

# Mahatma Gandhi and Tribal Development

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## Abstract

As we face intractable challenges of ever-increasing violence, growing inequalities, poverty, diseases and climate change all of which raise serious questions on our future existence, we once again turn to Mahatma Gandhi, his ideas and practices to face these adversities. The article engages with one such issue of tribes and the development initiatives of the state with ideas drawn from Gandhian economics and his model of social construction.

## Keywords

Tribal development and transformations, situating tribes in Gandhian approach, Gandhian economic, constructive programmes, work and livelihood, reinterpreting the Gandhian approach

## Introduction

There is a greater realisation now than ever before that humanity needs to pay more attention to Gandhian ideas and practices for a sustainable future. It is at our own peril we ignored him and are now paying the price for it. As we face intractable challenges of ever-increasing violence, growing inequalities, poverty, diseases and climate change all of which raise serious questions on our future existence, we once again turn to Mahatma Gandhi, his ideas and practices to face these adversities. The *Time* (1999) magazine in their last issue of the twentieth century ranked him after Albert Einstein as the most influential personalities of the last century. With his thoughts, speeches and actions, he proposed an alternative non-violent way of living, marked by primacy to truth, simplicity, frugality, love and respect for fellow beings. The man himself was an enigma. Nobody before him had imagined in such an effectual way the positive power of non-violence and its political implications.

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He derived his convictions by acting them out. He practised what he preached. Loved and respected by masses as Bapu or the father figure and revered as a Mahatma or a supreme soul, he also had his share of detractors (including his political opponents), who had many differences with him. It is these very differences which were a spring board of his self-reflections and self-corrections.

If Gandhi has been a challenge to understand, no less problematic have been the issues relating to transformations of our tribes. The seven decades of state-led efforts and numerous programmes of development have produced more contradictions and less positive transformations (Mitra, 2013). Although some individuals have gained in terms of government jobs and other benefits, not much differences are seen in the lives of the majority. The Annual Report of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2017–18) clearly indicates that nearly 45.3 per cent of tribes in rural areas and 23 per cent in urban areas continue to live under the poverty line, a figure much higher than the corresponding figures in context of the other sections of our population, including the dalits. The same trend is to be seen in all other indicators of development like the literacy rates, school dropout rates, access to safe drinking water and sanitation facilities like bathroom or toilet, infant mortality rates, under-five mortality rates, immunisation coverage and life expectancy. The scheduled tribes continue to be worse off than any other sections of our population. On the other hand, the atrocities reported against them especially human trafficking continues unabatedly (Ministry of Home Affairs, GOI, p. 331). Challenges are also seen regarding livelihood with shrinking traditional opportunities with declining forest resources, forcing many of them to take up employment as labourers in nearby areas. Land alienation also remains a major concern in tribal areas, as more and more outsiders continue to enter and usurp tribal land through legal or illegal means (Wahi & Bhatia, 2018). All this is in spite of the sincere efforts and many initiatives on part of the government. The term incompleteness refers to when something is not completed. There is something which we may call *incompleteness* and *disjunctions* about the various programmes. There are schools in the tribal area, but they are in poor maintenance conditions; there are toilets but not usable ones for there is no provision of water; there are classrooms but no teachers. If there are teachers and classrooms, there are only one or two teachers for five classes. Most schools in interior areas are without boundary walls. There are mid-day meal schemes, but funds are often delayed, and they have to manage on credit. The term disjunction refers to changes which do not contribute to effective functioning of the people. These activities have been performed more as bureaucratic accounting acts, where goals on paper become important than the actual tangible results. Programmes relating to education, economic, poverty, health and other infrastructure development seem to have reached a phase wherein after initial gains, there is a lack of ideas regarding what to do next. The issue what ails tribal development remains unanswered. The objective of this article is to engage with some of these problems through the insights drawn from Mahatma Gandhi.

It has been more than seven decades since Gandhi breathed his last, but his thoughts continue to inspire, and he remains a symbol of moral values and conscience. His teachings are routinely invoked by state and central governments to reflect on self-conduct, honesty and probity in public life. The government few

months back declared that all its offices and schools will prominently display the seven social sins of Gandhi, viz., 'wealth without work, pleasure without conscience, religion without sacrifice, trade without morality, science without humanity and politics without principle'. Along with this, the government also instructed the display of Gandhi's famous quotes 'Earth provides enough to satisfy every man needs, but not enough for everyone's greed' in departments and institutions in the states for guiding the moral conduct of the government employees. In fact, many of the messages of Gandhi are about the ethics of governance, public policy-making and public service, which are routinely quoted to teach life lessons to public employees. Other than this didactic use of Gandhian teachings, can we use his ideas to resolve the challenges we face regarding tribal problems? During the post-colonial era, we have chosen a policy of development-based integration of the tribes with other sections of the population. The alternative approach of safeguarding their identity through protective measures more often than not been given a short shrift in our tribal programmes and policies (Srivastava, 2018, p. 126). The *panchsheel* tribal development philosophy of Elwin and Nehru, which has been the guiding principle of tribal development, has been found wanting in its actual implementation in ground. The approach of integration with a distinct identity induced through developmental push failed to produce the desired result in many cases. On the contrary, it led to a sense of isolation, estrangement and decay of tribal culture without integrating them with the wider nation. Gains of development seemed to have been undone by the resentment of the many tribal communities with the institutions of the state like bureaucracy, forest officials and law and order machinery. Can Gandhi's ideas help us to reverse this worrying trend?

## Gandhi and Tribes: Initial Years

Compared to his prolific contributions in other fields, Mahatma Gandhi has not written extensively on tribes. That does not mean that he was less interested or the issues of tribal communities were not significant for him (Sengar, 2001, p. 628). He was deeply distraught by the social and economic conditions of the adivasis. In 1919–1920, the Bhils of Panchmahal, Gujarat, faced a severe drought and famine (Hathilal, 1961, p. 1). Gandhiji was deeply aggrieved to hear their conditions, and he immediately sent his close aid and follower Amritlal Vithalbhai Thakkar to work for them. It was Gandhiji who directly supported the activities of Bhil Seva Mandal, an organisation founded by Thakkar Bapa, when their proposal of funding was disapproved by the Indian National Congress–Provincial Committee (Yagnik, 1955, p. 45). It was felt by the committee that the meagre resources with them should be used for struggle against the British government and not for any social work. But Gandhiji was convinced that along with the freedom movement, there is also a need to work for the amelioration of poor and the downtrodden. In fact, he sent many of his followers to work with the adivasi communities, including Verrier Elwin, the famous philanthropologist who guided the approach of the Government of India during the post-colonial era. For Gandhi, social work was also a form of nationalism.

Acknowledging the fact that he never could directly involve himself with their problems, as he did in the case of removal of untouchability, he wrote in the pages of Harijan in 1942 that the 'country is so vast and the people so varied that the best of us in spite of every effort cannot know all there is to know of men and their condition' (Gandhi, 1942a, p. 38). But he had clearly stated while defining the meaning of independence in *Hind Swaraj* that Swaraj would remain incomplete unless we are able to win over the tribes. What he meant was it is the responsibility of the Indian state to look into the problems, misgivings, fears, doubts and vulnerabilities that shroud the relationship between the tribes and the others. The key phrase here is the term 'win over', that is, gaining their confidence. Gandhi had rightly identified that there are deep mistrust, fear and suspicion against outsiders in the tribal community. They have been exploited by the moneylenders, landlords, petty officials, traders and the forest department, which have left a deep scar in their hearts. Thus, when Gandhi said we have to win them over what he meant was we have to check their oppression and exploitation at the hands of vested interests. He used the term *Raniparaj* (forest dwellers) for them. He also used the term *adivasis* given by one of his close followers, Thakar Bapa, for the tribes. *Adivasis*, for him, represented the original inhabitant of the land and are the sons of the soil, but whose conditions were worse off than the most marginalised section of our population, viz., the dalits (Sengar, 2001, p. 628). There is an urgent need to address their problems. He felt that the Christian missionaries are doing a lot of social work with the tribes. But it is essential for our countrymen to take up this responsibility right earnestly. This is because Gandhi felt that along with working for the tribes, the Christian missionaries are also motivated by their zeal to convert them. This would lead to their distancing from us. In Gandhi's opinion, their number is too large to be neglected and leave this work for a few committed social workers. It is the duty of committed citizens to join in the effort and help in addressing their problems.

In his autobiography, Gandhi's wrote about his first contact with a tribe in 1906 during his stay in Natal, South Africa. During that time, the Zulus, the indigenous population of natal province, opposed and revolted against the unjustified taxation imposed by the colonial government to keep them as their indentured labourers. Gandhi led an Indian Ambulance Corp, consisting of 24 volunteers, to provide nursing services to the injured and wounded soldiers. But to Gandhi's satisfaction, their services were called for the injured Zulu fighters whom the British soldiers refused to attend. Gandhi wrote in his autobiography that Zulus were quite happy to see them as the white soldiers never attended to their wounds and would often use offensive and foul language against them. Gandhi to his amazement found that most of the Zulus under his care suffered from wounds inflicted on them because of flogging rather than serious injuries suffered in the battle front. The battle itself was quite unequal with Zulus outnumbered and armed with swords, spears and knives were no match to the superior British colonial army armed with machineguns and rifles. Gandhi himself thought it was hardly a rebellion, and the Zulus violent posturing was put down with a heavy hand. The encounter itself was significant realisation for Gandhi as he came face to face with the brutal and merciless nature of the colonial rule against the *innocence vulnerability* of the

Zulus. This innocence vulnerability later had a bearing on how Gandhi understood the adivasis in India (Gandhi, 1969, p. 352).

## Gandhian Brand of Economics and Tribes

As mentioned earlier, unlike the other thinkers on tribes of that era like J. H. Hutton, Verrier Elwin or other British administrative scholars, like H. H. Risley or J. P. Mills, Gandhi came to understand tribe not through direct contact with them. He looked at them through his economic and social agenda for the construction of India. As economic conception of welfare of people was the main principle of Gandhian economy, the *cultural aspect* was never seriously thought about by him. He connected to the tribes as a *social reformer*. In the Gandhian perspective, there are no cultural clashes between tribes and non-tribes. Culturally, there is continuity between tribes and the Hindus. There are however many pressing problems in tribal areas like that of famine, poverty, shortage of food, lack of education, alcoholism, etc., that need to be addressed. Therefore, the 'Gandhian approach towards tribe lies in the Gandhian program of economic construction'. In Gandhian approach, among others, there were three important ideas which were new and ahead of its time, namely:

1. Grounded: Gandhi did not base his economic ideas on the writings of Smith, Ricardo, Mill and Marshall, the classical economic thinkers of the nineteenth century. His economics is based on the problems of the poor, the peasants, the rural and the downtrodden, that is, all those who are marginalised. Unlike classical models of maximisation and minimisation of variables, his approach was meeting the basic needs of the poor as the central focus of economy, instead of the creation of wealth first and its distribution later. His approach questions the very idea of 'wealth' creation. For Gandhi, the process of wealth creation is an inclusive process, where all participate, there is no concept of paternalistic distribution in his approach for if all participate and their participation is valued then there is no need for distribution.
2. Embedded: Second, Gandhi never looked at economy as an independent sphere. He looked at it as embedded in other institutions of society. Thus, Gandhi was the first substantivist, even before Karl Polanyi, to look at economy as embedded in social and cultural matrix. He drew upon the idea of human nature to delineate his economic thoughts. The first thought he focussed upon was restriction on human greed and wasteful living. While the neo-classical economics worked on the idea of maximisation, Gandhi strongly advocated tempering of one's needs and avoidance of wasteful expenditure. Ethic was inseparable from practice of economy and trade without morality was one of the seven sins of Gandhi.
3. Concept of work: The third important idea was his concept of work. According to Dalton (1993), this was a brilliant original thinking by Gandhi. Nobody before him had dealt with the concept of human labour

and given it the importance which Gandhi gave. He placed it on a different platform, and so also the goods made from human labour. This dignity of manual labour immediately added to the sense of pride of millions of poor peasants, petty producers and workers who did most of their work with hands. This love and respect of labour immediately brought in the social recognition for all of them and this made pitch for equality especially for the poor and the untouchables. From this, followed his idea of how non-material aspects are more important than the material aspects to usher in change and transformation.

Another of his original contributions was the linkage he established between freedom, nonviolent power and civic responsibility. It was not just a theoretical idea. Gandhi also showed a way to practice it also. His starting point was an individual, as an agent of change. He gave emphasis on the moralistic, spiritual and political upliftment of the individual. In fact, individual and the 'freedom' of an individual and his/her ability to realise his/her full potential were true meanings of independence to him (Parekh, 1997, p. 117). And this would bring *empowerment of an individual*. Thus, Gandhian economic model was an eclectic and a pragmatic heuristic device to address the challenges that confront the colonial India. His objectives were threefold. First, he wanted to end the outside colonial rule of the British and then the interior colonialism of the elite and the well off. Finally, he wanted to build up a new series of programmes which he titled as constructive programmes compiled in 1941.

## **Constructive Programmes and Tribes**

Tribes appear as the sixteenth programme in the list of twenty-one programmes. These programmes formed the goals of winning the Poorna Sawaraj. Gandhi made a distinction between freedom and complete freedom. Complete freedom implied freedom from both external and internal colonialism. The account on tribes was a short write up with less than 250 words, but it contained three important elements. The most important was the term *living consciousness* of tribes. The term was used by Gandhi to emphasise the integration of the tribe based on their voluntary consent. As a corollary, we can infer he was acknowledging the distinction of tribal communities based on this consciousness. To have any dialogue with them, it is essential to understand this tribal consciousness. Gandhi also clearly mentioned that integration cannot be forced upon the tribes. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru later modified the term as 'genius', when he formulated his five principles of tribal development and proposed that people should develop according to their own genius and the imposition of alien values should be avoided. Gandhi looked at India not as nation but as civilisation. As a civilisation, unlike the Western notion of nation built on unitary culture, India is constituted of multiple cultures. Each culture is capable of leading a separate and distinct life, but at the same time moulded by the civilisational values of tolerance and peaceful coexistence.

Gandhi was also well versed with the enormity of the task. Therefore, he wanted his followers to work in the tribal community and carry out constructive programmes. He was convinced that national unity can only be achieved through the inclusion of tribe as one with others. Nation building is incomplete without their participation, and working for them is similar to nationalistic activities of the freedom fighters. So Gandhi's approach was eclectic wherein he recognises the tribal distinction but more important for him were the constructive programmes and the need for national integration. The various components of this programme were drawn with village construction as its objective but they were equally valid for the tribes also. Gandhi in the 1933 issue of his journal *Harijan* noted:

I am not at all concerned with appearing to be consistent. In search after truth I have discarded many ideas and learnt many new things—therefore, when anybody finds any inconsistency between any two writing of mine, if he has still faith in my sanity, he would do well to choose the later of the two. (Gandhi, 1933)

The above message clearly shows the evolving nature of Gandhian ideas over the course of time. The construction programme also needs to be approached with the same outlook. Thus, the programme which he formulated in 1942 (Gandhi, 1942b) needs some emendation for their implementation after a gap of nearly eight decades. First, I first would like to outline the central philosophy of the programme and later I shall take up the strategies for achieving those goals in the present times. There were four central goals or objectives of the programme, viz.:

- Self-sufficiency
- Indigenised livelihood strategy
- Habitat development
- Education and literacy
- Infrastructure and connectivity

Self-sufficiency appears in the original list as self-sufficiency of food needs. All villages must produce all their requirements for food. Its corollary was villages should have enough food for all. The idea of food *security* which we are talking now, Gandhi had already meant by it self-production of foodgrains. It has been achieved through state-supported public distribution system. Most tribal communities now have access to subsidised foodgrains distributed through the public distribution network, though at times there are delays, and often, people complain about the poor quality of the distributed grains.

The livelihood programme Gandhi spoke of relates to cottage industry, dealing with small scale, labour-intensive home-based processing and manufacturing centres. Tribes generally stay in resource rich environments. Similar types of home-based small productive units are also the key to sustainable economic development of tribes. Most of them are adept in traditional skills relating to art, craft, music, toy making and jewellery designing. Each tribal group has their own specialisation represented in their craft. The challenge in the present time with respect to livelihood is how we can market these products outside cities and other areas. The important point here is not the product but promotion of the *aesthetics*

*of the product.* The aesthetics of the tribal products must be communicated to the outsiders. This requires a multi-pronged strategy. First, the demand and requirements of the market needs to be communicated to the tribal artists. This may need certain changes in the finished products. One has to be cautious while introducing these changes so that they shouldn't affect the core features wherein their essence lies. Second, the recipient market also needs to be prepared to receive the product. This in terms of management strategy is called as marketing. Marketing is something which has been completely missing in our tribal livelihood approaches. Marketing involves not just selling; it involves communicating to the wider public, the symbolic significance of the product. So the product is sold not only as a *material* good, the buyers are also acquainted with the product's symbolic social value and the meaning it holds for the people. What is called 'brand approach' in management, the same strategy is required for tribal art and craft products as well.

The third sets of programmes are linked to local ecology or habitation preservation and development. Many tribal areas have come under a lot of ecological stress due to deforestation, encroachments on forest land, mining and landscape fragmentation. Natural water resources have been polluted due to upstream pollution or industrial waste discharge from factories located in tribal areas. Habitat regeneration and restoration programmes in tribal areas need urgent attention by the state. During our visit to many communities, we have seen packets of free chemical fertilisers and urea with many tribal families. Instead of this, organic farming with converting all bio-waste materials, including garbage, animal dung and human faecal matter and kitchen waste, into manure should be encouraged.

Education has always been the key in the Gandhian approach and so is the case for the tribes. The government has built schools in remote tribal areas, and at present, most tribal children have easy access to primary schools near their villages. For others who come from remote interior areas, there are Ashram residential schools. But now, the focus has to shift to *quality of education, language proficiency* and *curriculum content*. Language proficiency is important because the secondary education is only through the regional language. In many cases, the mother tongue may be different from the regional language, which is an impediment for tribal children to compete with other. Curriculum content has to be a fine balance between local context, livelihood requirement and the need to link up and compete with the world outside. The state education departments have to show certain sensitivity and sensibility in designing the curriculum. Tribal children are part of the family production process, and most skip school during season, when they have to collect forest produce. Education planning needs a decentralised approach to be the flexible enough to adapt to the local needs and demands. We have to remember many of the tribal students are the first-generation learners. They require hand holding and understanding and not the bureaucratic official approach. Teachers hold the key here, and it is the 'quality teachers' motivated with a missionary zeal who can ensure quality education. When Gandhi talked about village self-sufficiency, what he meant was functional *completeness* and *autonomy* of villages. At least health, education, clean drinking water, a sound grievances redress mechanism and livelihood avenues especially during the lean

season should be available to all villages. During off seasons, tribes have to migrate to nearby town to work as labour force. Livelihood planning needs to be done in such a way so that during these times, tribes can find work in the vicinity of their places of habitations. Other important Gandhi's constructive programmes relate to rural sanitation and village upkeep, cleanliness of the surroundings, strengthening of panchayat and the local bodies and the traditional justice system and development of communication network.

Through his economic model, Gandhi was seeking a more equal relationship between the rural and city dwellers. His emphasis on *economic empowerment* was a way to end the exploitation of peasants by the outsiders, and it would pave the way for a more social equality. Urban areas then will not be able to drain the tribal villages of their human resources, which in turn will be used for strengthening the community. Gandhi never stopped with construction at the level of village only. As a next step, the reconstruction after covering a village was to be extended to the neighbourhood, then to district and finally to the level of province. If we look at these programmes, one can clearly see that the Gandhian conception of transformation was much ahead of its time, as it just didn't focus upon poverty alleviation alone but social justice and removal of inequality as well. Gandhi felt that all those pre-conceptions that hold us back and do not allow us to think rationally should not be followed. It has been seen that there is a widely prevalent negative preconception regarding tribes as being lazy, low in intelligence, carefree, and only interested in alcohol drinks and pleasures, among the others. All these lead to a denial of tribal genius and a biased conception in the minds of the others. This has not been addressed much.

There is one point of difference we come across when we try to explain the problems of tribe through the Gandhian approach. As mentioned earlier, Gandhi was thinking of construction of nation through changing the nature and habits of an individual. Thus, he was essentially methodological and individualist, who placed the choices an individual make as essential conditions for emancipation. But it does not mean all choices. His emphasis was upon spiritualism and life lived in a simple self-contained manner (Parekh, 1997, pp. 41–47). For him, involvement in work was important, and everyone should be involved in work according to their capacity and capability. They should not be dull but be aware and conscious of what is happening around. The tribal ethos may clash here with the puritanical values of Gandhi's. These contradictions will take time to go away. For Gandhi, involvement in work was the greatest spiritual value. And as the tribals get involve, they themselves would find the answers.

The emphasis placed on combining local resources and social development in Gandhi's economic model is relevant with some modification for tribes also. The challenge for us is to strike the right balance between the local and global. To address the issue of inequality, Gandhian approach was simple—make people self-reliant, and self-reliance can only happen when people have control over the factors that affect their lives. He believed that it only this which will lead to change in 'relationship of dependence' to 'relationship of equality and reciprocity'. It is only then that the gap between village and city will disappear. Gandhi's approach was to use the local resources with available expertise, knowledge and

skills to become productive rather than an externally led endogenous change. This idea of change from within is what guided social reconstruction for Gandhi. It is this perspective towards development which seemed to be missing in the contemporary discourse on tribal development. In the similar way, the focus on both the individual and institutional developments in equal measures needs to be incorporated in our approach towards tribal development as well. Gandhi in his approach advocated strengthening both for an overall social transformation and individual's own transformation.

One of biggest challenges in development strategy is how to safeguard the interest of the tribal community. Most of our forest and mineral rich resource areas overlap with traditional tribal habitations. It is our tribal communities who have to face the brunt of mining, forest and wildlife conservation programmes. According to Report of the High Level Committee on Status of Tribal communities (2014), development programmes are one of main causes of tribal communities being forced to move from their land. Various forest laws have imposed restriction on free access to their livelihood (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, GOI, 2014). The Forest Right Act 2006 has tried to redress the problem. But the challenges regarding shrinking of tradition tribal livelihood continue to persist because of poor health of our forest and their declining productivity over the years. The global climate issues like climate change and inadequate rainfall are greatly affecting out tribal communities, forcing them either to migrate or to live on the support provided by the state. Surely, the contemporary situation calls for an introspection of our tribal development strategies and look for the solutions in Gandhi's economic ideas. We have looked at tribal development through either conservation-identity debate or integration development approach. In Gandhian approach, this Cartesian dichotomy is dissolved. The purpose of nation building calls for all four objectives, viz., conservation of tradition, strengthening of distinct identity, development and integration to go hand in hand. His was an approach of complete democratic decentralisation with change arising from below rather than being govern from outside. In some tribes, there may be a need for strengthening traditional identity, in some other, it may be development and integration rather than conservation of tradition which requires greater attention. But what is clear is the need for a change in approach from doling out benefits to a creation of a more enabling environment, which will allow them to realise their true potential and play their due role in Indian progress story, only then there will be the realisation of Gandhi's vision of complete freedom.

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