

Original Article

Gandhi's role in social inclusion of tribes: A sustainable Development perspective

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Abstract

India's tribal communities, constituting 8.6% of the total population, represent one of the most marginalized sections of society. Tribal communities were historically excluded from the mainstream of development. Mahatma Gandhi, through his philosophy of Sarvodaya (welfare of all) and Antyodaya (rise of the last), envisioned social inclusion as the moral and ethical foundation of true independence. His constructive programme, Nai Talim (basic education), Gram Swaraj (village self-rule), trusteeship, Ahimsa (non-violence), and ecological restraint addressed the structural inequalities and marginalization faced by Adivasis. This research paper examines Gandhi's approach to tribal social inclusion, situating it within the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Gandhi's ideals resonate strongly with SDGs of United Nations such as No Poverty, Quality Education, Reduced Inequalities, Gender Equality, Climate Action, and Life on Land, offering an indigenous ethical framework for sustainable and inclusive growth. By tracing historical engagements with Bhils, Warlis, and Oraons-In Bihar, as well as the institutional role of leaders like Thakkar Bapa, the study highlights how Gandhian principles continue to inform contemporary debates on tribal empowerment, ecological justice, and social equity. Ultimately, this paper argues that Gandhi's vision remains relevant for achieving inclusive development of Tribes where the marginalized are integrated with dignity into the national life.

Keywords M.K. Gandhi, Tribes in India-Adivasis, Sustainable Development, Sarvodaya, Gram Swaraj, Trusteeship, Nai Talim, Ahimsa

'Our ability to reach Unity in Diversity will be the beauty & the test of our civilization.'

— M. K. Gandhi.

Introduction

India is one of the most diverse nations in the world. In India resides a large population of tribals. Tribal communities in India contribute significantly to the country's cultural diversity. According to the census report 1911-1991 almost one tenth of Indian population consists of different tribal groups. (Sengar, Gandhian approach to tribals, 2001) There are around 500 different tribal communities exist in India. In accordance with 2011 census, Indian Scheduled tribes populations are 10.43 crore that is 8.6% of total population in India. (Tiwari, April 2020) Tribes often occupy the fringe of society facing systemic exclusion that limits their participation in national development process. As per World Bank social Inclusion is 'The process of improving the terms for individuals & groups to take part in society.' Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of social Inclusion is deeply rooted in his vision of equitable society. When Mahatma Gandhi was in South Africa he had met Zulu tribes & he described them as Innocent & Ignorant people. (Sengar, Gandhian approach to tribals, 2001)

Gandhiji's Philosophy & Sustainable Development Goals

Gandhiji's philosophy make connection with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly in the context of tribal communities. His idea of Sarvodaya literally means Rise of all and Antyodaya means Unto the last. It emphasized the inclusion of marginalized groups, directly related with SDG 1 = No Poverty, SDG 10 = Reduced Inequalities, and SDG 16= Peace, Justice,

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Strong Institutions. Gandhi's concept of Nai Talim for quality education is relevant to tribal empowerment and its aligns with SDG 4 = Quality Education and SDG 5 Gender Equality. His concept of Swadeshi promoted sustainable livelihoods based on local resources, connecting with SDG 8=Decent Work and Economic Growth and SDG 12 =Responsible Consumption and Production. As per Gandhiji's sentence "the earth provides enough for everyone's need but not for everyone's greed" tribal practices of living in harmony with nature, supporting SDG 13=Climate Action and SDG 15=Life on Land. Gandhiji believe in simple living, sanitation, and preventive healthcare aligns with SDG 3=Good Health and Well-being and SDG 6=Clean Water and Sanitation. Hence, the philosophy of Gandhiji offers ethical base for Inclusive sustainable growth in accordance with the SDGs. (Sustainable Development)

Social Inclusion of tribes & Gandhi: Historical Overview:

According to Gandhi's writing on Constructive Programme; The word *Adivasi*, like *Raniparaj*, is not an old term but a coined one. *Raniparaj* was used in place of *Kaliparaj* and it literally means Black people like their skin is not darker than others and was probably introduced by Shri Jugatram. Similarly, the word *Adivasi* is used for Bhils, Gonds, and other communities once described as "hill tribes" or "aboriginals". It literally means "original inhabitants," and was coined by Thakkar Bapa. (M.K.Gandhi, Constructive Programme (Its Meaning and Place), 1941) Gandhi Say's in his constructive programme – "Across India, there are more than two crore Adivasis. Thakkar Bapa began his service among the Bhils in Gujarat. Around 1940, Shri Balasaheb Kher dedicated himself to this cause in Thane district, and today he serves as the President of the Adivasi Seva Mandal. Many others people across the country are also engaged in this work, though their numbers are still too few. As the saying goes, "the harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few in numbers." This effort is not just humanitarian; it is also national in spirit. Such service strengthens unity and takes us closer to the true independence". (M.K.Gandhi, Constructive Programme (Its Meaning and Place), 1941)

Gandhiji considered the upliftment of Adivasis an crucial part of his *Constructive Programme*, emphasizing that national unity could only be achieved when marginalized groups were included into the social mainstream. His vision of equitable social inclusion aligns closely with the modern Sustainable Development Goals that advocate equality and inclusive growth. (M.K.Gandhi, Adibasis, 1942) Gandhiji described

the Adivasis as the original inhabitants of India, whose socio-economic conditions were often no better than those of the Harijans and who had long suffered neglect from dominant social groups. He admitted that their exclusion from the early *Constructive Programme* was an oversight, as their uplift deserved special attention. For many years, this responsibility had largely been taken up by the Christian missionaries, whose work, though extensive, was limited by the ultimate goal of religious conversion and cultural isolation. Gandhiji argued that any vision of Swaraj based on non-violence could not afford to ignore such a large section of the population, for the Adivasis were far too significant to be considered marginal. (M.K.Gandhi, Adibasis, 1942) Gandhi's vision of Sarvodaya means "the welfare of all" It was inspired by John Ruskin's Unto This Last which he read in South Africa in 1904 translation in Gujarathi .Gandhi got influenced by Ruskin's welfare for all concept and Then Gandhi translate it in Gujarathi and entitled as "Sarvodaya". Gandhi say's that the well being of each person depends on welfare for all. (M.K.Gandhi, The selected works of Mahatma, The Voice of Truth (Gandhi vol 5) , 1968) Gandhi saw it as a moral and socio-economic framework for an equitable society. In the tribal context, Sarvodaya means "Up to the last" . Thus term often use as Antyodaya means "Rise to The last" Gandhiji actively supported Amritlal Vithaldas Thakkar-Thakkar Bapa, who established the Bhil Seva Mandal in 1922 to improve literacy, healthcare, and socio-economic conditions of Bhil tribes in Gujarat. He was influenced by Gandhi's ideals of social inclusion and Sarvodaya that is Antyodaya. Gandhian workers also engaged with Warli tribals in Maharashtra and Oraons in Bihar, They are focusing on literacy, sanitation, and against untouchability. (Sengar, Gandhian approach to tribals, 2001) Gandhi frequently emphasized that unless tribals-least of India's sons were integrated into the larger national life with dignity, Sarvodaya would remain incomplete. (M.K.Gandhi, The selected works of Mahatma, The Voice of Truth (Gandhi vol 5) , 1968)

Gram Swaraj -Village Self-Rule Gandhi's idea of Gram Swaraj based on the principle of true democracy begins at the grassroot level. He visualize self-sufficient villages that managed their own administration through Panchayati Raj institutions. For tribals, this framework validated their existing systems of community based governance, customary laws, and collective resource management. During the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1920-22, Gandhi urged tribal communities to boycott foreign goods and adopt village handcrafts, Gandhiji has been linking

them with the broader struggle for independence with preserving their autonomy & culture. (M.K.Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj* (Indian Home Rule), 1938) This conception of self-rule continues to influence tribal self-governance, later included in the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Indian Constitution. Trusteeship :Gandhi's doctrine of trusteeship in time period of 1930s–40s emphasised that wealth and resources were not private property of Individual but a trust for the community's welfare. (M.K.Gandhi, *Towards Nonviolent Socialism*, 1951) In relation to tribal society, trusteeship implied that landlords, industrialists, and the State had a moral duty to safeguard tribal rights over land, forests, and water that is 'Jal, Jangal & Jamin'. Gandhi opposed the isolation of tribal lands through exploitative moneylending. His idea strongly echoed during debates on land reforms and forest rights in post-independence India. (Desai, 1974) influencing movements like Vinoba Bhave's *Bhoodan* (1951) where landlords donated land to landless peasants, including tribals.Nai Talim- Basic Education, The Wardha Scheme of Education introduced in 1937, also called Nai Talim, emphasized learning through productive handcrafts, and self-reliance. Gandhiji has himself explained that "By education I mean all round drawing out of the best in child's and man's body, mind and spirit. Literacy is neither the beginning nor the end of the education. This is only a means through man or woman can be educated."Gandhiji has basic principle for education that is, from 7 to 14 years of age education of each person should be free & compulsory. (Tandon, 1 January 2009) Another approach of Gandhi towards education is Education should be made self reliance through productive work for livelihood. (Tandon, 1 January 2009) Gandhi believed this approach harmonized perfectly with tribal cultural, where indigenous handcrafts, agriculture, and oral traditions played a crucial role. By connecting labor with education, The concept of Nai Talim sought to dignity of work and economic independence among tribal communities. It began with the social inclusion of tribals in education field. The ancient saying, "*Education is that ideal which liberates,*" is just as relevant today as it was in the past. Education does not means spiritual learning, nor should liberation but something that comes only after death. True education includes all forms of knowledge and training that able a person to serve humanity. Liberation means freedom from all kind of bondage whether it comes from external domination or from our own artificial unnecessary wants. Only the knowledge that helps us to move toward can truly be called education. (M.K.Gandhi, *Education*, 1946)

Krishna Kumar analyzed education system which Gandhi established – Nai Talim. Gandhian workers in tribal areas established schools where children learned weaving, spinning, and agriculture with reading and writing, a model that later converted in vocational education for inclusive growth. (Kumar, 1991)

Ahimsa means Non-violence. In its true sense, **Ahimsa** means the highest form of love and compassion. Gandhiji say's that To practice Ahimsa, must love even those who oppose us. We must be treat dishonestly whether the person is an enemy or a stranger; with the same understanding and care that we should show to our own father or son if they made mistakes. This positive form of Ahimsa naturally hold **Truth and fearlessness**. Just as one cannot deceive someone because they truly love, one also cannot harm or frighten them. The greatest gift for a person can give is the gift of life itself. When someone offers this gift through genuine nonviolence, they create the path for mutual respect and understanding. But this is possible only if the person have courage, for one who is bound by fear cannot offer such a beautiful gift. (M.K.Gandhi, *The selected works of Mahatma, The Voice of Truth* (Gandhi vol 5) , 1968) Gandhi's principle of Ahimsa shaped tribal participation in the national movement. Tribals were encouraged to join the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1920 and Quit India Movement in 1942 through non-violent resistance such as boycotting liquor, foreign goods, and oppressive landlords. (M.K.Gandhi, *Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Vol.4), 1968) However, not all tribals responses were non-violent movements like the Warli Revolt of 1945 in Maharashtra took a militant form. Yet Gandhian leaders and activists sought to channel tribal grievances into peaceful struggle. Gandhi emphasized that non-violence was not passive but an active force of social transformation, which tribals could adopt without compromising their cultural integrity & autonomy. (Guha R. , 1999) Ecological Restraint : Gandhi's philosophy of *aparigraha* means non-possession and simple living promoted ecological balance. He warned against large-scale industrialization, predicting it would dispossess peasants and tribals from their natural resources. (M.K.Gandhi, *India of my Dreams*, 1947) This restraint resonated with tribal cosmologies-the science of origin, which revered forests, rivers, and land as sacred. Gandhi advocated for sustainable resource use, aligning with SDG 15= Life on Land. His ecological insights inspired Tribals and movements with strong tribal participation, such as the Chipko Movement (1970s) in Uttarakhand and the Narmada Bachao Andolan (1980s–90s) in Madhya Pradesh, which defended

tribal rights over Jal, Jangal, Jamin (water, forest, land). (Guha M. G., 1995) According to the prof. Vinay Kumar Shrivastava - The director of Anthropological Survey of India, Kolkata; Gandhiji was influenced by self reliance of the tribals. He took the concept of Swaraj & Khadi by the influence of the Tribals self reliance. (A Session on Mahatma Gandhi's Connection with Tribes, 2020)

Cocclusion

Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy offers base framework for addressing the challenges of tribal exclusion and marginalization in India. By including the principles of Sarvodaya, Antyodaya, Gram Swaraj, Trusteeship, Nai Talim, and Ahimsa, Gandhi's vision of welfare of all and His emphasis on education with productive work, village self-rule, ecological restraint, and the moral responsibility of wealth holders provided practical pathways for tribal empowerment & Its social Inclusion. Historically, his constructive programme and collaboration with leaders like Thakkar Bapa laid the foundation for grassroots tribal upliftment, linking them with the broader freedom struggle while preserving their cultural autonomy.

In the contemporary context, Gandhi's ideals resonate with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those focusing on poverty eradication, quality education, reduced inequalities, gender equality, climate action, and ecological sustainability. Tribal ways of life was rooted in self-reliance, community solidarity, and harmony with nature find validation in Gandhian thought, making it relevance on sustainable and inclusive development. Therefore, Gandhi's vision is not merely of historical value but continues to provide us an ethical, socio-political, and ecological blueprint for ensuring dignity, justice, and equality for tribal communities (Marginalised people). Gandhi say's that True independence remains incomplete unless the Adivasis who are Original inhabitants of the Land, are brought into the heart of national life.

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