed and backward regions and between the rural and urban areas are economic in nature. Gandhi recognised the conflict between the working class and the capitalists. He witnessed the exploitative nature of capitalist method of production in terms of dehumanised working conditions, alienation of workers, unfairly low wages and high incidence of unemployment caused by use of labour saving machinery. Conflict between labour and capital arises precisely due to two reasons – dependency with unequal power relations and goal incompatibility; dependency and unequal power, in the sense that the workers have to sell their labour power to earn subsistence and reproduce their labour power, which is a perishable commodity (Sharma,2021). The workers have low opportunity cost and do not own the means of production. Their bargaining power is much weaker and is completely dependent on their capitalist. This gives the capitalist the opportunity to exploit the labour. Thus, the exploitation of factory workers by way of payment of lower wages than what their productivity permits is the important source of conflict between workers and management. Capitalism distorts human dignity, liberty and equality. The workers are dehumanised, deprived and frustrated.

The goal incompatibility envisages that capitalists want to maximise profit but the labourers want to maximise higher wages and better working conditions. Genesis of conflict, according to Gandhi, is more due to the imbalance in the system where material factors are given excessive importance at the cost of moral factors. Gandhi advocated harmonious relationship between employers and employees with strong support to fair and just treatment to the workers. He vehemently argued for payment of fair wages to the labourers and went to the extent that "A labourer should prefer a state of utter starvation rather than to work at insufficient wage making it impossible to observe the primary laws of morality". At the same time he insisted that the workers are obliged to treat the business of their employers as their own business and devote their honest and undivided attention. Regarding employer-employee relationship, Gandhi viewed that workers' success lies in the success of the employees, and in their defeat, the defeat of employers. If workers' demand for hike in wages is accepted by the employers, it will satisfy the workers and they will remain ever grateful towards them. It will be beneficial for both of them. Gandhi, therefore, advised the employers to willingly regard workers as the real owners of the concerns which they have created. They should consider it as their duty to equip the employees with sound education drawing out the intelligence dormant in them. Workers have to realise their strength that no part of the world can do anything without workers. However workers' success depends upon their truthfulness, courage, sense of justice and control over anger etc. Gandhi was of the opinion that whereas it is quite proper on the part of the labourers to insist upon their rights and privileges, it is imperative for them to recognise the obligations that every right carries with it. According to Gandhi, capital per se is not evil. It is its wrong use that is evil. Capital in some or other form will always be needed. However, capitalists will exist only as trustees.

Trade Unions

Labour plays a crucial role in Gandhian economics. He favoured the formation of trade unions in different places. The activities of trade unions should be based on non-violence, truth and arbitration. Trade unions are expected to safeguard the rights and interests of their members. They should arrange for the education- both general and scientific- for both men and women through night schools. Hospital, crèche, maternity home should be attached to every centre and education for the children of labour need to be arranged. They should be able to support themselves during strikes (Sen,2024). Gandhi organised labour in Ahmedabad on the basis of non-violence and democratisation and demonstrated it as a role model to run all the trade union organisations on the lines of Ahmedabad model. Trade unions should aim to elevate the labour to its deserved status. The intellectual and moral height of labour should be raised by sheer merit to make him a capable master of means of production.

Workers' Struggle:

Strikes, in Gandhi's opinion, are an inherent right of the workers for the purpose of securing justice. However, the moment the employers accept the principle of arbitration, resorting to strike must be considered as a crime. As labourers become organised, Gandhi's Social Thought strikes must be few and far between. As the labourers' mental and collective development progress, the principle of arbitration replaces the principle of strikes. To seek justice without resorting to violence, and by an appeal to the good sense of the capitalist by arbitration is lawful means (Bhalla,2024). A strike should be spontaneous and be not manipulated. There should be perfect cooperation amongst the strikers. It should be peaceful and there should be no show of force. The strikers should take up work either singularly or in cooperation with each other, in order to earn their bread. For successful strike, there must be a perfect correspondence between labour, the labour leader and the adviser of the labour leader.

During the lockouts resorted to by the employers, the workers should not: remain idle as idle resort to mischief, pass time by sleeping during the day or in gambling, go to the mills during the continuance of the lock-out. They should utilise some of their time in cleansing their houses spend time in reading books and increasing their knowledge and also teach the illiterates, those who know the art of tailoring, cabinet making or wood carving and engraving can find work for themselves, spend their time in learning some new and easy occupation.

Conflict Resolution

A struggle fought on the basis of true justice is beneficial to both sides. According to Gandhi, a struggle based on truth coupled with a sense of justice having no malice towards the employers is not only bound to succeed but will also generate good relations between the workers and the employers. To Gandhi in a struggle for truth, both sides need not be followers of truth. Even if one side keeps to the truth, the struggle for truth will succeed. If we fight non-violently and do not lose courage, we are bound to succeed in the end. Cooperation between labour and capital work wonderfully. But that can happen only when labour is intelligent enough to cooperate with itself and then offer cooperation with capital on terms of honourable equality. These conflicts can be resolved by educating the workers, and building organisation among them and thereby enabling them to realise their strength. Organised and enlightened labour can only dictate their terms. Gandhi believed that strong hearts, enlightened minds, and willing hands can brave all odds and remove all obstacles. The capitalists and labourers have to seek and win the cooperation of each other. However, this does not mean that labourers should accept exploitation. All conflicts between capital and labour end, if the labour is made aware of the fact that without its collaboration capital is utterly helpless. The sensitisation of labour towards its labour power will enable it to dictate its terms to the capitalists. Keeping in view the inter-dependent nature of capital and labour in the production process, Gandhi was of the view that capital and labour should supplement, help and come close to each other in unity and harmony. Gandhi does not believe in the supremacy of one over the other. By way of mutual cooperation, both can progress. Gandhi was against the political use of labourers.

Labour strikes may be resorted for the betterment of labourers and regulation of prices of their products. However, due care needs to be taken to ensure that: (i) the cause of the strike must be just, (ii) there should be practical unanimity among the strikers, (iii) strikers should be able to maintain themselves during the strike period without falling upon union funds, (iv) there is not enough other labour to replace strikers. In the following situations, Gandhi suggested, not to take recourse to strikes. In Gandhi's view, there is no room for violence in terms of *intimidation, incendiarism or otherwise in civil strike*.

Relevance of gandhi's views on labour in the 21st century

The relevance of Gandhi's basic principles i.e. non-violence, truth, satyagraha, cooperation, and trusteeship as a means to attain harmonious industrial relations and resolve the conflict between labour and capital in the 21st century are questioned on the following grounds: The proposition of trusteeship theory as a way to solve most of the labour problems is based on the belief in essential goodness of human nature whereas in practice, we observe selfishness in human nature. Under such circumstances, it becomes difficult to put many of the Gandhi's ideas into practice.

- Everyone must do labor wholeheartedly to realize the worth of their work and labor. Nobody's work can be considered as good or bad so that equality will be maintained. For ex-The work of barber should be given same importance as that of the work of a lawyer.
- Good of everyone is good of all- this will be realized by all.
- Human dignity and respect will be given high priority. Life of tiller and life of handicraftsman will be judged in equal footing.
- Various activities contributing rural economy such as agriculture, dairying, weaving, carpentry, and allied activities are encouraged in villages.
- People can realize the importance of life because this enables the formation of a classless and casteless society. No one can be treated as lower or higher in society.
- Village people can no longer be exploited in the hands of rich people and they became self-sufficient and can fulfill their desire. Indian villages will produce and supply to Indian towns by this way villages will be self sufficient. It will oppose foreign market causing mass production of commodities and gets it dumped into the village market and indirectly compels the villagers to purchase the goods produced by the foreigners and thereby leads to demolition of village production system. Khadi and Charkha are promoted along with small scale and medium scale industries.
- Economic activities should be made based on nature and laws of economy. No industry means no activity of violence and Gandhi wanted to minimize it. We will limit our wants as per the production by manual labor as nature will satisfy our needs, not our greed. Happiness will come in not desiring more and more goods and services. To Gandhi western materialism and industrialization had increased human wants. 'Production of mass' not the mass production will be the motto of his principle.
- If everyone is doing their work it will be more productive as well as income generating. The problem of hunger, poverty, disease, slavery, and discontent will be mitigated from society and it will guarantee higher standard of living and sound health.
- Value of labor will be realized in society and 'labor is the current coin, not metal.' Everybody must know how to produce their bread and realize the importance of physical labor.
- People will gain satisfaction, enjoyment from doing physical work which will raise the spirit of the person's working.

- There will not be excessive mechanization and industrialization that create pollution.
- Harmony, loving, caring and service will be brought in village.
- Basic necessities of life should be produced and people will lead a joyful life. Little use of machines renders people idle and unemployed. 15. People will do shorter hour work and get more leisure.
- It will curtail imperialistic exploitation of West towards people of Asia and Africa.
- Enhancement of equality in social relationship along with moral values is the need of the hour.
- Materialism and material possession of modern society are strongly opposed by Gandhi and he stressed on moral life with spiritual bliss which create conscience that will really improve of life of man. 19. Sustainable development without depletion of natural resources and damage of atmosphere should be ensured from the benefit of development.

Conclusion

Gandhi's political philosophy offers a powerful ethical framework for rethinking local governance in contemporary India. His principles of trusteeship, dignity of labour, and non-violent conflict resolution emphasise moral leadership, decentralisation, and cooperative economic relations. Applied to today's panchayats and local bodies, these ideas highlight the need for transparent leadership, community participation, and fair treatment of labour. While structural challenges such as centralisation, bureaucratic dominance, and socio-economic inequalities limit the realisation of Gandhian ideals, his vision of Gram Swaraj continues to provide meaningful possibilities for building inclusive, just, and sustainable local governance systems.

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