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The Trusteeship Model: A Way Forward to Sustainability

- By Dr. Pooja Sharma



Abstract

Ever since the advent of industrialization, human civilization has been driven by greed and unprecedented consumerism. Eventually, the human race has excessively damaged the environment and accumulated exorbitant wealth. Consequently, humankind faces global challenges such as climate change, natural disasters, pandemics, etc. Capitalism has been the driving force behind consumerism, with material progression being the core of economic fundamentals. Thus, the notion of sustainability has taken center stage in all policies across all nations. The paper proposes the framework of the trusteeship model, advocated by Gandhi, as a way forward to sustainability. The notion of trusteeship unfolds all global challenges and provides a way forward to sustainable and inclusive societies that function in a decentralized manner. The paper presents various communities and entities functioning on sustainability attributes, representing a role model for sustainable functioning.

On 1 January 2016, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development-Adopted by the world leaders in September 2015 at an historic UN Summit-officially came into force. Later, Environmental Social Governance (ESGs) fortified the fact that there was a shared responsibility for the environment and ethics (Forbes, 2018). With growing concern about the ethical status of quoted companies, these standards are the central factors that measure the ethical impact and sustainability of investment in a company. It is crucial to mention that the Gandhian Economics model has already addressed all the elements of SDGs and ESG.

Keywords: Trusteeship model, Gandhian perspective, Climate change, sustainability, consumerism, decentralized system.

Introduction

Gandhian economics is guided by an evolved consciousness that realizes the Truth of existence and, therefore, seeks ultimate satisfaction. Guided by empathy and the law of non-possession, the ultimate aim of economics is to build a localised society that is devoid of any concentration of power, competition, warfare, and unrest. The role of the state is ideally considered to be minimal, acting as trustee or custodian of its limited resources, addressing inequalities of ownership and wealth.

The world has begun to realize the challenge of sustainability: 'Meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs' (Brundtland Report, 1987). Later, the notion of sustainable development emerged, enabling human beings to fulfill their aspirations and reach their full potential over a sustained period (Munasinghe, 1994). As a result sustainability components were first incorporated into Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015) carried over into agenda 2030 -Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 2015-2030) to promote peaceful and inclusive societies, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all strata of the society.

The Notion of the Trusteeship Model

The Gandhian ideology of Trusteeship is a remarkable breakthrough in economic thought, unfolding the dilemma of the economic problem of unlimited wants and limited means. The trusteeship philosophy is based on the notion that *"One must care about the world one will not see"*. Before the climate change debate began, Mahatma Gandhi said that we should act as 'trustees' and use natural resources wisely, as our moral responsibility is to ensure that we bequeath a healthy planet for future generations (INDC, India, 2015). The Gandhian perspective of economics emerges from the primary dimensions or aspects of development emphasized by Gandhi. These aspects are mainly uplifting and enriching human life rather than the higher standard of living. The key driving force behind Gandhian economic thought is the minimal possible respect for human and social values. In his philosophy, ethical values dominated economic values.

“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 had more than his proportionate portion, he became a trustee of that portion for God’s people” (Harijan, 23-2-47, p.39)

The above are simple words by which Gandhi propagated the notion of trusteeship. The notion is that an individual must consume only the bare minimum required and give up the excess. The concept is, therefore, a testimony of corporate social responsibility, which involves engaging commerce or business in the development process. It also indicates the element of ethics and responsibility in any activity or production and consumption process.

The Trusteeship Model and *Sarvodaya*

Gandhi, in his seminal work *‘Hind Swaraj’*, written more than a hundred years ago in 1909, already warned the world of the dangers of environmental destruction the world faces today (Tiwari, 2019). The Gandhian thoughts revolutionized the issues of Climate change, advocating an environmentally sustainable way of living that sustains an ethical balance between the materialistic needs of humans and their responsibility towards ecology and the environment. Gandhi coined the term *Sarvodaya* to reflect ‘Universal Uplift’ or ‘Progress of All’. Gandhi conceived this term, inspired by John Ruskin’s notion of political economy, ‘Unto This Last’. Gandhi (1963). The notion of *Sarvodaya* is based on three basic principles. Firstly, the good of individuals is contained in the good of all. Secondly, every individual has the same right to earn a livelihood from work. Finally, the life of labour, such as the life of the tiller of the soil, handicraftsman is worth living.

The concept of *Sarvodaya* stands for the Progress of All, based on equality and liberty. It is an agency of service for common welfare based on non-possession, a concept of trusteeship. The essence of environmental ethics was advocated through the notion of *Sarvodaya*. Gandhi’s vision of

Sarvodaya implied preserving humankind's harmonious existence with nature and other living beings (Tiwari, 2019).

Gandhian Economics and Trusteeship Model

The discipline of Economics deals with the problem of scarcity through the theory of economic growth and development. The underlying phenomenon that 'Human wants are unlimited, but resources are limited' constitutes the fundamental economic problem namely 'The problem of scarcity.' In this context, the philosophical approach of the Gandhian economic perspective strategically distinguishes between the notion of 'wants' and 'desires' and provides a necessary rationale for ethical wants. Thus, the basic economic problem 'The problem of scarcity and choice' identifies explanations in the Gandhian notion of economics.

Evidently, the desire to acquire more and more has been detrimental to the limited resources and ultimately administered an unprecedented procession of resources. The outcome of greed has been 'the unchecked capitalism' that breeds more and more economic growth. Thus, one can conveniently state that the uncontrolled and unlimited human wants have resulted in a concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. The dynamics of the political economy further play a critical role in disrupting equity in the distribution and the existence of the welfare state.

The 'invisible hands' of profits or the forces of demand and supply caused capitalism to grow uncontrolled and detrimentally to the extent that it destroyed human values and ethics (Smith, 1987). Moreover, the Keynesian notion that increasing demand could lead to a multiplier effect and distribute growth to the poorest of the poor has subsequently failed. In addition, the political economy guided by vested interests inhibits the flow of well-being to every section of society.

The Gandhian concept of the "Trusteeship Model" unfolds the dilemma of the problem of scarcity by proposing the most efficient way of treating the

surplus in the economy. Guided by the fundamentals of ethical economics and human upliftment, the spirit of trusteeship doctrine emerges from the law of non-possession. The thought advocates that the world's bounties are primarily for the entire human race and not for any particular individual. When an individual processes more than what is rationally needed, he has the ethical responsibility to distribute (Harijan, 23 February 1947).

“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 all 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.” – Mahatma Gandhi (Harijan, 3-6-1939)⁵

According to Gandhi's trusteeship principle, 'when some people can work and earn more, their surplus wealth should be accumulated for the welfare of the poor and less privileged'. The trusteeship model he advocated essentially uplifts the economic order or the society to an egalitarian one. The core of the trusteeship model is the protection of human dignity and not merely material prosperity. Under state-regulated trusteeship, individuals will not be able to hold or use their wealth for selfish satisfaction, disregarding the interests of society. Such a system will ensure a minimum wage for all the members of society. Besides, this doctrine of trusteeship addresses the prevailing inequalities of ownership and income, narrowing the class gap in society (Kesavulu, 2004).

The Gandhian philosophy of Trusteeship advocates that humans are the custodians of nature. The concept of *Sarvodaya* propagates the 'upliftment of all', including human and non-human entities. The principle of 'economy of permanence' based on Gandhian thoughts reinforces the continuity of life with selfless work. The economy of gregarious ensures one sole aim of maintaining the harmony of humans and nature. The decentralized systems proposed by Gandhi provide a systematic framework for monitoring over-exploitation and destruction, ensuring non-violent, peaceful, and self-sufficient economies. Such economies generate lesser

energy demand and are energy-sufficient and independent. Energy conservation is a natural outcome of such communities. Consequently, the Gandhian ecological revolution commences from the moral and ethical Gandhian revolution of humankind, revolutionizing humans' socio-economic and political settings and their relationship with nature or ecology.

An economic system that adopts the Gandhian trusteeship model can comprehend the needs and plight of every human being that is living within its boundaries or territory. The government acts as a trustee or custodian of resources and intends to distribute its resources equitably to all living within its boundaries. No one consumes or owns or consumes excess resources; all resources that are in excess are distributed among the people who are deprived and in need.

The trusteeship notion, propagated by Gandhi, communicates the attributes of empathy and non-possession. Humans are custodians of all natural and man-made capital. Thus, the trusteeship notion reinforces the character of non-possession in the state, individuals, and all stakeholders. This elementary character of non-possession is devoid of greed, selfishness, and competition. Thus, the policymakers, the decision-makers, and individuals perform their respective roles with an empathic attitude, which is highly needed in present times.

The Trusteeship model establishes humans' relationship with nature. Humans serve as custodians of nature and bequeath natural resources to future generations. When human civilization views natural resources as curators, individuals try to restore every part of them for the future. Innovations will commence not to destroy natural treasures but to secure and protect them.

The elementary aspects of the Gandhian notion of self-sufficiency and self-reliance envisage that individuals are satisfied with minimum consumption. Such a society or community is devoid of any concentration of power, competition, warfare, and unrest. Such nations are peaceful and

nonviolent, with equitable wealth distribution. Given such an economic setup or regime, the economy's resources must be produced and consumed sustainably.

Welfare Economics, Decentralization & Trusteeship Model

Although the doctrine of the welfare state was developed around the 1990s, economists soon realized the missing concept of human welfare while discussing the mechanism of economics. Several noted welfare economists such as (Arrow, 1950), and the founder of utilitarianism (Jeremy Bentham, 1776). The Benthamite notion contended that the greatest happiness of the greatest number is the measure of right and wrong. Later, the Rawlsian approach measures the well-being of the worst-off individual (Rawls, 1971). Rawls asserted that equal fundamental liberties are to be embodied in the political constitution and relate to fair equality of opportunity and the general benefit of the least advantaged members of society.

Even though welfare economics attempted to incorporate some of human ethics and value judgment, there has been no evidence or testimony of implementing the notion of welfare economics. Certain countries, such as Norway and Canada, have attempted to implement such a welfare model. However, the core and critical aspect of the state being the custodian of nature has not been enforced.

The role of the state is hugely significant. A state must be motivated to serve humanity. Service to humankind and custodians of natural resources must be the two indispensable commitments of the state. When a community, nation, or state is based on the Gandhian philosophy of truth and nonviolence, then the system of governance is based on human service and human resource development. The element of human service should never be decoupled from the gross element of human development. The purpose of human development is destroyed when it is devoid of human service. Human development leads to destruction and is always associated with an

increased ecological footprint. When the core purpose of governance is human service, the socio-economic order produced is peaceful and sustainable.

In this context, a decentralized system of governance takes centre stage. The village *Panchayat*, the primary political unit of public administration, is considered self-governing and self-sufficient and has autonomous status. When small communities decide the best optimal allocation of every provision on consensus-based choices, then there will be no unrest. They take up complete responsibility for providing goods and services subject to available resources and capabilities. A decentralized, consensus-based decision-making system is another significant aspect of Gandhian philosophy. Such decentralized communities are characterized as self-reliant and self-sufficient communities. These communities are more non-violent and sustainable, reflecting lesser exploitation of resources. Such societies are more peaceful and ecologically sustainable.

In a decentralized framework, there will be no disturbance of peace at the nationwide level. Moreover, where small producers work in a decentralized setting, the raw material required for production would be exploited only locally. The system will not entail exercising its power over the raw materials. Therefore, such an economy would lead to a non-violent economy where supply meets demand without violence. Such an economy does not provide any opportunity for a wealthy person at the cost of another. This would further inculcate human values among the people living in the society. Effectively speaking, a sense of human values will direct economic activity, and various negativities in the global environment, such as international rivalry, jealousy, and competition, would be minimized, leading to human progress, peace, and prosperity.

Contemporary Models based on the Trusteeship Model

The present world has exhibited several societies and communities that are based on the Trusteeship model. One of the remarkable movements worth

noting is *Bhoodan Andolan* which was initiated by Acharya Vinobha Bhave. The movement is also referred to as '*Bhoodan Pochampally*' as it originated at Pochampally in 1951. This movement motivated the wealthy landlords by inculcating a 'change of heart' and imbibing the essence of compassion, a sense of common resource sharing among the privileged and resourceful. This movement stands unique in the mind that it depicted an instrumental role by women, who played a critical role in making this movement a success. The peasants of Telangana had called for a violent struggle against the local landlords.

However, Vinoba, through his noble and pure thoughts of *Satyagraha*, was able to render a peaceful movement where wealthy landlords were motivated to donate a proportion of their landholdings. Shri Vedre Ramachandran Reddy *Bhoodan* got the title *Bhoodan*" because he was the first donor in the village of Pochampally in the Nalgonda district. The movement later on developed into a village gift '*Gramdan* movement'. This movement further became a part of the *Sarvodaya* Society's rise of socio-political order, recognized for its inclusivity and elements of sustainability not only across India but internationally.

Gandhi argued that there is enough for everybody's needs yet not for everybody's greed. Gandhi's concept of trusteeship originates from non-possession, emphasizing that possessing material things we do not need is similar to stealing. The best alternative is to own resources as custodians of nature. Gandhi asserted that the noblest way humankind expresses love in the purest form is through service to his fellow human beings. Through this selfless service, humans have the capability to glimpse super consciousness and experience divinity on earth. However, if humankind decides to divert from selfless love to greed and selfishness or gets transformed into selfish considerations such as the accumulation of wealth, then this endeavor becomes the cause of all conflicts and proves to be detrimental to the environment and ecological harmony.

Gandhi advocated when individuals perform their tasks selflessly and are unconditionally inspired to maintain in harmony with nature, a non-violent

and peaceful society can be visualized. One of the remarkable examples of a cooperative society worth mentioning here is the Milk Cooperative Society in Nagpur, linked to Goras Bhandar that got originated in 1983. This cooperative society is characterized by transparency, participatory and consensus-based decision-making mechanisms; thus a socially inclusive system became a role model for human values and a peaceful decentralized system.

Another breakthrough in the system was witnessed by the Cadbury Committee's report, which referenced "responsible ownership" and was dedicated to the Gandhian notion of the Trusteeship model (Rao and Shishir, 2018). The doctrine of the trusteeship model continued to pursue and motivate the business section of society to adopt an extensive application of the doctrine of trusteeship in political mobilization (Chakraborty, 2015).

Several tribal communities in Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, and other states depict an ideal Gandhian community using simple technology that benefits workers by constructing their physical, mental, and spiritual health. The community represents a self-sufficient energy system and is effectively more renewable. Firewood cut from the community's forest was used for indoor heating, water heating, and cooking.

In India, J.R.D Tata, a prominent industrialist who was highly influenced by Gandhian thoughts, succeeded in accumulating wealth and resources for the betterment of society. The first trusteeship-based organization in India was Khira Trusteeship Projects Private Ltd., which was established in Pune and inaugurated there. The second was the cooperative sector at Mehsana, Gujarat, in 1985, which continues to work, further, under the joint Trusteeship Foundation of India and Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation Ltd. The Mehsana project was launched in 1985 at the Dudhsagar Dairy Campus. The largest cooperative dairy was established in 1960, an apex body of milk cooperative societies that provides remuneration to milk producers. In addition, it serves the interests of consumers by providing high-quality and safe milk products. This

cooperative covers a broad base of more than 10 lakh farmers from the states of Gujarat, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh. Further, apart from milk, several other milk products were launched. Also, a college by the name of MIDFT began in 2011 under Kamdhenu University intending to prepare future technocrats of farmers associated with the Dudhsagar Dairy.

The trusteeship model, thus based on the larger good for the society and ecosystem, serves the purpose of sustainability as a whole. The cooperative sector and the public sector based on the Gandhian trusteeship model can be considered a remarkable breakthrough in the economic system. This will set an example for any producing organization and individuals, in general, how one should perceive human life and living. The attributes of altruism will be motivated more than materialistic consideration, identifying and relating to the underlying motivation behind all the connections with human and non-human life, mainly the ecosystem as a whole. This is perceived to bring about the necessary transformation in individuals so that they can visualize the interconnectedness of every human and also humans with non-human living beings that are part of the whole ecosystem. Thus, the holistic attribute of Gandhian thought can be practically adopted in all the systems in which human societies function and operate. Such a system will ensure sustainability and inclusivity.

Conclusion

The Gandhian philosophy of Trusteeship advocates that humans are the custodians of nature. Exploitation is non-existent in Trusteeship because there is no incentive to accumulate or any scope of selfish interest. Self-sacrifice and selfless services are the two characteristics of the state, all organizations, and stakeholders. It is these remarkable attributes that cultivate sustainable development and growth. The concept of Sarvodaya propagates the 'upliftment of all', including human and non-human entities.

This provides a sufficient rationale to revisit Gandhian thoughts that advocate the Trusteeship model. The Gandhian thoughts transform how humans envisage their interaction with nature and perceive their existence on earth. The genesis of Gandhian economics evolves with the individual's self, then to the society, and finally the state. The roles of individuals, firms, and the state are aligned in one direction: to serve humanity and its ethical existence.

The decentralized systems proposed by Gandhi provide a systematic framework for monitoring over-exploitation and destruction, ensuring non-violent, peaceful, and self-sufficient economies. Such economies generate lesser energy demand and are energy-sufficient and independent. Energy conservation is a natural outcome of such communities. Consequently, the Gandhian ecological revolution commences from the moral and ethical Gandhian revolution of humankind, revolutionizing humans' socio-economic and political settings and their relationship with nature or ecology. This form of absolute love that leaves no one behind or deprives no one of the nectar of its enlightenment is bound to leave behind some remarkable footprints that are remembered by the history of humankind as the contribution of human beings to rekindle the continuity of life on earth.

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-About the Author

Associate Professor, Department of Economics, Daulat Ram College, University of Delhi. An alumnus of Miranda House, University of Delhi, she completed her master's in economics from Delhi School of Economics, MPhil, and Ph.D. from Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). An avid Gandhian, her contribution varies in the field of Energy security, Energy transition, Renewable energy, Human Capital, and Gandhian perspective on energy transition.