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# Mahatma Gandhi and Legacy of Democracy in India

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective**: Mahatma Gandhi was an ardent believer in the theory and democracy His belief was based on his own conception of democracy which was quite different from classical concept of democracy of the west. **Methodology**: His innate love of equality, unflinching support of individual freedom, and his consistent plea for bringing about a just order through the brotherhood of man that recognized no barriers of sex, religion, language and culture testify to his faith in democracy of his conception. **Results**: It is true that Gandhi was not a system builder as Plato or Aristotle. Gandhi's ideas on democracy are to be found in his speeches and writings, though they do not appear to be systematically developed in the sense that he carried ideas to a logical conclusion. **Conclusion**: Gandhi expressed his views on democracy in response to questions put to him by his friends and well- wishers, depending upon his own study. Observations of life experiences and experiments.

## 1. Introduction

by place and time? Was he an ordinary person who rose to extraordinary Mahatma Gandhi a product of his milieu, and his relevance circumscribed however, that the same heights or a person extraordinary? These and similar questions invoke endless debate and discussion. It can be safely argued, wo World Wars, of racism, of apartheid, produced many great personalities but only one Gandhi that the world milieu of British colonialism, the t .( $\Upsilon$ .) $\Upsilon$ Sanford, ) recognised as unique personality

contextual responses to the objective conditions of his time and I would like to submit that the relevance of Gandhi is best assessed not just in terms of his reliance (swadeshi), the -cooperation (Satyagraha) the spinning wheel (charkha), self-violent non-like non –place for bringing about social transformation but in terms of the conceptual and –aparigraha), unto the last (antyodaya) and so on ) "wantlessness" (hayati rajcommunitarian village republic (panc al import which If I were to single out some of the most significant abstractions of univers .( $\gamma \cdot \gamma v$ Guha, ) theoretical abstractions that lie embedded in these :many in the world have come to recognise, these would be

- violent revolt by Buddhist monks for restoration of democracy in -violence in thought and deed (the non-The transformatory power of truth and non (thoritarian regimes as in Iran and the Philippines; and other examplesviolent ouster of au-Myanmar; the non
- representative democracy The concept and theory of participatory democracy embedded in his vision of Panchayati Raj. This is a counter to the elitist . in the western formulation
- exploitative technology, a cooperative mode of production and trusteeship that would make for an economic order -earch for a nonThe s . inequalities commensurate with distributive and social justice .Emancipatory power of women and the rejection of social
- · . ty of preventive health care over prescriptive medicationPriori
- . alists the world overHumankind as an integral part of Nature, and not apart from Nature. A principle that is invoked by ecologists and environment
- · . as being embedded in one"s obligation to the other The primacy of obligations over rights. Rights
- · . state-The paradigmatic alternative to the western concept of the nation and nation

umably in the world, that Gandhi I shall restrict myself to the legacy of democratic decentralisation and the deepening of democracy in India, and pres patory democracy. Like most of bequeathed for the future. Embedded in his search for an ideal polity based on panchayati raj lies the formulation of partici ng and competing interests and ideologies. I wish to demonstrate that in India, the his ideas, participatory democracy is a contested terrain of clashi

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zag direction, consistent with Gandhi"s formulation of participatory -dialectics of contestation over panchayati raj, has taken an irreversible, albeit a zig  $.(\Upsilon )^{2}$ Kochanek, ) ocus will be on rural Indiademocracy. My f

#### 2. Materials and methods

#### Indigenous Polity and Grassroots Democracy 7.1

Gandhi was ,(epublicanAt a time when democracy was defined exclusively in terms of western representative democracy of the West (parliamentary or r governing village communities, in which the individual will be the unit and-on the innumerable self "centred" for a democratic polity that would be .ependence on and willing help from neighbours or the worldThis would not exclude d ."every village will be republic or panchayat having full powers" His vision was that of complete republic, independent of its neighbours for ".In such an arrangement there will be ever widening, never ascending circles" -violence with its technique of Satyagraha and non-necessity...Non r many others in which dependence is aits vital wants and yet interdependent fo ttempts at an ongoing cooperation will be the sanction of the village community. His elaborations, from time to time, on gram swaraj were so many a Embedded in this romanticisation was the hard ".se to portray a holistic picture of the village republic "though never realisable in its completenessexerci During the Indian national movement, he .structural reality of rural governance that was native and indigenous to India"s unparalleled complexity hayats suffered fromspearheaded the establishment of village panchayats by the Congress Committee, and was fully aware of the problems these panc .(\%AvMalik & Vajpeyi,)

:had proposed an alternative to the Westminster model up approach, he-Consistent with his bottom

l of them voting. Then there There are seven hundred thousand villages in India each of which would be organised according to the will of the citizens, al age, in other words, would have one vote. The villagers would elect the district administration; the would be seven hundred thousand votes. Each vill .the executivedistrict administrations would elect the provincial administration, and these in turn elect the President who is the head of

wield only that the real development of India was possible through its indigenous political system in which the centralised state would Gandhi believed the facilitator of development. More such power as was not within the scope of lower tiers of participatory governance. The state was not the architect but s villages and its superstructure at the 'layered autonomous vertical integration of political institutions with its base as India-positively, he was for a multi . (Y.)\*Corbridge & Harriss, ) people as one moved from base to superstructure manifesting a descending level of power over the –Centre

pervasive western paradigm of modernity, traditional values and institutions were regarded as obstacles to development, -In the post Second World War all pposition to Gandhi''s ideals of gram swaraj and panchayati raj. India witnessed a contestation between forces of "modern" consequently, it was in o more emocracyrepresentative democracy, and those convinced that the inadequacies of representative democracy could only be met by making d tion begins with the writing of participatory through the introduction of panchayati raj, transforming villages into "units of self government". The contesta "( $\gamma \cdot \Delta$ Saberwal, ) the Constitution for free India

#### of Panchayati Raj Draft Constitution and Willful Omission <sup>7</sup>.<sup>7</sup>

it in the mere survival of Babasaheb Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian Constitution, had a polar opposite view of village republics. He found no mer With ".msilanummoc dna ecnarongi fo ned a ,msilacol fo knis a tub,, village republics that were the cause of ,,the ruination of India". They were nothing ".dual as its unitan air of finality, he had concluded, ,,I am glad that the Draft Constitution has discarded the village and adopted the indivi

from the architecture of the Indian polity met with a barrage of criticism, from the time the draft was tabled The willful omission of the village panchayat A host of distinguished members including, H. V. Kamath, Arum Chandra .(\%%November `Y) until a resolution had to be passed (\%%November \*) Tyagi, K.T. Shah Guam, T. Parkas, K. Santana, Shebang All Sabena, Allude Krishnaswamy Ayyar, N. G. Ranga, M. Ananthasayanam Ayyangar, Mahavir led. The points that recurrently echoed in and others voiced their inability to accept this gross omission. Resolution after resolution for amendment was tab :(\%%Phana, ) the debate were

a''s ruination, it was the i) Ambedkar''s view about village republics was narrow and factually erroneous; (ii) far from villages being the cause of Indi) olonial exploitation; (iii) the Constituent Assembly that was now engaged in scripting India''s Constitution, owed its very villages that were ruined by c the Drafting movement for independence; (iv) none of the members of existence to the rural masses who had contributed principally to the national rural masses and their potential Committee, except one, had participated in the freedom struggle, hence their inability to appreciate the contribution of the .(\199FBrass, ) power to transform the country

tical significance. Kamath posed the fundamental question: Now what is the State for? ... The ultimate conflict that The debates dwelled on issues of theore tion or Ranga asked, "Sir, do we want centralisa "?has to be resolved is this: whether the individual is for the State or the State for the individual e of the most important decentralisation? Mahatma Gandhi has pleaded over a period of thirty years for decentralisation." He went on to add, "Sir, on er power not to the Central Government but to the consequences of over centralisation and strengthening of the Central Government would be handing ov ".Central Secretariat

:When Gandhi came to learn of this willful omission, his trite observation was

spondent) says that there is no mention of or I must confess that I have not been able to follow the proceedings of the Constituent Assembly (the corre shadowed Constitution. It is certainly an omission calling for immediate attention if our -direction about village panchayat and decentralisation in the fore eater the power of the panchayat, the better for the people." Finally, Ambedkar very graciously independence is to reflect the people"s voice. The gr :November Y accepted the following historic resolution moved by K. Santhanam on

take steps to organise village panchayats and endow them with such powers A. The State shall-"": the following article be added, "That after Article "government-and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self

#### Failed Experiments and Renewed Faith in Participatory Democratisation 7.7

level democracy in bringing -nalist elite were divided in their conviction over the efficacy of the role and capacity of grassroots villageClearly the natio heated debate. Steeped in the about rapid economic transformation. No less a person than Jawaharlal Nehru preferred to maintain silence during this cts embedded in a rich history of India that he himself had authored, he seemed trapped between the ambiguities of western modernity, and the prospe Pakistan) contained a stark warning for the future. It is understandable that he –continent (India-civilisational heritage. The traumatic Partition of the sub His approach was eclectic. .veered towards a centralised democratic state to keep the nation in tact and make it the agency of rapid economic development and seeks to create something –the Russian, the American and others –which takes the best of formally existing systems ,"way third" He spoke of a .s own history and philosophy'suited to one

ects, land reforms, irrigation schemes, modern agricultural inputs projects: multipurpose hydel proj-Impatient for change, he went in a big way for mega ational Extension etc. to boost Indian agriculture. He put a lot of expectations in the US model of Community Development Programme (CDP) and N e USA to bring about rapid rural transformation through people"s cooperation. Once this experiment Service (NES) and forged a partnership with th oriented polity. His decision -centred development and village-conclusively failed, his mind was clear on the primacy that Gandhi had accorded to village with S. K. Dey at its helm, testified the new (\%2^September \%)reate a new Ministry of Community Development, Panchayati Raj and Cooperation to c .resolve with which democratic decentralisation would be pursued. He never looked back thereafter

Chairmanship of level Committee under the-t Govind Ballabh Pant, Chairman of the Committee on Plan Projects appointed a highPandi , <code>\%AvIn</code> and the Programme Balvantrai Mehta, a veteran Gandhian and Congressman. The Committee was mandated: (a) to review the Community Development government. The Committee concluded: Development cannot progress without -National Extension Service, and (b) to evolve a system of local self ems, realises its responsibilities, exercises responsibility and power. Community development can be real only when the community understands its probl .nnecessary powers through its chosen representatives and maintains a constant and intelligent vigilance on local administratio

State level administration in a very short period of time. The Panchayat -tier structure of sub-It goes to the credit of Dey that he put in place the three would be formally under Samiti became the strategic level for the formulation of the District Plan. The decentralised administrative system hereafter .followed closely by Andhra Pradesh (1929October \*)sthan became the first to adopt the new scheme elected bodies. The State of Raja

ted representatives of the The qualitative changes brought about in the administrative and governing structure sought actually to delegate power to elec The development .hayati Raj institutions for the effective implementation of the Community Development Programme, not yet in their formulationPanc ess intensive phase with the model consisted of an intensive phase with heavy resource flow from the Central government; to be followed by a l -the way for self expectation that heightened people's involvement will be matched by a reduced contribution from the Centre, eventually paving rve that a further change had to take place "from a government sustaining development. Reality proved otherwise. This made Balwantrai Mehta to obse ."s programme with government participation' programme with people''s participation to a people

s panchayats were established throughout India...local  $19\hat{r}$  - all the States had passed the panchayat acts and by the mid"  $19\Delta9$ In spite of the fact that by and regular elections were not taking place. Mathew attributes this lapse on the electoral ,"administration resisted devolution of functions and powers .( $\hat{r} \cdot 1^{\text{VP}}$ Pelinka, ) rshipfront to the fear of ascendancy of panchayat leade

#### Continuity in Gandhian Praxis: Sarvodaya Movement <sup>\*</sup>.<sup>\*</sup>

the newly constituted Sarva Seva Sangh, under the leadership of Vinoba Bhave, was committed to carry forward the  $,^{14\%}$ After Gandhi"s death in and the creation of a sarvodaya samaj. The movement came into limelight in the context of the fierce armed Telengana, programme of rural reconstruction y employed dian armfeudal struggle led by the Communist Party of India. The armed agrarian movement had to succumb to the intervention of the In-anti t of voluntary gift of land for to integrate the feudatory province of Hyderabad (then under the titular rule of the Nizam) with the Indian State. The concep acres from Ramchandra Reddy in  $\cdot \cdot \cdot$  the first land gift of was given shape and content by Vinoba when he received –bhoodan –removing landlessness .( $\cdot \cdot \cdot$  Kohli et al., )  $^{190}$  Village Pochampalli in April

overnment g-lages for selfThe momentum gained in the bhoodan movement developed into a collective initiative for voluntary pooling of land gifts in vil an, Balvantrai Mehta gramdan) through gram sabhas (village assemblies). The movement attracted nationalist freedom fighters like Jayaprakash Naray) became unmanageable for the movement to control (gifts (gramdan-in-and others. Millions of acres of lands in gift (bhoodan) and thousands of village dership of Jayaprakash even as the government dragged its feet over lands to be redistributed. The All India Panchayat Parishad (AIPP) under the lea ommunity Development and Panchayati Raj and Cooperation. It consistently pressed for Narayan received support from Nehru, and the Ministry of C .(\\\\\Chiriyankandath, ) of the Constitution mandatory \\* legislation that would make Article

#### Reverse Swing towards Centralisation and Authoritarianism Y.A

the day Indira Gandhi assumed office as Prime Minister, ,\9??January Yer Nehru did not subscribe to democratic decentralisation. On The regime aft the Ministry of Food, the Ministry of Community Development, Panchayati Raj and Cooperation was closed and merged with the extensive empire of .(\99AVarshney,) Agriculture and Irrigation

sponsored programmes such as, "Intensive Agricultural District Programme, Small Farmers Development -The new agricultural strategy relied on centrally ntensive Tribal Development Programme, etc. downgrading the Ministry of Community Development into a Agency, Drought Prone Area Programme, I ".department under the Ministry of Food and Agriculture

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decentralisation was revived with the Asoka Mehta Committee Immediately on assumption of power by the then opposition Janata Party, the process of .reopening the subject

ocially motivated economic The most significant feature of the Committee''s report was the linking of "institutions of democratic decentralisation with s level Panchayat Samiti by Balvantrai Mehta in the formulation of district plans, it was -In contrast to the key importance given to the block ".development .ate levelsuggested that the district should be the first point of decentralisation, under popular supervision, below the St

ati Raj was missing. The The dissenting note by the veteran Gandhian Siddharaj Dhadda pointed out that the very foundation of the structure of Panchay governing -creation of an integrated structure of self purpose of decentralisation was not merely to help development, however it is defined, but the Dhadda was invoking the .airsinstitutions from the village and small town onwards, to the national level in order to enable people to manage their own aff .elt out for gram swarajprinciple of subsidiarity, which Gandhi had sp

s administration with no 'ryThe distinguished Marxist leader Namboodiripad could not think of PRIs as anything other than the integral parts of the count I am afraid that the ghost of the earlier idea that PRIs should ",e observeddifference between what are called "development" and "regulatory" functions. H He, too, was for nothing short of comprehensive devolutionary "be completely divorced from all regulatory functions is haunting my colleagues .(\*\*)Shani, ) democracy

#### 3. Discussion and results

#### Vindicated \* • Article ". 1

s confronted with a The pragmatist in Rajiv Gandhi, successor to Indira Gandhi as Prime Minister, finally vindicated the Gandhian position. He wa enormous revenue of the State reached the village for the uplift of the poor beneficiaries? straightforward question: How is it that only ten per cent of the d dry, and flow of benefits His answer was forthright: If we continue to device schemes from above large sections of the populations will be left high an every individual pment will pass over their heads like water on a ducks back, for it is not possible for government agencies to reach each andfrom develo .and to guide him and tell him to do this or that

nistration is not sufficiently responsive, the basic reason ]was[ that it ]was[ not sufficiently apparent that if our district admi" He argued that it was quite ".representative

irst time th amendments to the Constitution were enacted, India had created history in democratic practice and governance. For the f<sup>v</sup><sup>\*</sup>rd and <sup>v</sup><sup>\*</sup>When the -mative action requiring onethe institutionalised organs of participatory democracy constituted the third stratum of the Indian state, empowered by affir lits in proportion to their population in the region. The third representation of elected women members and functionaries, and the representation of da was only to comprehend structural requirement enabling them to shape as agents of their destiny and that of the nation was met. What they needed now .urmount the cultural, political and class barriers that come in the wayand realise the power that is vested in them to s

#### st Century <sup>\*</sup> Prospects and Challenges for the <sup>#</sup>.<sup>\*</sup>

subjects that Yalist of Yet devolution of power is easier enacted than promulgated. The problem of devolution takes two forms. First, when out of the actually ed for devolution by the XI Schedule of the Constitution, there is a wide variation between States on the number of subjects have been recommend h the administrative devolved (administrative devolution). Second, when the financial resources of the local governments are incommensurate wit Ya in spirit, have devolved all the responsibilities reposed on them (fiscal devolution). As of now, eight States and one Union Territory, in letter, if not all .subjects to the panchayati raj institutions

the numerous problems that confront the world's largest and most complex democracy. It is not within the scope of this We cannot remain oblivious to .o realitygovernment, if only to keep us anchored t-challenges to our system of local self *Y* presentation to get into these. I shall mention only

- (1) . There is the factor of the local political economy and the high probability of elite capture of resources
- (2) level political elite feel threatened having to vie with the local political elite, trying to win support from a common-Central and State . constituency
- (3) rich NGOs/INGOs with their primary accountability to the donors operate within panchayat jurisdictions as -elected resource-The non . competing structures of influence and power
- (4) . ority of the PRIslevel projects that bypass the auth-There are State and central
- (5) . seeking behaviour characterise many functionaries at all levels-Problems of accountability and transparency often associated with rent
- (6) . intervals with poor attendance Gram sabhas, which are the fundamental units of direct democracy, are often convened at irregular
- (7) e elected There is the problem of what is known as "proxy panchayats", where the husband/male members of the family act on behalf of th . women representatives
- (8) . the Scheduled Castes) and the Scheduled Tribes in the Panchayati Raj system) institutional barriers often inhibit the role of dalits-Social
- (9) . A resistant bureaucracy is tardy in implementing devolution of power

- (10) .minant powersPolitical and economic clientelism in an iniquitous agrarian and caste structure perpetuates the role of do
- (11) .State levels-There are problems relating to ambiguities in the distribution and sharing of power at the various sub
- (12) -improvement in life Most importantly, there are problems of poverty, illiteracy and malnutrition that provide structural barriers to the . chances of the deprived and marginal groups

### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the dialectics of contestation has entered a new phase after the constitutional breakthrough. The process of contestations that I have highlighted in the presentation points to the resultant, irreversible ascendance of the forces of gram swaraj. It must be distinguished from the wave of decentralisation in many developing countries prompted by structural adjustment programmes since the 1980s that seek efficient service delivery as its main objective. Decentralisation per se is not necessarily democratisation. Neither deconcentration nor delegation of power is a sufficient condition for effective democratisation. What is important is real devolution of power to the constitutionally elected representatives at the level of local self-government. Had Babasaheb Ambedkar been with us today, he would have been pleased to note that the serious apprehensions he had nurtured about panchayati raj at the time of drafting the Constitution, no longer remain in the same measure. Had Gandhi been alive he would remind us that if only the people were able to hold on steadfastly to truth, non-violence and love the process would be so much the easier.

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