MAHATMA GANDHI’S VIEWS ON TRUSTEESHIP AND LABOUR MANAGEMENT RELATIONS AND THEIR RELEVANCE TODAY

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ABSTRACT

Few would dispute the notion that Mahatma Gandhi was one of the twentieth century’s transformative political and spiritual leaders. He is the subject matter of many studies and biographies. Gandhiji stimulates intellectual interest as an original thinker on a variety of issues. That is why a number of scholarly studies on his ideas have appeared over the years. In this paper a humble attempt has been made to present “Mahatma Gandhi’s views on Trusteeship and Labour Management Relations and Their Relevance Today.”

Gandhiji had immense faith in the goodness of man and he believed that many of the evils of the modern world have been brought about the wrong systems and not by wrong individuals. Gandhiji spoke at length regarding the need of generating spirit of cooperation between the workers and the proprietors of the factories and owners of other means of production and at several times made known his exhortations to both the parties to act as trustees on the resources of production. About trusteeship theory, He said that “My theory of trusteeship is no makeshift, certainly no camouflage. I am confident that it will survive all other theories. It has the sanction of philosophy and religion behind it.” If implications of his trusteeship theory are properly grasped by the modern labour managers they can easily tackle many of the day to day problems faced by them at their work places by gainfully applying them in consultation with the workers.

Trusteeship is the natural answer to modern management science. It establishes healthy and lasting relationship between employees, employers and management. In the strict sense the term is not just an instruction of business management but an ideology, which by its very nomenclature implies a determined sense of dedication.
and commitment for the social welfare. In recent industrial relations trend in our country has added a greater meaning and dimensions to the teachings of Gandhiji. We are painfully aware that, in recent times, an atmosphere of violence is being let loose in settling labour-management disputes. The solutions to labour-management problems of today lie in properly understanding the Gandhian approach to industrial relations. For Gandhiji means and ends are equally important. Gandhiji strongly believed in the concept of settling industrial disputes through mutual negotiations and arbitration without any rancour between the parties.

The system of trusteeship, as viewed by the Gandhian theorists, is of utmost relevance for resolving conflicts and for achieving cooperation in the organisational setting. Understanding each other better with respect for mutual rights and responsibilities is the surest way to settle all problems. The Gandhian philosophy of Ahimsa and peaceful conduct of relations and positive cooperation will lead us to the correct path of industrial relations. In a nutshell, it can be said that Gandhiji’s philosophy of trusteeship can be relevant today because it is based on mutual respect, understanding, appreciation and compassion. If we conclude that nonviolence is not relevant today we are saying in effect that positive attitudes of respect understanding, appreciation and compassion are not relevant. If that be so then we cannot claim to be a civilised society.

**KEYWORDS:** Trusteeship, Management, Labour, Co-operation, Growth.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Few would dispute the notion that Mahatma Gandhi was one of the twentieth century’s transformative political and spiritual leaders. He is the subject matter of many studies and biographies. Among his contemporaries only Hitler attracted a larger number of authors than Gandhi. While books on Hitler are primarily concerned with biographical details, the psycho-analytical aspects of the Fuhrer and political developments in his country, the studies on Gandhiji raise many far-reaching issues concerning philosophy, ethics, and political thought. Gandhiji stimulates intellectual interest as an original thinker on a variety of issues. That is why a number of scholarly studies on his ideas have appeared over the years. However, it is felt that a rigorous examination of many of his ideas with the aim of critically evaluating them and enriching our understanding about their relevance today has still to take place. For this purpose one has to turn to his writings and speeches from about 1900 to 1948 which have appeared in published form in about ninety-five volumes and another twenty are to follow. They should constitute the relevant starting point in assessing him as an intellectual thinker. While studying his voluminous work one important feature of Gandhiji’s thought emerges is that there was no system in it in a conventional sense. His ideas were always in the process of evolution. As Vinoba Bhave writes: “Even in his major fights, he had no pre-mediated plans, no techniques, and no ordered arrangements etc. etc. Since he used to say, one step is enough for me, why should the lord show him two?” But this is not to deny the fact that Gandhiji thought originally on many vital matters. He had his definite views on social change in the Indian Society, nature of economic developments of the country, and the adoption of non-violent methods in resolving
political conflicts on the national and international levels. The purpose of the present paper is to delineate “Mahatma Gandhi’s views on Trusteeship and Labour Management Relations and Their Relevance Today.” It is an attempt to rediscover Gandhiji through interpretation to some of Gandhian Economic Thoughts and thus to provide for him his own place in contemporary world economic order.

Gandhiji had immense faith in the goodness of man and he believed that many of the evils of the modern world have been brought about the wrong systems and not by wrong individuals. Gandhiji spoke at length regarding the need of generating spirit of cooperation between the workers and the proprietors of the factories and owners of other means of production and at several times made known his exhortations to both the parties to act as trustees on the resources of production. About trusteeship theory he said that “My theory of trusteeship is no makeshift, certainly no camouflage. I am confident that it will survive all other theories. It has the sanction of philosophy and religion behind it.” But before proceeding further we must have a look on what Gandhiji originally said on various aspects of the theory of trusteeship and labour management relations. The concept of trusteeship as enunciated by Mahatma Gandhi seems to have been inspired and influenced by his conviction in goodness of human-beings and also by two preaching of Srimadbhagwatgita viz. Nishkamkarma and Loksangraha. The concept of Loksangraha symbolises the persistent striving to connect everything secular to sacred, to imbed the empirical in the transcendental to anchor the individual in the cosmic. Nishkamkarma also propounds the psychological preparedness for egoless or ego-controlled action. Gandhiji believed in the principles of non-possession and non-stealing. He believed in simple living and minimisation of wants. He did not believe in the western tendency of seeking constant rise in the standard of living. To him material prosperity was spiritual bankruptcy. Gandhiji believed in voluntary poverty. According to him, “Less you possesses, the less you want, the better you are, better not for enjoyment of this life, but for enjoyment of personal service to one’s fellow beings, service to which you dedicate yourself, body, soul and mind.” He was of the firm conviction that everything belonged to God and therefore, to His people as a whole. No single individual could therefore, claim ownership of anything on the earth. Even then people do come in possession of things more than their proportionate share. Gandhiji did not in fact disallow that. Disproportionate share, he considered, was good incentive to production, and was also natural because of the differences in the human capacities. What he suggested was that this disproportionate portion should be held by the person concerned not as an owner but as a trustee of that portion for the community as a whole. That was his non-violent alternative to the method of forcible expropriation.

Gandhiji insisted on recognising each individual worker as a human being. He very well identified the need for wealth creators. According to Gandhiji,” A labour workers’ aim should be to raise the moral and intellectual height of labour and thus by sheer merit to make him or her capable not merely of bettering his or her material condition but making labour master of the means of production instead of being the slave that it is Capital should be labour’s servant, not its master. Labour should be made conscious of its duty from whose performance rights follow as a matter of course.” In the context of Ahmadabad textile strike of 1918, when someone asked Gandhiji whether it is desirable to close down the mills he opined that we also need people who have the capacity to make money. Some more excerpts:
“That no matter how much money we have earned, we should regard ourselves as trustees, holding this money for the welfare of our neighbours. If God gives us power and wealth, he gives us the same so that we may use them for the benefit of the mankind and not for our selfish, carnal purpose.” He went on to add, “I am inviting those people who consider themselves as owners today to act as trustees i.e., owners, not in their own right, but owners in the right of those whom they have exploited. Supposing I have come by a fair amount of wealth—either by way of legacy, or by means of trade and industry—I must know that that wealth does not belong to me; what belongs to me is the right to an honourable livelihood, no better than that enjoyed by millions of others. The rest of my wealth belongs to the community and must be used for the welfare of the community.”

When at a later stage it was brought his notice that no sufficient number of capital owners were likely to come forward to act as trustees as enunciated by him, Gandhiji said: “The question how many can be real trustees according to this definition is beside the point. If the theory is true, it is immaterial whether many live up to it or only one man lives up to it. The question is of conviction.” He further added: “It is my conviction that it is possible to acquire riches without consciously doing wrong. For example I may light on a gold mine in my one acre of land. But I accept the proposition that it is better not to desire wealth than to acquire it, and become trustee. I gave up my own long ago, which should be proof enough of what I would like others to do. But what am I to advise those who are already wealthy or who would not shed the desire to wealth? I can only say to them that they should use their wealth for service.”

Gandhiji was against use of force for making the capitalists to part with their wealth and act as trustees because he had seen that “Several decades later most of the above stands vindicated. Several countries that tried to enforce equality by force have failed. The communist countries in their efforts to make a classless society simply ended up creating another layer of bureaucrats and middleman.” But Gandhiji was of the view that if his exhortations to haves were not paid due attention the power of public opinion would force them to part with their possessions. He threw the bait when he warned the Rajas, “If they do not become trustees of their own accord, force of circumstances will compel the reform unless they court utter destruction. When Panchayat Raj is established, public opinion will do what violence can never do. The present power of the Zamindars, the Capitalists and the Rajas can hold sway only so long as the common people do not realise their own strength. If the people non-cooperate with the evil of Zamindari or capitalism, it must die of inanition.”

The method of non-violent non-cooperation against haves by the have-nots was the second method that Gandhi would allow. For the present, he would permit trusteeship alone. There could be various reasons for that. He had great faith in the haves of the society. Some of the riches Zamindars and Capitalists were his personal and intimate friends. A rich man like G.D. Birla consulted him on the smallest detail of his family life. He along with others supported Gandhi not only in movements they liked but also in others which to them were nothing but fads. To them Gandhi, who as the spearhead of Indian nationalism, was a definite gain. The alliance between the two was too vital to be broken. Gandhi was statesmanlike enough to understand that it would be better to concentrate the fight on the British alone and that any division within the Indian ranks would be suicidal. Moreover, he had great faith in his friends. “There is a very real difference in the abilities, intent and opportunities that each individual has. This will be reflected
in the trajectories each individual follows in their life spans. Some will achieve more, some less. So the endeavour to create equality cannot be forced top down, there need to be a bottom up approach. Enduring change can only come through some real transformation of hearts.” But he was prepared to adopt non-violent communism and went so far as to say that “if communism comes without any violence, it would be welcome.” He also believed that “organised and enlightened labour can dictate its own terms. It is no use vowing vengeance against a party because we are weak. We have to get strong. Strong hearts, enlightened minds and willing hands can brave all odds and remove all obstacles.”\(^5\)

Desai rightly holds: “Gandhi’s thought is India’s most enlightened and modernizing gift to the world. It can become the basis for social action which enables each individual and each community to enrich the world’s diverse cultural heritage without claiming privilege and hurting another’s susceptibility or legitimate interest.”\(^6\)

B. Bhattacharya says the crucial values which Gandhiji advocated, preached, practised and insisted for realization into practice by the human being are the following. They are: Truth, non-violence, kindness, charity, repentance, self-purification, suffering altruism tolerance, sacrifice, benevolence, fearlessness, equality, continence, non-possession or voluntary poverty, humility, generosity, freedom, honesty and simplicity. From the above we understand what Gandhi wished and what Gandhism was.\(^7\)

According to K.B.K. Singh, “For Gandhi, equality, justice and liberty are fundamental values through which a perfect social order can be attained and established.” In consonance to these values, Gandhi cherished the ideal of Sarvodaya and Ramrajya society. In such a society there shall be no place of inequality, exploitation and injustice. Gandhi warned labour to reject the principle that “might is right” and to uphold the dictum that “Truth alone conquers, that truth knows no mishap, that the strong and the weak have alike a right to secure justice.”\(^8\)

Gandhi who himself helped found a union of Ahmedabad Mill Workers in 1918, wrote in 1921: “The political situation too is beginning to affect the labourers of India. And there are no wanting labour leaders who consider that strikes may be engineered for political purposes.” Gandhi was opposed to the infusion of nationalist politics into the labour movement. He again wrote: “It does not require much effort of the intellect to perceive that it is a most dangerous thing to make political use of labour until labourers understand the political conditions of the country and are prepared to work for the common good.” \(^9\) Gandhi placed before the trade union the purpose of raising “the moral and intellectual height” of labour and thus makes it capable not merely of bettering its material condition, but also of becoming master of the means of production instead of being a slave to it.” He laid down certain conditions for a successful strike.

i. The cause of the strike must be just and there should be no strike without a grievance

ii. There should be no violence; and

iii. Non-strikers or “blacklegs” should never be molested.
iv. He was not against strikes but pleaded that those should be the last weapons in the
armoury of industrial workers and, hence should not be resorted to unless all peaceful
and constitutional methods of negotiations, conciliation are exhausted.

Gandhiji considered labour far superior to capital. According to him, “Without labour gold,
silver and copper were useless burden. It was labour which extracted precious ores from the
bowels of the earth. He could quite conceive labour existing without metal. Labour was
priceless, not gold. He wanted marriage between capital and labour. They could work wonders
in cooperation. But that could happen only when labour was intelligent enough to cooperate with
itself and then offer cooperation with capital on terms of honourable equality. Capital controlled
labour because it knew the art of combination. Drops in separation could only fade away; drops
in cooperation made the ocean which carried on its broad bosom greyhounds. Similarly, if all the
labourers in any part of the world combined together, they could not be tempted by higher wages
or helplessly allow them to be attracted for, say, a pittance. A true and non-violent combination
of labour would act like a magnet attracting to it all the needed capital. Capitalists would then
exist only as trustees. When that happy day dawned, there would be no difference between
capital and labour.”

Thus, the trusteeship system is totally different from other contemporary labour relations system.
It aims at achieving economic equality and the material advancement of the ‘have-nots’ in a
capitalist society by non-violent means. He gave greater importance to the change in their
attitudes and to regard themselves as co-equals and co-partners in a joint venture. As early as
August 1927, Gandhiji wrote in Young India, “in my opinion, the mill hands are as much the
proprietors of the mills as the shareholders and when the mill owners realise that the mill hands
are as much as they are; there will be no quarrel between them.” He further emphasised that
“workmen should be regarded as equals with the shareholders, and they should have, therefore,
every right to possess an accurate knowledge of the transactions of the mills.”

Gandhiji recognised the need for higher productivity and pleaded that the “management should
share with the workers, the gains from higher productivity.” He also laid stress on the importance
of job enrichment and observed, “A spinner may not dream of earning as much as the manager
now, but he refuses to be ignored. If his work and talents are ignored and if his contributions to
the industry are never to be measured by any other yard-stick except of selling price at the lowest
or static level, he will never give his best.”

From the above discussion it emerges that the theory of trusteeship as propounded by Mahatma
Gandhi is based on three basic Gandhian concepts viz. Ahimsa (non-violence), Samanta
(equality) and Swaraj (self-rule). In this way his concept of trusteeship in which labour and
capital both are considered as trustees is a significant contribution in the sphere of industrial
relations. According to him, employers should not regard themselves as sole-owners of mills and
factories of which they may be legal owners. They should regard themselves only as trustees, or
co-owners. He also appealed to the workers to behave as trustees, not to regard the mill and
machinery as belonging to the exploiting agents but to regard them as their own, protect them
and put them to the best use they can. In short, the theory of trusteeship is based on the view that
all forms of property and human accomplishments are gifts of nature and, as such, they belong
not to any one individual but to the entire society.
Further, he realised that relations between the labour class and the management can either be a powerful stimulus to economic and social progress or important factor in economic and social stagnation. According to him, industrial peace is an essential condition not only for the improvement in the conditions of work and wages. At the same time, he not only endorsed the workers’ right to adopt the method of collective bargaining but actively supported it. He advocated voluntary arbitration and mutual settlement of disputes. He also pleaded for perfect understanding between capital and labour, mutual respect, recognition of equality and strong labour organisations which are the factory essentials for happy and constructive labour relations.

India is fast emerging as one of the fastest growing economies of the world and this has led to a lot of interest in the study of distribution of surplus income among various segments of the society. Over the years multinational companies and corporations have also come to flourish in the country relying on laws, codes of ethics and in house awareness programmes for their managers to deal with the problems of corporate social responsibilities and business ethics. But the current global financial crisis and other corporate scandals have exposed the limited utility of the approaches adopted by these big business magnates and there is needed quest for innovative solutions to the perennial problems of moral business philosophy. It is to overcome these intricacies of our modern times that the Gandhian concept of trusteeship assumes importance in today’s global society.

Dr. S.K. Chakraborty, in his book Human Values for Business, exhorts managers for bringing in value orientation in their day-to-day practices: “Viewed broadly, if the cultivation of highest values strengthens human virtues like gratitude, caring, work-ethic, honesty, forgiveness, helpfulness, humility and so on, we see no reason why they should not improve organizational effectiveness. For usually a colossal dissipation of energy occurs in organizations due to the low level or even lack of such healthy human value. Teamwork, co-ordination and communication become the major casualties. Therefore, efforts spent on keeping alive and strengthening their noble sentiments in human networks will produce individuals who should not be narrowly individualistic.” If implications of his trusteeship theory are properly grasped by the modern labour managers they can easily tackle many of the day to day problems faced by them at their work places by gainfully applying them in consultation with the workers. Gandhiji also wanted the capitalist or the wealth creators to be the trustees of the wealth they create. In that trusteeship remains one of the most relevant of Gandhiji’s concept, which something most of us can easily relate.

Trusteeship is the natural answer to modern management science. It establishes healthy and lasting relationship between employees, employers and management. In the strict sense the term is not just an instruction of business management but an ideology, which by its very nomenclature implies a determined sense of dedication and commitment for the social welfare. In recent industrial relations trend in our country has added a greater meaning and dimensions to the teachings of Gandhiji. We are painfully aware that, in recent times, an atmosphere of violence is being let loose in settling labour-management disputes. The solutions to labour-management problems of today lie in properly understanding the Gandhian approach to industrial relations. For Gandhiji means and ends are equally important. Gandhiji strongly believed in the concept of settling industrial disputes through mutual negotiations and arbitration without any rancour between the parties.
It would be wrong to assume that Gandhian views regarding trusteeship or labour management have lost sight of the modern capitalists or the labour class. Reverse is the truth. Recently Narayan Murthy said that he is a socialist at heart and capitalist by profession. In the same vein there is no dearth of the stories and news of labour unrest and strikes at various factories and organisations. All the workers and their union leaders continue to swear in the name of the Gandhian ideology to get their grievances redressed. Therefore, it is imperative to suggest that true meaning and methodology as enunciated by the Mahatma must be grasped by all concerned. The system of trusteeship, as viewed by the Gandhian theorists, is of utmost relevance for resolving conflicts and for achieving cooperation in the organisational setting. Understanding each other in a better way, with respect for mutual rights and responsibilities, is the surest way to settle all problems. The Gandhian philosophy of Ahimsa and peaceful conduct of relations and positive cooperation will lead us to the correct path of industrial relations. In nutshell it can be said that Gandhiji’s philosophy of trusteeship can be relevant today because it is based on mutual respect, understanding, appreciation and compassion. If we conclude that nonviolence is not relevant today we are saying in effect that positive attitudes of respect understanding, appreciation and compassion are not relevant. If that be so then we cannot claim to be a civilised society.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. Srimadbhagwatgita, Chapter 3, verse, 20
4. O.P. Goyal, Studies in Modern Indian Political Thought (Gandhi an Interpretation), Kitab Mahal, Allahabad, 1964, p. 60.
5. Harijan, March 1, 1935
6. According to Prof. O.P. Goyal, (see, op. cit. p. 60): “The disillusionment came only when it was very late for him to do anything else. His Secretary, Shri Pyare Lal tells us in The Last Phase Volume I, how Gandhi had realised in his later life that his capitalists friends would not become trustees of his imagination. He had started advocating stronger measures. Pyarelal told the international seminar organised by UNESCO on Gandhian Outlook and Technique in New Delhi that Gandhi had come to believe that the rich must be dispossessed of their wealth and that this can be done without the necessity of paying any compensation for that.


11. Harijan dated 13th February, 1937


14. However, O.P. Goyal sees no merit in the theory of trusteeship as propounded by the Mahatma. He says: “Trusteeship was the temptation that he offered to the rich and after the enunciation of the principle, he proceeded to make concessions. Thus he agreed that the trustees should be given a fair commission commensurate with the value of service rendered to the society. If they are trustees, what commission are they entitled to? Who would be the trustees for that commission? Moreover, the original trustee is granted the right to nominate his successor though the choice is to be finalised by the State. Here he appears to have been influenced by the example of his great friend and disciple Jamuna Lal Bajaj. Shri Jamuna Lal Bajaj renounced his wealth which he had inherited from his grand-father and created a trust for it. Yet he again acquired wealth and renounced it again. The process was rotated and yet he left enough for his family to enable them to create another trust. And this was the ideal trustee for Gandhi. That only shows that trusteeship is only eye-wash for the teeming millions. If Gandhi wanted to help his friend to dispossess himself of his property, trusteeship could be of no avail. (See, op.cit. p.60)