

The Gandhian Concept of Rural Reconstruction and Its Application in Paschim Medinipur District of West Bengal: An Overview

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Abstract:

M. K. Gandhi had an alternative version of rural reconstruction. During 1920s, he spoke about the scheme of “Constructive Programme” to ensure rural reconstruction and thereby to make India’s struggles for Independence meaningful and effective. Influenced by Gandhi’s notion of rural reconstruction, different Gandhian organisations are engaged in reconstructing Indian villages along Gandhi’s line after Independence. This paper seeks to examine the activities of Four Gandhian Organizations of Paschim Medinipur District in the State of West Bengal regarding the process of rural reconstruction through the implementation of Gandhi’s “Constructive Programme” at the local level.

Keyword: Rural Reconstruction, Constructive Programme, Gandhian Organizations

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi throughout his entire life experimented with different concepts and ideas. It would not be exaggeration to say that he spent his all life to quest a suitable path for political, social and economic uplift of the people of colonial countries like South Africa and India. For him, *Ahimsa* and *Satyagraha* were the weapons to fight the political battle against the foreign rule and the Constructive Programme was the instrument for creating a new kind of society in a colonial country like India. In the first section of the article, Gandhi’s concept of rural reconstruction, its meaning and efficacy will be discussed briefly. In the second section of the article, Gandhi’s Constructive Programme will be discussed. Implementation of Constructive Programme by the Four Gandhian Organizations in Paschim Medinipur district of West Bengal will be discussed in the third section. In the last section of the article, some concluding remarks will be made regarding the discussion under study.

During the heyday of anti-colonial movements, most of the nationalist leaders focused mostly on India’s political freedom from the British. But Gandhi was an exception in this regard. He not only engaged in emancipating the compatriots from British rule but also emphasised the attainment of self-reliance and self-sufficiency of all fellow countrymen. Gandhi believed that India is a country of villages. For him, the real India lay in her 700,000 villages, not in a handful of its big cities. So he believed India’s development could only be possible through the reconstruction of its villages which were ruined completely during British colonial rule. In this context Gandhi wrote:

Indian independence must begin at the bottom. Thus every village will be a republic or panchayat, having full powers. It follows, therefore, that every village has to be self-sustained and capable of managing its affairs even to the extent of defending itself against the world.¹

Gandhi viewed rural reconstruction is a matter of serious concern, which needs intrinsic attention. In common parlance, rural reconstruction means to bring some physical and infrastructural changes in villages. For Gandhi, rural reconstruction means radical transformation of objective and subjective conditions of rural life towards a positive direction, so that “all round development of all” be ensured. Actually, he gave over emphasis on revitalization of Indian villages in every respect, i.e., social, economic, political and moral. This concept is popularly known as ‘Gram Swaraj’ i.e., self-reliance and self-rule. Gandhi’s concept of "Gram Swaraj" or self-rule emphasized the need for sustainable rural development through the empowerment of local people. Gandhi's concept of rural reconstruction can be viewed as sustainable, holistic, and community-centric. This community-centric approach was based on non-violence, education, and participation of both men and women. Gandhi's vision of rural reconstruction emphasized the needs and necessities of rural societies, promoting a bottom-up approach to development. Gandhi wanted to construct the village as a complete republic. In another article Gandhi wrote:

My idea of village swaraj is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its vital wants, and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is a necessity. Thus every villages first concern will be to grow its own food crops and cotton for its cloth.....Education will be compulsory up to the final basic course. As far as possible every activity will be conducted on the cooperative basis. There will no caste such as we have today with their graded untouchability.²

By arguing village as a complete republic, Gandhi on the one hand advocated the concept of a limited state and on the other criticized the modern westernized concept of development. He believed that industrialization leads to the concentration of economic power, and the concentration of economic power necessarily calls for a centralized state. This situation would undermine the freedom, democracy and social justice. He opined, when economic and political powers are concentrated in the hands of a few, it will create a condition in which the democratic institutions become meaningless. Gandhi opposed the centralization of economic as well as political power in rural India for the sake of rural community. Here the concept of *Sarvodaya*, (the rise of all) becomes relevant. Instead of rise of the few, Gandhi advocated the concept of ‘rise of all’. He promoted self sufficiency, reducing dependency on the urban economy. Gandhi relied heavily on popular participation and he believed that through the participation of all a strong sense of community feeling would be developed. It is conducive to make a healthy democratic and a just society.

Now, the key principles of Gandhian concept on rural reconstruction are noted below:

- 1. Swaraj or self-rule:** As mentioned earlier, Gandhi believed in the concept of self-rule. In his view, People would govern themselves rather than be governed by a centralized authority. Thus, Gandhi emphasized on peoples empowerment. According to him, the empowered common people would be able to make their own decisions and could take control of their lives. In addition to that Swaraj stands for Home-rule also. Gandhi advocated for Home-rule too.
- 2. Decentralization:** Gandhi emphasized the importance of decentralization of political and economic power. He believed that local communities should have control over their own resources and should be empowered to take decisions that affect their lives.
- 3. Village Industries:** Gandhi believed that rural development should be based on the promotion of village industries. He actually wanted to rejuvenate traditional village industries which were destroyed by the colonial ruler. Gandhi had an urge for preserving traditional knowledge and practices which would help to preserve cultural heritage. Gandhi was in favour of small scale labour

intensive village industries. By advocating so, he wanted to solve the problem of unemployment in rural areas on the one hand and tried to address the issue of migration of people from rural to urban areas on the other. This would create employment opportunities and generate income for the rural population.

4. **Gram Swaraj or village self-rule:** Gandhi believed that villages should be self-sufficient. He also believed every village is a unique entity, different from others in their needs and resources. Therefore, developmental policies should be opted in view to meet the specific needs and resources of each village. Local people, through their active participation in the decision-making process, would set the goal of its development and would determine the path of its attainment. This principle emphasizes the importance of empowering rural communities to take charge of their development. Through this principle, Gandhi rejected the role of common people as a mere recipient of development and advocated the role of an active participant in the development process.
5. **Sarvodaya or the welfare of all:** Gandhi propagated the idea of ‘all round development of all’ i.e. Sarvodaya. Gandhi believed that the welfare of all members of society is very much important. Societal Gandhi upheld the idea of social equality and empowerment of marginalized communities such as women and dalits.
6. **Trusteeship:** Another important principle of village reconstruction is the responsible use of wealth and resources. Gandhi believed that individuals and communities should not waste resources, but should use it judiciously. Gandhi considered human beings as the trustees of natural resources not as the plunders. He thought that in the world enough resource is there to meet the needs of the people as a whole. He also considered the people as the custodian of resources.

By way of adopting the following steps the above noted concepts would be materialized.

1. Non- violent path should be followed to achieve the target;
2. Decentralization of social, economic and political power is required to reach the goal;
3. To introduce the concept of trusteeship to address the issue of economic inequality in the society.
4. Village industries are to be established to produce swadeshi goods.

Being a post-modern activist, Gandhi opposed state-centric highly mechanized model of economic development and planning, though his disciple J.L.Nehru was the passionate follower of western model of economic development and planning. Gandhi thought that India’s socio-economic problems could be solved through the implementation of labour-intensive programme and the same could ensure *Sarvodaya* or equal and the fullest development of all. It is popularly known as the Gandhian alternative to establish a ‘just society’ in a non-violent manner. In this context Dr. Bandyopadhyaya writes;

The constructive Programme, which is consisted of creating a set of highly decentralized socio-economic institutions, provides, to Gandhi’s mind, the infrastructure of the just society of his conception. Justice is consummated to the maximum practicable extent at each step of the Constructive effort involved in the programme.³

The view is also shared by many writers. According to Anil Dutt mishra, The Constructive Programme is, therefore, central to the understanding of Gandhi’s concept of *Swaraj*, which was for him a step towards the ultimate goal of *Ramrajya*.⁴

(II)

In the previous section Gandhi’s concept of rural reconstruction has been discussed. Gandhi’s concept of rural reconstruction could be implemented through the Constructive Programme. According to Gandhi, all-round development of a village can be ensured through the implementation of “Constructive

Programme”, designed by him during the 1920s. Gandhi mentioned that the “Constructive Programme” would help to establish “PURNA SWARAJ” or complete Independence. After the suspension of the non-cooperation movement on 10th March, 1922, Gandhi retired from active politics for nearly eight years and devoted himself to organize and implement programmes of constructive work. In 1941, he clearly mentioned about it. He also wrote a booklet entitled “*Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place*” for the Congress Workers. In 1945, he revised his scheme and added one more item, i.e. “improvement of cattle”, to it.

The “Constructive Programme”, as detailed by Gandhi in the booklet, may be summed up in the following manner: ⁵

1. Establishment of communal unity amongst the different communities of society;
2. Removal of untouchability from the Hindu society through moral appeal;
3. Introduction of prohibition by the medical practitioner, students and women and also to set up new centre for recreation;
4. Establishment of Khadi production units in each of the 700000 villages of India to make the villagers independent and self-reliant;
5. Installation of other village industries like hand-grinding, hand-pounding, soap-making, paper-making, tanning and oil-pressing etc. to boost up the village economy and to provide employment in rural India;
6. Improvement of village sanitation to make the villages a clean place for dwelling;
7. Introduction of new or basic education for children to make them model villagers;
8. Organizational arrangement to be made for ensuring adult education throughout the country in order to make the people politically conscious;
9. Emancipation of women to be considered as a part of such programme to equip the women with the changing environment;
10. Education in health and hygiene to be related to personal care for one’s body and mind to make individual physically fit and mentally sound for founding a new society;
11. Promotion of regional languages and development of the same to lessen the dependency on English language;
12. Development of Hindustani (Hindi mixed with Urdu) as the national language of India;
13. Establishment of economic equality through equitable distribution of resources;
14. Mobilization and management of the peasantry in a non-violent way to solve their problems with a suitable manner;
15. Formation of labour organization with an apolitical mode on a local basis;
16. Steps to be taken for the uplift of the Adivasis or aboriginal tribes;
17. Rehabilitation of the lepers;
18. Organization and mobilization of students on a non-political basis;
19. Improvement of cattle.

The above-said measures highlighted the fact that the “Constructive Programme” was basically designed to build up a new nation from below. The dedicated social workers and the voluntary organizations will take initiative to implement such scheme to ensure all-round development of all. In such a way, a “Just Society” will be established. But Gandhi’s notion has been criticized by many.

For example, Jayantanuja Bandyopadhyay writes:

“The whole idea behind the Constructive Programme is the anarchist conception of the gradual replacement of the state and government by autonomous popular institutions constructed voluntarily by the people.”⁶

Thus the “Constructive Programme” is not a ‘top-down’ model, but bottom-up in nature. Keep in mind that Gandhi was in favour of decentralization and he opposed centralization of political power. So he propagated the idea of decentralization.

Now, the characteristics of Constructive Programme are given below:

1. The entire scheme is voluntary and creative in nature;
2. It is highly decentralized and labour intensive;
3. The programme is society and community centric, not state-sponsored;
4. The total scheme is holistic in a sense;
5. The programme is based on the principles of non-violence, love and cooperation;
6. It is need-based and contextual, i.e. suitable for Indian context;
7. The entire scheme is non-profitable in nature.

Gandhi was not only a theorist but a man of action, so he did not confine himself only by formulating the principles of Constructive Programme. After tendering resignation from the Indian National Congress in 1934, he established “All India Village Industries Association” at Wardha and he devoted most of his time to the reconstruction of Indian villages. Gandhi started different productive activities such as village-craft and agro-processing industries at Wardha. Then he started the programme of village cleanliness so that the villages would become as an ideal place of living. Even he engaged himself to do something to remove untouchability from the Society. In 1936, Gandhi came to Sevagram of the then Bombay Presidency for organizing constructive work. He established various Constructive Work Institutions to guide the nation on a particular direction to reconstruct the village-economy in a non-violent way. The name of the All India Spinners’ Association can be mentioned in this context. The motto of the association was to develop the economic condition of the rural mass. Needless to say, Gandhi was the champion of village life but he could not tolerate ignorance, un-cleanliness, laziness and jealous altitude of the villagers. Influenced by this Gandhian notion of rural reconstruction, different Gandhian organizations are engaged to reconstructed Indian villages along with the principles of Constructive Programme.

(III)

During 1950s, many Gandhian social organizations came into being to reconstruct Indian villages along Gandhi’s line. The name of some such organizations are mentioned below:

1. Banwasi Seva Ashram (1954, U.P.)
2. Visarjan Ashram (M.P.)
3. Mahatma Gandhi Darsan (Chhattisgarh)
4. Gandhi Peace Foundation (New Delhi)
5. Gandhi Vichar Parisad (Bankura, W.B.)
6. Gandhi Prem Nivas (Kolkata)
7. West Bengal Gandhi Peace Foundation (Kolkata)

Similarly, many organizations have also been formed in West Bengal after Independence to implement Gandhi’s “Constructive Programme”. But, due to the paucity of time and fund, only Four Organizations

of Paschim Medinipur District have been selected for survey. Now, the short profiles of the Four Organizations are given below:

Table No. 1 Title: Profile of the Gandhian organizations of Paschim Medinipur District

Sl. No.	Name of the Organizations	Founder	Year of Establishment	Community Development Block
1	ALOK-KENDRA	Late Nagendra Nath Sen	1947	Debra
2.	ABHOY ASHRAM	Late Kshitish Roy choudhury	1953	Balarampur, (Kharagpur-1)
3	SRAM VIDYAPITH	Late Bimal Chandra Pal	1956	Belda (Narayangarh Block)
4	SARBIK GRAM BIKAS KENDRA	Sri Narayan Bhai	1978	Daspur

Source: From Field Survey dated 26.01.2024

As all these Organizations are voluntary in character so they usually receive financial assistance from the different funding agencies as well as receive donation from the interested persons willing to donate money for social work. Usually these Organizations received some amount of money as subsidy from *Khadi Village Industries Commission (K.V.I.C)* and Khadi Board for Khadi Production. *Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti*, New Delhi, sanctions fund these Organizations for organizing seminars. At initial stage, these Organizations got cultivable lands from the land-donors. Sram Vidyapith and Alok Kendra received acres of land in the form of donation from the local persons. Sarbik Gram Bikas Kendra, Daspur got financial assistance from L.C. Dani to run an Eye Hospital. Abhoy Ashram received money in the form of donation from Bramha Society (1950-51 A.D), Kolkata to construct office building. All these organizations have generated surplus from agriculture and have invested the same in industry and service sector also. Now, by selling surplus land, Sram Vidyapith and Abhay Ashram have accumulated capital and invested the same in State Bank of India and Punjab National Bank respectively. From it, these two organizations receive near about Rs. Twenty Five Thousand (Rs. 25,000.00 Only) per month as interest and utilize the same for implementing different constructive programmes. In such a way, these organizations are generating and mobilizing resources for the purpose mentioned earlier. Now, the nature of activities of the Organizations will be focused. To get a comprehensive picture, the activities of the Organizations are presented in tabular formats:

Table No: 2 Name of the organization: Alok Kendra, Debra

Nature of Work	No. of Units/ Persons enrolled	Financial Year 2010-2020
a) Khadi production	All types of khadi garments	2019-2020
b) Poultry, Gotery, Fishery, Milk	Labour intensive activity	2019-2020

production, Honey, Bamboo works		
c) Formation of SHGs	19	2019-2020
Anti-drug awareness programme (one)	575 students	2019-2020
Running a co-operative bank to provide financial assistance to the local people	01	2019-2020
f) Publication of a Newspaper	<i>“Swaraj O Sangathan”</i>	Till 2020
g) Organizing Land and Village Gift Movement	800 Dec. land was gifted to the Landless	1970s

Source: Data provided by the Secretary of the Organization dated 26.01.2024

Table No: 3 Name of the Organisation: Abhoy Ashram, Kharagpur

Nature of Work	No. of Units/ Persons enrolled	Area Covered at Kharagpur (local)	Year 2010-2020
Organizing of Eye Operation camp 10	1452 patient attended	Balarampur	2010-2020
Tree plantation programme	15000 Sal, Segun	Balarampur	Do
Organizing training programme for women (ICDS workers) (one)	1750	KGP Subdivision	DO
Installation of Low cost latrine	268	Balarampur	DO
Organizing anti-drug and anti-liquor Campaign 10	355 students attended	KGP Sub-division	DO
Running a school upto class V (Sishu Bharati)	165 students enrolled	Balarampur	2019-2020 Academic Session
Construction of a Seminar Hall	300 person can attend the programme	Abhoy Ashram Office	DO
Organizing Gramdan and Bhodam Movement	700 Dec. cultivable land were gifted to the landless	Balarampur village	DO

Source: Data provided by the Secretary of the Organization dated 26.01.2024

Table No: 4 Name of the Organisation : Sram Vidyapith, Belda

Nature of Work	No. of Units/ persons enrolled	Area Covered at Belda 8/2 GP	Year 2010-2020
Installation of Low cost Latrine	258	8/2 GP	Do
Formation of SHG	15	Do	Do
Setting up of animal husbandry	2 Gosalas	Do	Do
Organized Health awareness programme	10	Do	Do
Distribution of books and related equipments to the students of the locality up to class VI.	168	Do	Do
Anti-drug awareness programme organized (one)	175 students attended	Do	Do
Running a School named Adarsha Sishu Siksha Niketan (Primary Level)	35 students enrolled	Do	2019-2020
Literacy campaign for the adult people	467 persons attended the programme	Do	Do

Source: Data provided by the Secretary of the Organization dated 26.01.2024

Table: 5 Name of the Organisation: Sarbik Gram Bikas Kendra, Daspur

Nature of Work	No. of Units	Area Covered	Year 2010-2020
Installation of Low cost Latrine	1156	Dashpur Block	Do
Installation of Deep-tube well	05		Do
Installation of tube well for drinking water	05		Do
Excavation of pond	05		Do
Providing water purifier	568 families		Do
Organizing training programme	15	ICDS workers & Panchayat members	Do
Running an Eye Care Camp and Hospital (L.C.Dani Memorial	1580 patient attended		Do

Hospital)			
Organizing Eye operation Camp (free)	05		Do
Organizing seminar (anti-drug, anti-liquor)	10		Do
Celebration of Gandhi Jayanti			Do

Source: Data provided by the Secretary of the Organization dated 26.01.2024

In such a way these Four Organizations of Paschim Medinipur District have been engaged in rural reconstruction along Gandhian line.

Regarding the activities of the above mentioned Four Organizations, the basic features of their style of functioning are noted below:

1. Veteran Gandhian activists have established these organizations in these areas to implement the programme of rural reconstruction along Gandhi-line;
2. Main motto of these organizations are to make the village a “self-sufficient, self-reliant” unit and also make the villagers “a new person having some human values”;
3. The main aim is to ensure ‘production by the mass, not mass production by a few’;
4. Apart from the state-sponsored developmental projects, the founders of such organizations are interested to do something using own resources and human power to ensure all-round development for all;
5. These organizations can be able to be considered as ready reference or instrument in connection with rural reconstruction programme along Gandhian line;
6. These Organizations can be regarded as civil society organizations located in between the state and family;
7. All these activities are labour intensive in nature, to generate additional employment.

Issues and Problems Faced by the Organizations under study:

Several problems are also faced by these Organizations while running and implementing the scheme of social change. These are as follows:

- a) For the purpose of rural development, state-centric and state-sponsored programmes are prepared now-a-days. Even, Panchayat is considered as the main implementing agency of such programmes. So, the importance of such voluntary organizations is decreasing day by day. As a result, such type of organizations is facing problems. Now a days, it is very much difficult for these Organizations to survive.
- b) Due to the paucity of fund and adequate resources, these Organizations are in great trouble. Now, some Organizations fail to continue their day-to-day business. Regarding this, the financial condition of Alok Kendra and Abhay Ashram are very grim. So, these two organizations have taken a decision to shut-down the khadi production units in the year 2013. Earlier they got financial assistance from the *Khadi Village Industries Commission* (K.V.I.C.) Now, the K.V.I.C. does not release fund regularly. It creates havoc in the implementation of the “Constructive Programme” at the local area.
- c) Capital-intensive technology has created lot of problems. As a result, these Organizations fail to compete with the products manufactured by the multinational corporations. Say for instance, earlier honey was produced by these organizations and it was sold in the market. Now-a-days, the reputed Drug Houses like Dabur India Ltd and others are producing honey and sold it in market. Even the

khadi products fail to draw the attention of the consumers. Under such circumstances, these Organizations are compelled to stop their production units.

- d) Now-a-days, these organizations fail to allocate adequate resource and mobilize the resource towards development. Earlier different funding agencies do allocate resources for different projects. But due to some unavoidable reasons, the funding agencies, like *Khadi Board*, has taken decision not to provide subsidy to the Organizations for producing khadi clothes. This has created a negative impact on the organizations' production process. If some positive steps are not taken, these Organizations will be moribund in future.

In relation to leadership, these organizations are facing lot of troubles. The founders of two Organizations namely Alok Kendra (Debra) and Abhoy Ashram (Balarampur) left the material world two decades ago. The founder of Sram Vidyapith is an octogenarian. Due to various reasons, the young generation is not at all to be associated with such kind of activities. As a result, it becomes very much difficult for the Organizations to survive and to continue Gandhi's social action programme as before.

(IV)

In spite of such limitations, these organizations have done well in relation to rural reconstruction in the areas concerned. From the available data it can be said that these Organizations have played a vital role to empower the rural mass and make them self-reliant. These Organizations have also helped the people to be the maker of their own destiny. Inspired by Gandhian ideology, these Organizations have tried to eradicate poverty, illiteracy, superstition from society. Such type of voluntary activities can be a model regarding rural reconstruction in the present day context. Today, we have seen that everything is determined by the Government and political society particularly in Bengal. Thus, there is no scope of voluntary organizations to do something. But the founders of these organizations thought that apart from party, state and other governmental organizations, there is an opportunity to play a pivotal role for the betterment of society. They have practiced it in reality.

Secondly, it is to be mentioned that these Organizations are not like the present-day NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) which are operating in the society for different purposes by way of generating and mobilizing a huge amount of resources as a whole. The veteran Gandhian Activists took initiative to form voluntary organizations for the purpose of rural reconstruction at the local level. They tried their level best in past to do something positive for the betterment of the society. Some of the organizations are doing well in different fields like establishing Co-operative Banks in rural areas. The one is managed by Alok Kendra (Debra). It is a glaring example regarding the same. Moreover, the local Gandhian Activists want to do something for the betterment of the society guided by their conscience. It was their passion to do it for the community, not a fashion to do the same from the managerial perspective to make some material benefits that has made all the difference. Here lies the significance of such kind of exercise which was started by the Gandhian Activists in the rural areas of Paschim Medinipur District near about half a century ago.

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