



Gandhian trusteeship and non-violence: The basis for a creative society

Ashni Biyani: Let's Start with a broad question. Please start of by introducing us to the idea of Gandhian Trusteeship .

Rajni Bakshi: Gandhi is better known for love and non-violence and *satyagraha*. One of his neglected ideas which he held very dear and developed a great deal in the last two decades of his life is trusteeship. What it means, at the bare minimum, is that the essential relationships of life and all of society depends of degrees of trust. He was focused on public life and the business sector.

Based on his observations of life, he felt that this was not an overly moral idea he was pulling out of a dreamy domain. Look at the financial sector, which practices the idea of fiduciary responsibility. A fiduciary is somebody who is a benevolent custodian of the wealth is placed in their care. So it applied to people who are managers of wealth.

In the same way, the idea of trusteeship is that of benevolent custodianship or stewardship towards whatever you happen to be looking after. It could start with your children. As parents we are trustees of ensuring that the most enabling circumstances are created for children.

In the same way in every stage of public life, if we are able to act out of, either enlightened self interest or disinterested service to a larger good, that is trusteeship.

Ashni: How does this apply to the western context as well. Can Gandhian trusteeship be exported to more developed countries or to a world thriving on certain values?

Rajni: I feel that this idea is intrinsic to several strands of even western capitalism.

At the idealistic far end you have the people like the Quakers who through the period of two and a half centuries ago, were practising in various ways the idea of trusteeship. Even in the 1800s in the U.S. there were people who did not invest in "Sin Stock"- gambling, guns and liquor. It is out of that legacy that the contemporary ethical investing movement has arisen. This is now a vast industry with many different kinds of indexes and elaborate fact finding mechanisms by which investigators investigate to see how a company delivers not just from a money bottom line but from a social impact and environmental bottom line; therefore a triple bottom line.

None of these are perfect manifestations but life is not perfect. It is about approximating to words an idea knowing you will never able to reach a final goal but your incremental movement to a final ideal is very crucial. Because in the absence of that, the opposite can get established as the desirable way of being.

At the moment we are in the swing of a pendulum towards such ideals. Away from what was celebrated in the film Wall Street in the year 1991, which said that greed is good. I believe we are in the middle where the pendulum is swinging -more and more people want to see forms of trusteeship applied to the financial and political sectors and various forms of governance and social life.

Ashni: We spoke about triple bottom line. How does it correlate to capitalism, socialism, charity or philanthropy?

Rajni: That is a big range of issues. There is a famous quote where Mahatma Gandhi says that trusteeship is the ideal that will outlive both socialism and capitalism. His reasoning is based on a clear logic. First he was committed to the idea of nonviolence. He believed both socialism and capitalism in their unmitigated forms lead to violence; socialism by forcibly trying to take peoples' wealth and redistribute it by force and capitalism is violent when it earns profits regardless of social and environmental impact. It is Gandhiji's firm commitment that both routes will eventually fail. I think we have lived through that moment. We are now in a moment in history which has seen that prophecy come true. The collapse of communism was more obvious, because it happened in a dramatic historic moment when the wall came down in 1989. The collapse of unmitigated capitalism happened in 2008. Many people have said this. Now we come to the other part about why Gandhiji is significant and very important on this issue. And that is because he had great respect for the entrepreneurial energy. He in fact never forgets or lets anyone forget that he was born as a *bania* in a merchant family. He knows that this is a very important skill in society. The difference is that while the dominant mode globally, or in the 100 years before Gandhi, mid-1800's to mid-1900s, the idea has taken shape that because you have entrepreneurial skills you are entitled to *amma's* unlimited wealth and do with it what you will and use the power that it gives you in whatever way you want. That is really a very primitive idea which in India we call *jiske latti uski bhains* or what Gandhiji would say – 'might is right'.

But 20th century was celebration of multiple struggles for *right is might* so he argues that since entrepreneurial skills are very important, anybody who is endowed with them has a greater responsibility to the larger good. If they don't fulfill that responsibility then other options, the violent options of forced distributions, will have their day. Mind you he lived through two revolutions of that kind and saw his prediction come true.

Ashni: Can we just go over his idea of non-violence and what it implies for a creative society?

Rajni: Firstly the creative society is, and this is my understanding of it, is that social, cultural, political, economic setting in which we are all enabled to explore and bring out our meta self. The opposite of this, or the anti-creative or the non-creative or the destructive society is one in which you are taught from early childhood that you are in a win or lose world, dog-eat-dog in that if you don't beat the next guy and triumph over him/ her you are finished. That is the destructive mode. Therefore, non-violence becomes essential, as the way of trying to foster, trying to create that enabling environment. Now it is also important to point out that non violence doesn't mean so in absolute terms. Even in the Jain tradition, where so much care is taken not even to ingest a living insect by mistake, it is recognised that as long as we are in the human form, and are living, breathing beings, we cannot be absolutely non-violent.

Ashni: And the focus on the intent perhaps.

Rajni: The intent is important, absolutely important, but also that because the absolute form is not possible, it doesn't minimise what we are able to do. The forms of non-violence we are able to live by become even more significant.

Ashni: So how do you propose that we co-relate this idea to laws that we have around giving?

Rajni: It's a very interesting dilemma that has now come up because of the compulsory 2% CSR tax that will come into effect through the New Companies Act. And the few people that I have discussed with including Rahul Bajaj, and I think you and I have had this discussion too that does it mean now that those who have been doing much more and been giving away more than 2% of their profits should now give less. I think the more serious issue why many people who are very much in favour of greater giving have not responded to that rule or that law very happily is that a law if it's a pointer towards a desired goal is very valuable. So I want to make it very clear that I am not minimising the importance of legislation. But as we are seeing in every sphere of life, without the social renewal or cultural shift which will in a sense inspire masses of people to do the right thing. The law in its self is always easy to subvert. In fact, we know that in India we have a great deal of expertise in finding ways to avoid the legislation. This to me is again the significance of Gandhiji that at every stage his emphasis is on what will bring about a social renewal.

Ashni: So he is at the point of understanding and questioning morality at society.

Rajni: Yes. The historical Gandhi may well, and by historical Gandhi I mean the actual person who was born on a certain day and was shot dead on a certain day. He certainly may have had moments where he may have sound very moralistic to you and me - impossible to follow. But the Gandhi the thinker is so hypnotic even today and so much of a magnet because he is nuanced. So I want to share a very favourite story of mine on this. At one point his great friend and his adopted son, Jamunalal Bajaj, declares that, "I now want to will all my money to you. I don't want to keep a single paisa with myself." For those times, he was very wealthy. And Gandhiji won't let him. And the reason for that Gandhiji says, "It's not yours alone to will away. Your sons are still minors. You cannot give me your wealth until they are old enough to have their say and you have consulted them and got their active consent. So to me this is very significant that in actual life and his practice, he was more nuanced than historical bearers and accounts to believe.

Ashni: I have a question from the social media world for you. Can you give your thoughts on the correlation between trusteeship, the common good and democracy?

Rajni: Maybe all of them are impossible without each other. That's the obvious one. The most difficult one is the common good. Trusteeship is easy to understand because each one of us can give form to it wherever we are, as a parent, as a teacher, as a bus driver. Forget CEOs and lofty positions. In a democracy too everybody must have their say and we must have all kinds of balance of power. The really tough one in our times is what indeed is the common good and how do you arrive at it. But the most creative and constructive way in which we could move is going to be a constant process. It's not like we will decide one day that this is the common good and it will remain static. What constitutes the

common goal will always be fluid because life is dynamic, fluid, ever changing.

Siddharth: Rajni, great to see you on this platform. Sometimes principles like trusteeship are beautiful and I definitely see the value in them and I see the need in today's world. But what I have come to understand that it was really an expression of the way Gandhiji lived his life, an expression of an ideal that was very prominent around those times. How can we bring that way of life or make trusteeship almost an expression as opposed to an intellectual concept or a legal construct that drives value.

Rajni: There is no question Siddharth that all of us in any small or big way are capable of acts of trusteeship. I will give you an example of a young person I met very much of your own age group who was at a cricket match recently. People were just drinking water and throwing the bottles on to the stadium. He got up and tried to stop them just by appealing to them. It didn't work. In fact apparently one of the young people who were throwing the bottles on to the field said "*Arey tu chup kar, tu Gandhi mat ban*" (Shut up, don't be Gandhi). And in fact he asked the same question that in a sense you are asking. My feeling is that we have to continue to stand up and make that appeal regardless of how often it seems to be rejected because I know from experience that even that person who stood up and shouted him down for asking them to do the right thing will have second thoughts later.

Ashni: So it's about creating that moral elevation?

Rajni: Living the space and my biggest concern is that we shouldn't hesitate to live the small ways in which we can live it. What happens to a lot of people is they think I can't change so much, or it's too big and so let me not bother at all.

Ashni: Don't get daunted by the largeness of it but practice it be it in daily small ways, is your idea.

Rajni: Yes. And the best way to do it is actually begin to notice what you do, do already. I think people do far more good than they sometimes realize because they take it for granted. Or recognise that which others do, that recognition itself becomes a way of reaffirming and then celebrating.

Ashni: Moving on, there are lot of questions on Twitter for you. So let me go ahead and ask some of these. So there's a question for you which asks, is trusteeship better than CSR? I know we've captured a bit of this but someone wants a specific answer on it.

Rajni: Well I would say that you could think of trusteeship as the operating programme, what in computer software is the base programme, the operating system. It's the over arching ideal and CSR can be one of the programmes that runs on that operating system. But if you do the other way round, it won't work the computer won't run. A computer without an operating system can't run a programme.

Ashni: What really then is the difference between CSR, philanthropy and trusteeship? Are there fine differences that you can make?

Rajni: Philanthropy is simple enough; it is the act of sharing your wealth whether it is by a salaried person sending Rs 500 to CRY, and I know that are many such donors in India. Or a billionaire who gives

away five billion out of his fifteen billion. So philanthropy is simple enough to understand. And there in fact I think what is important to appreciate is that the global trend now is towards not just giving away money and thinking of it as charity but doing what is now known as strategic philanthropy and engaging in the actual large scale long term solution of actual problems. So that is the big development in philanthropy. CSR at the moment unfortunately is defined as a company doing philanthropy, a company giving away a part of its profits. But the proper and the more meaningful definition of CSR is where a company practices higher and higher levels of responsibility in how it earns the profit in the first place.

Ashni: So you are saying that it actually begins with the practice of business or the practice of living in itself really.

Rajni: No. See we all know you can make more money if you cut corners and you underpay people. It's easier to pollute a river than to treat effluence into it. Those are the simple obvious things. But if you are willing to do the right thing to reduce your negative social impact, or completely eliminate them actually, that should be the goal. And then you may fall short now and then but at least you are striving to be completely harmless. And then the next level, when you stop being harmless, is that you work to actually being constructive.

Ashni: I'll just quickly wrap up and ask you to sum up briefly what do you think we should do to understand and live this idea of trusteeship further and can you just sum it up for all the viewers? Can the idea go beyond Gandhi's idea of trusteeship as well?

Rajni: Oh indeed. For me personally, exploring Gandhiji's understanding of this concept is a starting point. It's a kind of a launch pad from which to look at what is actually happening in the world today. And I believe that we are at middle of a historical moment, where there is a greater momentum for varied forms of trusteeship. There are endless ways in which we can individually we can all plug into this.

Ashni: And that's what I find really interesting about our discussion today that you don't need to be at an advantageous point to be a trustee. But every individual, as a citizen, as a person, as a member of the family can also understand this question and apply to a larger cause.

Rajni: If we have a minute or two, I think Ashni you should say something about your experience because I know that in your business, your role as a business woman, you are working for this.

Ashni: I'll talk about the ecology of our stores (Big Bazaars) and how we try to embark on this idea. At our stores, we call our store managers the *kartas*, who are not only responsible for the profits of the business, the EBITA margins and the turnovers but he is also lets say, looked as a benevolent custodian of the entire ecology in the way which he operates the store. So whether it is his employees who have to be happy with his style of leadership or the community which he is serving. A large part of our efforts are towards building the *karta* hood in a sense and this value that you are responsible for a larger goal, a larger team and a larger universe to whom you serve. And it's only when you become a better trustee,

are people going to trust you more and in return give you benefits as well, come shop with you, and hang out at your store and so on.

Rajni: Because it creates a sense of relatedness.

Ashni: Absolutely and you connect better with the community with this.

Rajni: I recently discovered, two weeks ago, that apparently in the U.S. there is a term called servant leadership. I didn't know about that and that would I think be somewhat similar to what you are working with.

Ashni: So thank you so much for doing this with us. Rajni has studied the various works and philosophies of Gandhi. She's also published a paper for Gateway House on Civilizational Gandhi. Taking forward this dialogue of trusteeship, she will soon be writing a paper on Gandhi and Trusteeship; that is where we all of us can find out more about trusteeship and how it connects to modern life today. Please feel free to write your questions on Twitter, Rajni will be available to answer them.
