

# Gandhian Trusteeship and Economic Ethics

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## ABSTRACT:

Gandhi did not distinguish between economics and ethics. His economic ideas enshrined in his concept of trusteeship were based on his deep understanding of religion, truth, non-violence as well as western ideas like bread labour. He had faith in the goodness of even the propertied class and believed that they can be persuaded to become trustees of their wealth for the welfare of the entire society and nation. Trusteeship aims at the winning over the hearts of the rich in favor of the poor so that the wealth of the rich can be used for the upliftment of the poor. It is indeed a grand alternative to the existing economic systems of the world viz. capitalism and communism, which is based on goodwill and trust.

**Keywords:** Trusteeship, truth, non-violence, bread labour, alternate economic system, non-possession, satyagraha

## INTRODUCTION

Gandhi had immovable faith in the innate goodness of human nature. He approached everything from a moral perspective. Almost all his ideas, about politics and social order were a result of a spiritually evolved philosophy of life. He did not distinguish between economics and ethics either. He wrote in *Young India* in 1921, "I must confess that I do not draw a sharp or any distinction between economic and ethics. That economics is untrue which ignores or disregards moral values." He evolved trusteeship as not just an economic concept or a new theory of property ownership but a way of life. He clarified in *Harijan* in Dec. 1939, "My theory of trusteeship is no makeshift, I am confident that it will survive all other theories. It has the sanction of philosophy and religion behind it".

The primary inspiration of his economic concepts were the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. He understood the teaching of non-possession in *Gita*, which says, "those who desired salvation should act like the trustees who, though having control over great possessions, regard not an iota of them as his own." Pyare Lal believes that Gandhi based his doctrine of trusteeship on the celebrated opening verse of *Isopanishad* that proclaims: "God, the ruler, pervades all that is there in the universe. Therefore, renounce and protect or dedicate all to him and then enjoy the portion that may fall to the lot. Do not covet or cling to anybody's possessions, for whose is wealth". This first verse of *Isopanishad* that celebrates the idea of 'enjoyment through renunciation' had a profound impact on Gandhi's thoughts. He wrote in Feb. 1947 in *Harijan*, "Everything belonged to God and was from God. Therefore, it was for his people as a whole, not for a particular individual. When an individual has more than his proportionate portion, he became a trustee of that portion for God's people." Ancient Indian scriptures are replete with this idea of non-covetousness. The ancient Indian concept of kingship was that of a real trustee as kings were supposed to wield power for the benefit of their people. The Christian ethic of stewardship also has an impact on his ideas.

During his education in the U.K., Gandhi read the works of western thinkers like Snell, Ruskin and Tolstoy. He wrote in his autobiography, "My study of English Law came to my help. Snell's discussion of the maxims of equity came to my memory." According to Snell's law of equity, the legal owner of the property need not renounce his right over property, but he holds it for the benefit of others. John Ruskin's *Unto This Last* discusses the philosophy of social justice and emphasizes the principles of sacrifice and renunciation. Leo Tolstoy's ideas of simple life, bread labour and the belief that 'land belongs to all', had the most profound impact on Gandhi. Tolstoy saw landed property as a source of evil and injustice. He renounced his own property, the vast Yasnaya Polyana estate, in favor of the peasants, and lived the life of a trustee. All these ideas played a significant role in the gradual development of Gandhi's theory of trusteeship as a solution to the existing economic problems.

### **Trusteeship as a 'Grand Alternative'**

Gandhi perhaps used the word trustee and trusteeship for the first time in 1909 in his seminal work *Hind Swaraj*. He later defined trusteeship in 1940 in *Harijanas*, "The rich man will be left in possession of his wealth of which he will use what he reasonably requires for his personal needs and will act as a trustee for the remainder to be used for society." He regarded it as compromise between private and state enterprise. According to J.D. Sethi, "in trusteeship, Gandhi produced a grand alternative to the prevailing economic organizations whether in the communist or capitalist countries." Private enterprise under capitalist system, Gandhi believed, led to great and unjustified disparities of wealth. A non-violent government was "clearly an impossibility as long as the wide gulf between the hungry millions and the rich persists." He also did not approve of the Marxist method of violent overthrow of private property. Instead, he proposed trusteeship as a moral economic order that would eliminate all possibilities of class conflict and lead to the establishment of harmonious relations in a just society based on trust and co-operation between the conflicting classes. "What is needed is not the extinction of landlords and capitalists, but a transformation of the existing relationship between them and the masses into something healthier and pure." Gandhian approach aims at a change of heart on the part of the rich, in favor of the poor. In trusteeship, there is no place for violence, but only trust. The common man trusts the trustee, who in turn acts as the custodian of wealth. Gandhi wrote in *Harijan* in June 1939 that he wanted the "Zamindars and ruling chiefs to outgrow their greed and sense of possession, and to come down in spite of their wealth to the level of those who earn their bread by labour.

The theory of trusteeship applies equally to both material and non-material possessions. Gandhi instructed that "the man with extraordinary talents should hold his talent in trust for society" and use it for the social structure of which he is a part. He envisioned property as of two types: gifts of nature and products of social living. Since natural resources like land, mines, etc., are created by God, they belong to all. "*Sabhi Bhoomi Gopal ki*". No individual can claim to be their real owner. Similarly, man-made property is accumulated by the capitalist with the help of the labour and co-operation of the workers. Thus, the poor workers also have a legitimate share in it. Since the rich acquire their wealth by exploiting the masses, they are morally bound to share it in a fair measure with the workers and poor. None has a right to acquire more than what is needed to satisfy his immediate needs.

## Theory of Trusteeship

Gandhi believed that the toiling masses cannot be liberated from exploitation unless the character of ownership is altered both for the capitalist as well as labour. In March 1946, he wrote in Harijan that the present owners of wealth "would have to make their choice between class war and voluntarily converting themselves into trustees of their wealth. They would be allowed to retain the stewardship of their possessions and to use their talents to increase the wealth, not for their sakes, but for the sake of the nation and, therefore, without exploitation." They would hold the property or wealth in trust for others. They would be entitled to a commission regulated by the state in accordance with the value of their service to the society and in tune with what other workers receive. As "a trustee has no heir except the public", they cannot bequeath the property to their children. Their children can become trustees only if they accept the conditions of trusteeship and are approved by the state. They would live under the gaze of the society as well as the state. Gandhi's trusteeship is not charity done to curry self-glorification but a moral approach towards ownership, which shall liberate the wealthy of their sin of acquisitiveness and greed.

Gandhi believed that the wealthy can be persuaded to part with their wealth to help the poor. Initially he did not favor compulsion in the surrender of property, as that would deny to society the talents of people who could create national wealth. If persuasion failed one could resort to the supreme remedy of *Satyagraha*. Gandhi did not believe in class war and use of coercive state action. He believed, "class divisions there will be but they will be horizontal not vertical." He was convinced of the indispensability of non-violent, non-cooperation and *Satyagraha* in converting the privileged classes into trustee. "Exploitation of the poor can be extinguished not by affecting the destruction of a few millionaires but by removing the ignorance of the poor and teaching them to non-cooperate with their exploiters also." He suggested an ideological struggle through *Satyagraha*. Once the change in attitudes is successful, statutes can be implemented. He recommended that a beginning might be made at the base, at lower levels like the *Gram Panchayats*. But by the 1940's he advocated state legislation to ensure compliance with the concept of trusteeship and did not rule out violence altogether. "We shall have to dispossess them of their possessions through the state with the minimum exercise of violence."

Many Gandhians consider trusteeship as the most original concept of Gandhian economic thought. V.K.R.V. Rao found Gandhi's vision of trusteeship "prophetic for the world". Gandhi's views on wealth, private property, possession, etc. are all well illustrated in the concept. J.D. Sethi writes "of all Gandhiji's ideas and concepts, trusteeship was the most original as it was also the most tentative since he did not have time to experiment with it on a scale that would match the grandeur of the concept. He did not have time enough even to define it precisely, not to speak of spelling out its implications in concrete terms." The concept gradually developed over time in Gandhi's mind and his writings.

A simple, practical trusteeship formula was drafted by Gandhi's coworkers, Narahari Parikh and Kishorelal Mashruwala and it was fine-tuned by Professor M.L. Dantwala. The draft was placed before Gandhiji in 1942, who made a few changes in it. This six-point document of the Gandhian ideal of Practical Trusteeship was later published in Harijan in Oct. 1952 that spells out the cornerstones of the concept.

## Pillars of Trusteeship

The theory of trusteeship is firmly based on the concepts, which were the pillars of Gandhian philosophy: truth (*Satya*), non-violence (*ahimsa*), non-possession (*aparigraha*) and the idea of bread labour.

The twin concepts of *Satya* i.e. truth and *ahimsa* i.e. non-violence lie at the heart of the entire social and political philosophy of Gandhi. *Satya*, for Gandhi was the ultimate goal and *ahimsa* was the means to achieve it. He raised truth to the level of God by saying "Truth is God" and believed that everyone who is in quest of truth is in fact serving God. To him truth is harmony of thoughts with words and of words with action.

According to Gandhi, the idea of trusteeship was inherent in the ideology of *ahimsa*. Infact, he saw trusteeship as an inescapable stage in the methodology of a non-violent revolution. Since trusteeship has the sanction of philosophy and religion and "no other theory is compatible with non-violence", he was confident that it would survive all other theories.

For Gandhi, non-violence is closely linked with the idea of non-possession. While acquisition stands for violence, non-violence stands for non-acquisition. Gandhi believed that economic equality is a basic requirement of a just and non-violent society. Economic inequalities are the cause of conflict and disharmony in a society. To achieve the ideal of equal distribution, Gandhi suggested trusteeship as a weapon. It was advocated as the non-violent means to achieve social harmony.

*Aparigraha* is the ethical ideal of non-possession professed in every religion. Gandhi was strongly influenced by the idea exhorted in the first verse of *Isopanishad* that celebrates 'enjoyment through renunciation': *Tena Tyaktena Bhunjeethah ma Gridha Kasyaswiddhanam?* Gandhi recommended that individuals should abstain from acquisitiveness and possessions as everything belongs to God; wealth belongs to society and must be utilized for common good. According to Gandhi, to possess something which is not needed now, is stealing. He elaborates "If I take anything that I don't need for my own immediate use and keep it, I thieve it from somebody else."

Gandhi was aware that absolute non-possession is an abstract idea. He offered trusteeship as a means for transfer of wealth from the privileged to underprivileged. He asked the wealthy to shed possessiveness if not possession and greed for wealth, if not wealth itself. The rich may keep their wealth by considering their excess wealth as the property of the community. They become the trustees of such wealth and use it for the welfare of all, especially the needy. Gandhi wanted to avoid unnecessary monopolization of wealth in the hands of the rich. Through trusteeship, he suggested a method for the socialization of wealth.

Non-possession did not mean living in voluntary poverty. It meant that everyone would have to work to fulfill his needs. Gandhi was greatly attracted to the concept of bread labour. "The law, that to live man must work first came home to me, upon reading Tolstoy's writing on Bread Labour." He was influenced by the view expressed in Gita that 'he who eats without offering sacrificial fruit to others is a thief'. Gandhi believed that "sacrifices may be of many forms, one of them may well be bread labour." Every healthy individual must labour enough to earn his food. For Gandhi, labour is the root of the entire creation and everyone can see God through his own work. One who performs labour acquires the legitimate right to his bread, however nobody should acquire more than his absolute need.

Gandhian concept of bread-labour epitomizes, "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need." Everyone must work to the best of his own ability and acquire according to his need. This need based acquisition can lead to an egalitarian society. No work is low and every type of labour has its own value. A man of work possesses a right to honorable livelihood. He announced, "Under my system it is labour which the current coin is and not metal." He believed that by obeying the law of labour whereby everyone would work to the best his abilities for societal progress and partake only according to his immediate need, a silent revolution could be brought about in the society.

Gandhian trusteeship was thus a noble idea shaped out of his deep understanding of spirituality and modern education. It was not just an economic concept aimed at achieving an ideal non-violent, non-exploitative and egalitarian society but also an ethical idea that drives every individual to achieve self-realization. Above all, it is an attitude, a mindset that involves an individual's identification with the entire humanity. Trusteeship as an attitude believes in equality of all and trains a man for serving the society. The assessment of the doctrine of trusteeship ranges from eulogy to bitter criticism. Gandhi's trusteeship indeed attempts to create an ideal socio-economic order, which seems elusive to many. However, all great ideas are difficult to achieve.

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