
The Toiling Masses and Liberation: Gandhi's Ideals for the Holistic Upliftment of Workers

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Abstract:*The working-class movement in British India has long been a central theme of discussion among historians. The formation of a working-class in India remains a subject of ongoing debate and scholarly inquiry. During the colonial period, the working-class movement was shaped and directed by various ideologies, making it difficult to identify an idiosyncratic character of the movement in India. The pressing issues faced by Indian workers under the capitalist structure became so urgent that they drew prominent national figures like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, C.R. Das, and many others into their fold. Gandhiji's unparalleled approach to the working-class movement has garnered both appreciation and criticism. The distinctive and profound ideas articulated by Gandhiji—such as non-violence, self-reliance, conciliation, and trusteeship—offered new insights into the existing workers' struggle, thus redefining their antagonism. To Gandhiji, labourers were not merely a component of the production process; rather, he regarded them as one of the strongest pillars in the nation-building programme, for whom he advocated holistic development. He proudly regarded himself as a labourer and envisioned the nation's salvation through their efforts.¹ This paper aims to explore Gandhi's ideals for the holistic development of the workers.*

Keywords: *Capitalist Structure, Self-reliance, Conciliation, Trusteeship, Nation etc.*

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Introduction

In the working-class movement of India, numerous national figures fervently dedicated themselves to championing the cause of workers. However, what set Gandhiji apart from all of them was not only his profound desire to embody the life of a toiling worker but also his

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unwavering commitment to living that ideal. Renouncing all the luxuries of life, he wholeheartedly adopted the simple, laborious lifestyle of the working masses, aligning his actions with his convictions. The establishment of several ashrams stands as a testament to Gandhi's ideology, embodying his commitment to simplicity, self-reliance, and the values of the toiling masses. Gandhi's lifestyle underwent a transformative shift in 1904 with the establishment of the Phoenix Settlement in South Africa, marking his transition from the life of a successful lawyer to that of a labourer. He not only upheld the dignity of labour as a principle but also actively embodied it, inspiring others to follow his example.² Gandhiji firmly believed that the salvation of the nation could only be realized through the active participation and contribution of the workers. Emphasizing the importance of manual labour, he stated, "...I feel that India's salvation lies in labour, in manual labour, which is not to be had by reading books or mental gymnastics."³ This reflected his conviction that true progress could only emerge from the dignity and efforts of the toiling masses. Gandhiji regarded the labourers as one of the most crucial contributors to the nation-building process and urged them to prioritize national interests over personal self-interest. While addressing the issues of Capital, Labour, and the Rowlatt Act in front of a massive gathering of labourers at Nagapatam on 29th March 1919, Gandhiji said, 'It is but a truism when I say that the future of India and, for that matter, of any country depends more upon the masses than the classes.'⁴

Gandhi's Vision for Holistic Upliftment: Nurturing the Workers' Moral, Social, and Economic Well-Being

For Gandhiji, the labourers were not merely a segment of the nation's population; rather, they were considered the most valuable resource for the nation's progress. While addressing a gathering at Madras Beach under the auspices of the Central Labour Board, presided over by B. P. Wadia on the rights and duties of labour on 15th August, 1920, he clearly emphasized the importance of labourers in the construction of the nation by saying, "A nation may do without its millionaires, without its capitalists, but a nation can never do without its labour."⁵ He sought to instil a sense of self-esteem and confidence among them, empowering them to ultimately solve their own problems. During the Champaran Satyagraha, which marked the beginning of Gandhiji's political career in India, he realized that legal measures alone could

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not ameliorate the plight of the peasants unless they developed confidence and fearlessness. As he himself stated, 'I have come to the conclusion that we should stop going to law courts. Taking such cases to the courts does little good. Where the peasants are so crushed and fear-stricken, law courts are useless. The real relief for them is to be free from fear.'⁶ This underscores his belief in empowering the peasants by addressing their psychological and social barriers, rather than relying solely on external systems like law courts. Wherever Gandhiji achieved success in advocating for the masses—be it in Champaran, Ahmedabad, or Malabar—he attributed the victory to their unwavering confidence and resolute willpower.

Holistic empowerment, encompassing the moral, social, intellectual, cultural, and economic development of workers, was a paramount concern for the Great Soul, Gandhiji, which made his ideology distinct from others. He identified the primary causes of their degeneration and vulnerability to the moneyed men,⁷ including indulgence in drinking habits, addiction to gambling, involvement in immodesty, ignorance of professional ethics, and a lack of interest in education—both for themselves and their children. While addressing the labour union in Colombo on November 16, 1927, Gandhiji urged workers to renounce alcohol, vividly illustrating its destructive nature. He stated, "A man under the influence of drink becomes worse than a beast and forgets the distinction between his sister, his mother and his wife. And if you really believe me as your friend, you will take the advice of this old friend of yours and shun drink as you would shun a snake hissing in front of you. A snake can only destroy the body, but the curse of drink corrupts the soul within. This, therefore, is much more to be feared and avoided than a snake."⁸

Moral development was always a priority for Gandhiji, who urged workers to cultivate their moral sense in a positive direction. He even placed morality above physical sustenance, calling on labourers to adopt the same perspective. By articulating the concept of self-restraint and moral conduct, Gandhiji urged the labourers to recognize the sanctity of the marriage bond and regulate their relationships, particularly with women, which had become compromised due to the conditions of living in close quarters. He acknowledged that poor accommodation and insufficient wages often forced workers to live in close quarters, making it difficult to maintain proper boundaries. He strongly advised the workers to quit such conditions, emphasizing the need for self-restraint and moral conduct. He said, 'If your means do not permit you to have separate and sufficient habitations so as to observe the laws of primary decency, you will refuse to serve under such degrading conditions and for such

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insufficient wages. I would honour you as brave men if you will accept a state of utter starvation rather than that you should labour on such insufficient wages as would render it impossible for you to observe the primary laws of morality.’⁹

Gandhiji was equally concerned about the mental development of workers, considering it the first and foremost criterion for shaping them into responsible citizens. He consistently advocated for workers to be the chief contributors to the nation-building programme. The Great Soul reminded them of their responsibilities alongside their rights unlike the contemporary trade unionists who focused solely on asserting workers’ right, much like how, in modern times, we emphasize fundamental rights while often overlooking fundamental duties. The early decades of nineteenth-century India witnessed numerous strike movements organized by the working class, which the apostle of non-violence deemed utterly futile. For Mahatma Gandhi, mental development was imperative to understand the significance of the principle of arbitration over the principle of strikes. He remarked, ‘...as your mental development progresses further you will find immediately that the principle of arbitration replaces the principle of strikes.’¹⁰ He urged the workers to cultivate professional ethics by performing their duties honestly, promoting a symbiotic relationship between employers and employees, and thus maintaining a sustainable approach. The Father of the Nation thus remarked, ‘While, therefore, you will insist upon adequate wages, proper humane treatment from your employers, and proper and good sanitary lodgings, you will also recognize that you should treat the business of your employers as if it was your own business and give to it honest and undivided attention.’¹¹

Gandhiji was an ardent worshipper of non-violence (Ahimsa), steadfastly adhering to this principle without deviation. Workers in contemporary India were often distracted and diverted by various philosophies propounded by different nationalist leaders; even sometimes, they inclined towards violence and attacked their ‘blacklegs’. He instructed the workers, ‘You must live and remain non-violent under circumstances however grave and provoking.’¹² Though Gandhiji envisioned a strike-less society, his political career ironically began with a movement involving strike action, namely the Ahmedabad Satyagraha. In an article titled ‘Gandhiji and Indian Labour: Pioneer Work’, written by Kanji Dwarkadas, a twentieth-century Indian writer, politician, and social reformer, and published on 12th February 1948 in The Times of India, the contribution of Gandhiji to Indian labour was

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summed up. The article highlighted four conditions laid down by Gandhiji in 1918 for a successful strike:

- Never to resort to violence;
- Never to molest blacklegs;
- Never to depend upon alms;
- To remain firm no matter how long the strike continued and to earn bread during the strike by any other honest labour.¹³

In this manner, the advocate of 'Ahimsa' and 'Satyagraha' discouraged the act of violence, the assault on non-strikers (blacklegs), the act of begging to fund the strike, and being indecisive while staying on strike. The reliance on public subscriptions or trade union funds to sustain a prolonged strike was, to him, an instance of both immorality and dependency. He strongly opposed the parasitic attitude of strikers during the Ahmedabad Satyagraha of 1918, encouraging them to earn money through alternative employment to financially support their prolonged strike action. To him, the fight should be waged on one's own strength, not on somebody else's; otherwise, 'the world will ridicule you by saying that you fought on the strength of other's money.'¹⁴ Thus, in almost every effort, Gandhiji emphasized a constructive approach, focusing on positive and sustainable solutions rather than resorting to destructive or revengeful actions.

Apart from all these concerns, Gandhiji was equally concerned about the proper sanitation, ventilation, and hygiene of their living spaces. The filthy and unhygienic living conditions of the workers did not escape Gandhiji's attention; he raised objections and actively brought the issue to the notice of the employers. He tried to inspire the workers to refuse offers of employment where they were not provided with proper accommodation, stating, 'You should give up insanitation and filth. Whether you are living in houses for which you are paying rent or in houses built for you by your employers, you should decline positively to live in dirty houses where there is no sunshine and where there is no air. You must keep your houses and yards absolutely clean of all dirt, of insanitation.' With an emphasis on personal hygiene, he further stated, 'You must keep your own bodies clean by washing them properly every day, and as your bodies and surroundings must be absolutely clean, so should your life be chaste.'¹⁵

Being a spokesperson for the 'Harijan' (God's Children), Gandhiji actively advocated for their rights and worked tirelessly to eliminate the stigmas and taboos surrounding their existence in

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society. In Indian society, lepers have long faced harsh treatment and been cruelly ostracized from the rest of the community. People believed leprosy to be a contagious disease and were scared of getting infected simply by conversing with lepers. Even lepers from the upper strata of society faced cruelty from the rest of the community and were treated as outcasts. In 1939, while providing shelter to a leper named Dr. Parchure Sastri at Sevagram Ashram, Gandhiji faced strong opposition from the other Ashramites. Gandhiji's association with lepers began during his time in South Africa, where he started working for their welfare. However, it was in 1935, in India, that he took leprosy relief efforts very seriously. By this time, several reports emerged about people infected with leprosy, primarily spinners and weavers (Khadi workers) from a village called Savli. Gandhiji began writing regular columns on leprosy in Harijan to raise awareness among the people, though it took a long time for his message to be fully understood.¹⁶

The revered figure altered the prevailing misconceptions about manual labour in Indian society and normalized it through various means, such as crafting an education policy called 'Nai Talim' and incorporating activities involving manual labour for the Ashramites. In the daily routine of the Sabarmati Ashram, from 7:00 AM to 8:30 AM, time was allotted for manual work, such as drawing water, grinding, sweeping, weaving, and cooking. The same tasks were repeated again from 3:00 PM to 5:00 PM.¹⁷ As an educationist, Gandhiji formulated an education policy that not only focused on the three R's (Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic) but also emphasized skill-development programs such as spinning, weaving, and other life-skills. Through this approach, he aimed to transform the education system into a life-centred one. In this regard, Gandhiji commented in Young India on 9th September 1926, "And if we want universal education in India, the primary education consists not in a knowledge of three R's but in a knowledge of hand-spinning and all it implies."¹⁸ He envisioned education as the best medium to train both the heart and the hand, rather than as a system for making money and dreamed of integrating intelligence with the production process to enhance its efficiency. He reprimanded the workers for neglecting to attend the night schools specifically established for them and for failing to send their children to school.

The relevance of his meticulously crafted education policy is timeless and continues to resonate even in the present day. B. Krishna reported in his article 'Gandhiji's Fight for Labour' in The Times of India, stating, 'Today the Association runs over 80 reading rooms

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and libraries in different working-class areas of the city. There is a kindergarten school for children, where the fee charged is merely a rupee a month. Other benefits include centres equipped with educational facilities and reading rooms for the workers' children. Children belonging to the lower classes like the Vagharies, Banjaras, and Thakaradas are admitted into these institutions and provided with amenities such as beds, blankets, and towels. The objective of the 'homes' is to help cultivate good habits and pleasing manners through social living. The students produce all the khadi material needed for their uniforms.¹⁹

Gandhian Ideals: Defending Dignity and Equality for Female and Child Workers

The burning issues of gender equality and the demand for equal pay for similar work for male and female workers remain highly relevant in today's world, issues which Bapu raised objections to long ago. He did not overlook the issue of child labour either. In India, since time immemorial, women workers have laboured even harder than their male counterparts, yet they are paid less. This remains particularly common, especially in the informal sector, even today. During colonial India, the exploitation of female workers escalated significantly. Although several inquiry commissions and acts (such as various Indian Factories Act implemented at different times) were appointed and passed by the British government to investigate the situation at the grassroots level, little was done to address the issue. Even at the national level, the percentage of female representation in trade union membership increased only from 3.5 percent in 1936-37 to 4.9 percent in 1946-47.²⁰

The multi-shift system prevalent in various mills (especially in the jute mills of Calcutta) was a well-established mechanism to exploit the workers. The introduction of electric lights in the 1890s in most of the jute mills in Bengal made the suppression of workers even more violent. In 1895, Chief Investigating Officer Walshe found that at Ganges Mill, 100 child workers were averaging 9 to 10 hours of work daily. According to the Adams Report, children working in Shift A, which accounted for nearly 50 percent of the total employed children, had to work for 13.5 hours. Those in Shifts B, C, and D, comprising 30 percent of the child workers, worked 7.5 hours, while the remaining 20 percent worked for six hours.²¹

Gandhiji found the salvation of women's oppression only through achieving economic independence, which, he believed, could be attained through khadi and village industries. He expressed his frustration by criticizing the societal expectation that confined women to the sole roles of bearing children, cooking for their husbands, and performing household chores.

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This stereotypical role assigned to women in society was, to him, a source of shame and nothing less than domestic slavery. Along with condemning the domestic status of women, he also harshly criticized their status in the workplace. Gandhiji lamented, "...when she went out as a labourer to earn wages, though she worked harder than the men, she was paid less."²² In Indian society, having more male children was often perceived as an asset, providing additional helping hands. Children were forced to earn a livelihood at a very early age, and to Bapu, they often worked at a level equal to that of adult male workers but were paid even less than female workers. He sought to put an end to such forms of exploitation. After Kasturba Gandhi's death in 1944, a fund called the **Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Fund** was established to initiate social welfare activities. While discussing the possible uses for the collected fund, Gandhiji prioritized providing medical relief for women and children in the villages. He recognized the urgent need to establish maternity homes and free hospitals in rural areas, addressing the needs of the most deprived segments of society. He wished to prioritize sanitation and hygiene efforts as the principal activities.²³

Conclusion

Gandhiji, a charismatic figure in our history, embraced people of all castes, creeds, races, and religions, empathizing with their struggles rather than merely sympathizing with them. A person filled with positivity, Gandhiji maintained a constructive approach in every step taken throughout his life. His farsightedness made him realize the importance of holistic development for workers, extending beyond their economic interests. Apart from raising demands for decent wages, he was equally concerned about the mental and physical health of the workers. Many nationalist figures of contemporary India fought for the rights of workers, but the Great Soul reminded them of their obligations as well, alongside asserting their rights, which made his ideals unconventional. He never aimed to be the solution to all the workers' problems; instead, he intended to instil a sense of self-reliance, enabling them to solve their problems on their own. To him, Satyagraha was an act of, 'self-purification ' and he urged workers to introspect their deeds and embrace the same. Strike was an ephemeral solution to labour disputes; hence, he promoted the principle of arbitration, introduced for the first time in the Indian subcontinent. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Gandhiji's ideals

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resonate with the highest stage of moral development, namely the 'Universal Ethical Principle' or 'Principled Conscience,' as propounded by Lawrence Kohlberg, an American psychologist.

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