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Mahatma Gandhi's idea of self-reliance in Gram Swaraj and its role in Panchayati Raj

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Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi's concept of Swaraj was based on the basic needs and self-reliance of Indian rural society. According to him, the village should be developed as a self-sustaining forest centre where the rural life could be enriched by utilising local resources and labour. Gandhiji wanted to make the villages economically, socially and politically empowered through this concept, so that along with the progress of the villages, the balanced development of the entire nation is possible. In his philosophy, self-reliance was not limited to economic activities, but also included the concepts of ethics, mutual cooperation and collective responsibility. The Panchayati Raj system provides an effective basis for putting into practice Gandhi's idea of Gram Swaraj. The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution provided for a decentralised system of governance at the village level in the Panchayati Raj Institutions so constituted. Through this, rural communities can participate in policy decisions, identify public resources and make their priorities self-reliant - a process in line with Gandhiji's principle of Swaraj. Financial rights to villages through Panchayati Raj, ability to take administrative decisions and legal autonomy so as to participate in local development activities. Implementation of MGNREGA, Swachh Bharat Mission and other Government schemes can be done effectively with the help of Panchayati Raj Institutions, leading to self-reliance and citizen participation in villages. Gandhiji believed that under Gram Swaraj, people should have access to basic amenities like clean water, education, healthcare and sanitation at the local level. For this, it was considered necessary to combine traditional knowledge and modern technologies so that the rural economy is strengthened and the problem of migration is prevented. The Panchayati Raj system has proved to be extremely useful for this, as it provides an opportunity to find solutions to local problems at the local level itself. However, obstacles like corruption, political pressure and lack of resources also emerge in this journey, but these can be mitigated on the strength of collective consciousness and strong citizen participation. Thus, the combination of Gandhi's Gram Swaraj and Panchayati Raj system is a meaningful effort to encourage self-reliance and democratic participation in rural India.

Key words: Gram Swaraj, Self-reliance, Panchayat Raj, Decentralization, Rural Development, Mahatma Gandhi, Community Participation, Democratic Participation, Local Self-Government, Rural Economy.

Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi is remembered in the social and political history of India as a leader whose ideology influenced not only the Indian freedom movement but also the development and democratic traditions of the post-independence country. Gandhiji presented a new vision of India's rural life, the concept of Gram Swaraj, with self-reliance, decentralisation and harmony of political values at its centre. This concept of village swaraj was limited to a single area and encompassed political, economic and social dimensions so that rural India became self-reliant and contributed to the empowerment of the entire nation. To understand the concept of Gram Swaraj, it is first necessary to look at its ethical basis. India has traditionally been a country of villages, where the majority of the country's population lived and depended on agriculture, handicrafts and traditional cottage industries. The period of colonial rule and the increasing influence of urbanization had an adverse impact on the rural economy, leading to a situation of stagnation, illiteracy, displacement and economic inequality in the villages. Gandhi saw these problems not merely from an economic point of view, but as a serious political and social question. He said that if the villages become self-reliant, the way will be opened for the development of the entire nation, because only on a rural foundation can the structure of democracy and social justice be built. According to Gandhiji, Gram Swaraj was not limited to economic upliftment of the time; it also sought a comprehensive social and economic regeneration. To make the rural society self-reliant, he emphasized on Charkha, Khadi and cottage industries so that people can earn their livelihood without depending on external economy. At the same time, they were inspired to keep their moral and cultural values intact. This ideology included not only the decentralization of production, but also the decentralization of power, with the ability to make decisions at the village level, so that people could find solutions to their local problems themselves and not have to rely on a large administrative structure.¹

Swaraj means "rule over self," but according to Gandhiji, it is not limited to political freedom. He included moral, social and spiritual freedom in Swaraj. Gandhiji believed that liberation from colonial power is not enough; real freedom will be achieved when people adopt the values of self-control, self-restraint and self-determination in their personal and collective lives. In this context, Swaraj is not merely a question of changing the ruler, but of empowering the governed, with the right and ability to make decisions about their own lives. Values such as truth and non-violence played a central role in this conception of Swaraj because, according to Gandhiji, if Swaraj was based on violence and vengeance, it could never bring lasting peace or real public welfare. He gave the message through Satyagraha that moral values should be protected even while opposing injustice. This gives moral ground to Swaraj, which considers the people supreme over any feudal or centralised power.²

For Gandhiji, self-reliance of villages was the most important dimension of the original definition of Gram Swaraj. He believed that every village should be able to meet its basic needs, be it food, clothing or basic amenities like sanitation and housing. The meaning of this self-reliance was linked to the sense of self-esteem at the individual level and collective cooperation at the social level. When people in villages will no longer be overly dependent on outside help for their needs, they will have the opportunity to escape economic exploitation and cultural hegemony. Along with this, the decision-making process will be run democratically through institutions like Panchayati Raj at the village level. Gandhiji believed that if this root of Swaraj becomes strong in the villages, then the form of a strong democracy can be developed at the country level. He saw this concept as "Samarth Gram" and "Rebuilt Nation," where the functions of public welfare would be governed by the people's power and not by any centralised authority or bureaucracy. In his view, Gram Swaraj was not just a model of economic development, but also the basis of a moral-spiritual revival in which the spirit of compassion, cooperation and truth within man could be nurtured. Thus, Gram Swaraj was an essential part of Mahatma Gandhi's political philosophy, which aimed at decentralization, self-reliance and moral values. It was not only a means of empowering the rural society of India but also envisioned a just and equitable system in the entire nation. The role of Panchayati Raj in the modern administrative system is



inspired by this idea, where the tasks of development and welfare can be embodied through democratic institutions at the village level.³

The concept of self-reliance

The concept of self-reliance is a key pillar of Mahatma Gandhi's vision of Gram Swaraj, where individuals and societies meet their needs by using local skills and labour, without depending on external resources for their daily lives. Self-reliance does not only mean being economically self-sufficient, but it is also linked to universal social and economic values. According to Gandhiji, the development of self-reliance should be in three dimensions - individual, collective and economic - so that the society can function as a cohesive unit. In this sense, the self-esteem of the self-sufficient individual and the social consciousness of society combine the two. At the individual level, self-reliance means that an individual is psychologically and economically capable of determining his or her own needs, and is free from any dependencies or insecurities. It involves building character, representing morality and being courageous in the face of conflict. When a person moves towards self-reliance, he also assumes his family and social responsibilities with greater ease and responsibility. The social spirit is born when the people of the community and village find a solution to the local problems through their mutual participation. Collective effort had a special significance in Gandhiji's ideology because he believed that if the people of the village worked in cooperation with each other, the dependence on external institutions or centralized structures would be reduced. This process not only creates new employment opportunities but also establishes unity and mutual trust within the rural society.

Economic self-reliance is clearly visible in Gandhiji's Swadeshi movement and encouragement of cottage industries. He urged that traditional skills like handicrafts, weaving, spinning wheel, khadi, farming and others should be developed in villages so that people could meet their daily needs based on local resources. It is not only economically beneficial but also preserves cultural identity and knowledge-tradition. The concept of self-reliance is central to Gandhiji's Gram Swaraj philosophy, which seeks to empower rural communities not only economically but also socially and morally. Production and consumption based on local resources lead to real self-reliance by establishing identity with it. If this method is adopted in a practical way, balanced and inclusive progress can be made in the development of rural areas as well as in the economy and social system of the whole country.⁴

Role of Panchayats in Gram Swaraj

One such integral aspect of Mahatma Gandhi's ideas in the land of the Panchayat in Gram Swaraj is related to making the rural society self-reliant and instilling democratic values. Gandhiji said that the real Swaraj should not be limited to a mere change of power; it should come directly into the lives of the people, where decisions can be taken at the village level and their responsibilities are also fulfilled there. In this context, the Panchayati system, i. e., the constitution of Gram Panchayats, serves as a central pillar for finding local solutions to the problems of the villages and giving the rural population an experience of direct democracy. The importance of the Panchayati system in Gandhi's thought lay in the fact that decentralisation of power was considered essential to nation-building. According to him, if we are able to manage our resources and administrative responsibilities well, the purpose of independence will be served. Gandhi understood that a centralized system of government was alien to the masses, leading to a gap between policies and real needs. The Panchayati system is an effective medium of interlocutory administration, as Panchayats are institutions directly and indirectly connected to the people of the village. They are well acquainted with the problems, resources and culture of the people of the rural society. Gandhi did not see the Panchayati Raj system as merely an administrative unit, but as an institution to promote moral values, cooperation and transparency in rural life. This institution teaches the people of the village that any dispute can be resolved through mutual understanding, discussion and constructive cooperation.⁵

People's participation and democratic control in local decisions is the basic foundation of the

Panchayati system. Gandhi suggested a number of constructive experiments in this direction, including the importance of group discussions, open meetings, and transparent accounting. He described the Gram Sabha as the soul of the Panchayat, where all the adult members of the village can come together to discuss issues like local development, budget, health, education and sanitation. In this process, the people themselves become the decision-makers and not merely the recipients of decisions. Democratic control also means that if the elected representatives of the panchayat abdicate their responsibility, the public can hold them accountable. This develops a sense of transparency, accountability and participation, which gives a concrete direction to rural development. Encouraging local leadership in the Panchayati Raj system also opens the way for representation of women, Dalits and backward classes. Although there was no such structural provision in Gandhi's time, the trend of inclusiveness and collective interest was evident in his ideas. Today, after the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution, this structure has been further strengthened with the provision of reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions. This reinforces pluralism in village leadership and ensures wider participation in decision-making. As a result, basic facilities like education, health, clean water, roads, electricity etc. can be developed in rural areas according to local conditions.⁶

Thus, the role of the Panchayat in Gram Swaraj gives practical shape to Gandhi's ideas. Panchayats are not only instruments of rural development but also create a society where the values of mutual cooperation, accountability and self-reliance are deeply rooted. The Panchayati Raj system through decentralization of power strengthens the democratic principles in rural India and gives a direction to Gandhiji's vision under which every village can realize Swaraj according to its characteristics and needs.

Structure and Development of Panchayati Raj

The structure and development of Panchayati Raj can be seen as a symbol of the sustainable development of Indian democracy. Before and even after Independence, Mahatma Gandhi had dreamt of India's development with the idea of Gram Swaraj at the centre. He believed that if the ability to take administrative decisions at the village level is strengthened, then the paths of political, economic and social progress of the country will be paved. The legal provisions of Panchayati Raj systems (73rd Constitutional Amendment etc.) have proved to be crucial in institutionalizing Panchayati Raj. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) gave constitutional status to Panchayats, leading to decentralization of rural administration. The amendment made it mandatory for states to hold elections to gram panchayats, panchayat samitis and zila parishads at regular intervals to ensure participation of local citizens in rural development work. The Panchayati Raj Institutions were also empowered to play an important role in the implementation of development schemes, taxation, tax collection and various welfare schemes. This amendment also became the basis for women empowerment in rural areas as it provided for reservation for women in Panchayats. Further, ensuring reservation for Scheduled Castes and Tribes also gave a wider dimension to democratic participation.⁷

Introduction to the three-tier Panchayati Raj system (Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti, Zila Parishad) presents a step-by-step framework for implementing this legal framework at the ground level. The lowest unit is the Gram Panchayat, whose members are elected by direct election. The Gram Panchayat is the nearest administrative body at the village level, responsible for solving the problems of the local residents such as water supply, sanitation, roads, education and for carrying out development works. The head or pradhan of a gram panchayat is usually the principal representative of the panchayat who presides over the meetings of the panchayat and liaises with the gram sabha. The unit above this is the Panchayat Samiti, which is constituted at the block or taluka level. The scope of the Panchayat Samiti is based on the group of Gram Panchayats. The Panchayat Samiti coordinates development work at the village level, such as maintenance of primary health centres, secondary education and agricultural extension programmes. Apart from the elected members, the Panchayat Samiti sometimes includes official level representatives who provide administrative support. At the third level is the Zila Parishad, which is considered to be the highest panchayati institution at the district level. The Zila Parishad works as coordination between various Panchayat Samitis and Gram Panchayats. The Council



monitors the implementation of schemes covering a wide range of subjects such as construction of roads, irrigation, secondary and higher education. The members of the Zila Parishad are elected by direct election, and the Zila Pramukhs are its key functionaries.⁸

Thus, the structure and development of Panchayati Raj has provided an opportunity to the rural masses to play a responsible role in the development process along with empowering them politically. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment not only gave statutory protection to these institutions but also paved the way for the integration of women, Scheduled Castes and Tribes into the democratic mainstream. This system provides an effective example of decentralized governance in the country, thereby strengthening the possibilities of implementing Gandhiji's idea of Gram Swaraj on a practical basis.

Gandhian Decentralization and Local Administration

Gandhian decentralization and local governance is based on Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of Gram Swaraj, with special emphasis on devolution of power and resources from the central to the local level. Gandhiji believed that if there is excessive centralisation of power, the problems of the common people are often neglected and the benefit of decision-making is limited to a few. On the contrary, the process of decentralization paves the way for empowering the local society by ensuring direct participation of the local people in the activities of policy-making and resource-distribution.

The meaning of decentralization and its benefits can be understood as the transfer of power from the center to the local level. The direct benefit of this is that the dependence on external or high-level bureaucracy for solving local problems is reduced. With the formation of self-governing institutions at the village, block or district level, rural and urban communities can decide their own priorities, which make it possible for better implementation of plans and policies. Decentralization not only speeds up quick decision-making but also leads to efficient utilization of resources. In the view of Mahatma Gandhi, this process makes the people self-reliant and increases the possibilities of incorporating moral values in political decisions.⁹ When the masses begin to define their own needs, instead of adapting to government schemes, the government has to adopt community-based strategies. This approach is in line with Gandhiji's Swaraj philosophy, where citizens are included as active participants rather than merely as beneficiaries of schemes. The direct role and responsibility of the people's representatives in the administrative system is another important aspect of Gandhian decentralization. Elected representatives in local bodies such as gram panchayat, panchayat samiti and zila parishad get decision-making power, which makes them directly accountable to the public.¹⁰ This deepens the roots of democracy, because compared to the members of Lok Sabha or Vidhan Sabha, the village head or councilor knows the smallest problems of his area, and the public can directly communicate with him.

In this mechanism, the possibility of transparency and accountability is high as the public can closely monitor the activities of the representative. This system embodies Gandhian thinking, where administrative units lead the decision-making process at the local level, rather than following the instructions of a higher authority. However, its successful implementation requires trained human resources, adequate financial autonomy and a conscious citizenry.¹¹ Rural development and urban systems can be improved by harmonizing these, as decisions can incorporate region-specific needs and priorities. Thus, Gandhian decentralization not only strengthens democracy but also makes development more inclusive through people's participation at the social and economic level.

The Relevance of Gandhi's Gram Swaraj in Modern India

The relevance of Gandhiji's Gram Swaraj in modern India has to be understood from these dimensions. The impact of industrial expansion, urbanisation and the global market still hold the potential for economic growth, but rural India is still facing challenges such as lack of basic amenities, unemployment and unequal distribution of resources. In such a situation, Gandhiji's philosophy of Gram Swaraj, which gave priority to self-reliance, decentralization and a social life based on political values,

is still relevant in the present times. This philosophy not only shows the way to strengthen the rural economy but can also provide a strong foundation to the overall development of the entire nation. Both the choices and opportunities of the present Panchayat Raj system attest to the relevance of Gandhiji's ideas. The first challenge is that while the Panchayati Raj Institutions have been given statutory status, there are still many shortcomings in financial and administrative autonomy. The allocation of funds by the Central and State Governments is controlled in such a manner that the Panchayats do not empower themselves to take decisions independently. On the other hand, the selection of panchayat representatives is often driven by local ethnic, political and economic influences, which have an adverse effect on accountability and transparency. Despite these conditions, efforts to strengthen the Panchayati Raj system have created many opportunities in rural areas. Through institutions like Gram Sabhas, the public is getting an opportunity to participate in the decision-making process, as a result of which it is possible to assess the needs of rural development works in a more realistic manner. Representation of women and deprived sections has deepened the roots of democratic values, which is a remarkable step towards Gandhiji's ideal of Swaraj.¹²

Government schemes related to self-reliance at the village level, such as Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, MGNREGA, Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, etc., resonate with Gandhiji's ideas. The basic objective of Swachh Bharat Abhiyan is not only to create sanitation infrastructure but also to promote awareness and community participation in the rural society. Gandhiji himself emphasized on individual and collective hygiene as it was not only a question of health but also of social consciousness and respect. Similarly, MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) promotes economic self-reliance by curbing rural unemployment. Building sustainable assets and creating employment opportunities at the local level are both aligned with the priorities implemented in Gandhi's Swaraj Doctrine.¹³ Schemes like Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana and National Rural Livelihood Mission have also opened the doors of possibilities towards infrastructure and skill development at the village level.

In the light of all this, it is clear that Mahatma Gandhi's concept of Gram Swaraj is not merely an idealistic idea in contemporary India, but is being put into practice through the Panchayati Raj system and government schemes. However, challenges still exist - like corruption, lack of awareness, financial dependency - but these can be addressed through empowered panchayats. The basic premise of Gandhiji's vision of Gram Swaraj rests on the strength, cooperation, self-reliance and transparency of the community. If Panchayati Raj Institutions get adequate autonomy and resources, and awareness and participatory approach are encouraged in rural communities, the vast rural population of the country can pave the way for prosperity through their own efforts. In this way, an important part of Gandhi's dream can be seen to be realized in modern India, which will not only strengthen social justice and equality, but will also further strengthen India's democratic foundation.

Conclusion

The contemporary application of Mahatma Gandhi's idea of Atmanirbharta in Gram Swaraj is significant in view of the fact that at present, judicious use of traditional and local resources is emerging as an effective countermeasure while addressing the challenges of economic development, social justice and ecological balance. In the modern era, the impact of rapid urbanisation and the global market has affected the rural economy in many ways, some of which have had some negative consequences. But Gandhiji believes that real development is that in which rural society remains self-sufficient, dependent on skills equivalent to its local resources in production and consumption, and moral values are preserved. Today, support to indigenous peoples, promotion of cottage industries and decentralized governance can be such tools to provide sustainable support for people's livelihoods while also empowering rural self-reliance. This ideology is also capable of yielding additional benefits in areas such as environmental protection, poverty alleviation and social empowerment, as respect and sharing of local resources is at the core of Gandhiji's thinking. The future of rural India can be brightened through innovation and collective participation, if panchayats have the ability to effectively implement the directions and recommendations from the highest level at the root level. The use of micro-irrigation techniques to



conserve water, organic farming to conserve soil fertility and digitization of rural cottage industries can open new avenues of access to markets. At the same time, the all-round development of rural society is possible by expanding the role of Panchayats in the field of education and health. For this, a deep understanding of Panchayats, honest administration and constant monitoring is extremely necessary. According to Gandhiji, if decision-making at the village level includes transparency, collective discourse and moral values, even the biggest challenges can be overcome successfully.

Thus, the Gram Swaraj of Mahatma Gandhi was not only a source of inspiration during India's freedom movement, but continues to be the guiding principle for building the future of rural India. If the Panchayati Raj institutions become strong, inclusive and accountable in a decentralized system based on the core of self-reliance, the path of economic and social development of the rural society can be strong. This development will take place not only on the basis of government schemes but also in a self-sustaining manner through local initiatives, resources and manpower. This journey of realizing Gandhiji's Swaraj philosophy on a practical level is difficult, but a new chapter of self-reliance and prosperity in village communities can definitely be written on the strength of collective participation and right policy-making.

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