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The Philosophy of Sarvodaya: Gandhi's Path to Social Justice

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Abstract: Mahatma Gandhi is recognized as the Father of the Nation because he dedicated his life to the service of all human beings, irrespective of religion, caste, gender, or race. His philosophy was rooted in the welfare of all—an idea encapsulated in the concept of Sarvodaya. Derived from the Sanskrit words 'Sarva' meaning "all" and 'Udaya' meaning "uplift" or "rising," Sarvodaya signifies the welfare and upliftment of all. The term Sarvodaya first appeared in Gandhi's Gujarati translation of John Ruskin's book Unto This Last, which deeply influenced him. The primary objective of Sarvodaya is the holistic development of not only Indian society but of the global human community. According to Gandhi, every human being is inherently equal and possesses the right to live life with dignity and according to their own will. This research paper aims to explore Gandhi's concept of Sarvodaya—its philosophical foundations, practical implications, and continued relevance in contemporary society.

Keywords: Welfare, thoughts, philosophy, love, equality, humanity.

INTRODUCTION

I

Gandhi is widely regarded as the Father of the Nation because of his commitment to the welfare of all people, regardless of religion, caste, gender, or race. His philosophy was rooted in the idea of Sarvodaya, a Sanskrit term derived from sarva (all) and udaya (uplift or rising), which translates to "welfare of all." The term first appeared in the Gujarati translation of John Ruskin's book Unto This Last. Gandhi adopted this idea to emphasize the development and upliftment of every individual in society, both in India and globally. He believed that every human being is equal and has the right to live according to their own will and dignity. In the contemporary world, dignity faces challenges posed by technology, economic inequality, and political strife. The rise of digital platforms has led to new forms of social interaction, but it has also introduced concerns about privacy, identity, and the dehumanization of individuals. Cyberbullying, harassment, and the spread of hate speech can undermine the dignity of individuals, particularly vulnerable groups.

II

The term Sarvodaya was popularized by Gandhi after he read John Ruskin's Unto This Last, which deeply influenced him. He translated it into Gujarati and titled it Sarvodaya, recognizing its core message as aligned with his vision for society. The central teachings of Ruskin's book, as interpreted by Gandhi, are:

1. A life of manual labor—such as farming or handicraft—is a life worth living.
2. The good of the individual lies in the good of all.
3. All professions have equal value, and everyone deserves the right to earn their livelihood with dignity.

Gandhi believed that the philosophy of Sarvodaya could ensure a conflict-free society if every individual participated in collective development. Unlike Ruskin's idea of "the greatest good for the greatest number," Gandhi emphasized the good of all, without exception.

The philosophy of Sarvodaya also draws on India's spiritual traditions. Gandhi found the seeds of Sarvodaya in the Upanishads, Mahabharata, Ramayana, Quran, and the Bible. The idea of universal upliftment resonated with these scriptures' core ethical teachings.

Gandhi was also influenced by Leo Tolstoy, particularly by The Kingdom of God is Within You, and his essay "Christianity and Patriotism." Tolstoy's emphasis on simplicity, moral purity, and love deeply impacted Gandhi. Tolstoy viewed love as the law of life, a principle Gandhi incorporated into his doctrine of non-violence (ahimsa). This non-violent approach became the cornerstone of Gandhi's social and political activism.

III

Today, unemployment, poverty, and social unrest are major issues. Gandhi's Sarvodaya offers a framework for addressing these problems. One of the causes of unemployment is the unwillingness of some individuals to engage in meaningful labor. This often leads to social evils such as substance abuse and crime. Gandhi's emphasis on the dignity of labor, inspired by Tolstoy's concept of "bread

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labour," holds that every individual has a moral duty to contribute through honest work.

According to Gandhi and Tolstoy, those who do not contribute through labor exploit society. Gandhi believed that if everyone engaged in simple, productive tasks—spinning, farming, or other manual work—society would function more justly and harmoniously. This respect for all kinds of work, from that of an IAS officer to a cobbler, would reduce social hierarchies and conflicts. So, someone's dignity involves not only refraining from harm but also actively supporting their well-being and self-respect. This can be seen in acts like recognizing people's right to self-determination, giving them autonomy over their choices, and acknowledging their worth.

IV

Gandhi was also influenced by Henry David Thoreau, especially his essay Civil Disobedience. Thoreau argued for individual conscience over blind obedience to unjust laws and promoted a society governed by moral principles rather than state coercion. His belief that "that government is best which governs not at all" resonated with Gandhi's vision of a decentralized, self-reliant society.

Both thinkers shared a belief in the fundamental goodness of human beings and the power of love and non-violence in resolving conflicts. Gandhi's method of Satyagraha—non-violent resistance grounded in truth—was a direct expression of these values.

V

Gandhi's Sarvodaya is not merely a utopian ideal but a practical philosophy for social transformation. Rooted in spiritual values and informed by global thinkers like Ruskin, Tolstoy, and Thoreau, Sarvodaya emphasizes equality, labor, education, non-violence, and love as pathways to a just society. In an era marked by division, conflict, and inequality, Gandhi's vision of Sarvodaya remains deeply relevant. In conclusion, the difference between Gandhi's vision of nationalism and that of the extremists or national revolutionaries lies in their approach to unity. Gandhi's appeal was more inclusive and sought to transcend religious and caste divides, but it also faced its own set of challenges and ambiguities. The extremists, on the other hand, were more narrowly focused, often framing the struggle for independence in terms of Hindu religious identity, which limited their ability to create a truly unified Indian nation. Both approaches, while significant in their own right, ultimately struggled to overcome the complexities of India's social and religious diversity, highlighting the challenges in forging a unified national identity in a deeply fragmented society.

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