

Gandhian Psychology & Sarvodaya: A Psychological Interpretation of the Gandhian Social Order

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ABSTRACT

Gandhian Psychology is not a separate branch or discipline; indeed, it is an application of Gandhian principles truth, non-violence, satyagraha, non-possession, bread labour etc in the domain of psychology. It also deals with the various types of conflicts (Srivastava & Singh, 2023). One of the best gifts to mankind by Gandhian philosophy is the idea of Sarvodaya i.e. harmonic social order. From Gandhi to Vinoba and Jai Prakash Naryan to Deen Dayal Upadhyay, many political thinkers given space to their mind to develop this novel idea of Sarvodaya in theoretical and empirical both ways. But one of the novelties in researching on the Sarvodaya is linked with the psychological interpretation of Sarvodaya thought, the first time it was attempted by Indu B. Tikekar in late seventies after independence in India. The work of theological and analytical study of Gandhian thought in deeper perspective of Integral revolution. (Tikekar, 1970). This paper is an attempt to explore the theological work of Indu B. Tikekar in open perspective. This paper is an extended version of analytical study of psychological interpretation of Gandhian thought. The paper is purely qualitative in nature and it is based on theological analysis of quotes of Gandhi and Gandhian Scholars. This paper also presents an analytical commentary on comparison between Indian and Western psychology on establishment of harmonic social order.

Keywords: Gandhian Psychology, Social Order, Psychological Interpretation, Gandhi

Gandhian psychology treats the human mind as both the site and the instrument of *Sarvodaya*—the all-embracing welfare of every being. Gandhi, Vinoba and later interpreters such as Indu B. Tikekar view the individual psyche not as an isolated, self-seeking entity but as a node of an underlying spiritual unity that radiates truth (*satya*), non-violence (*ahimsa*), and creative labour (*bread-labour*). In this reading, psychological health is identical with realizing one's inborn capacity for love, service and self-rule, while social harmony is the outward ripple of millions of such awakened selves. The two introductory paragraphs that follow develop this idea—first by tracing how Tikekar and contemporary scholars relocate Gandhian ethical vows inside the architecture of the mind, and then by contrasting that integral, duty-oriented “Indian” model of the self with the more individualistic paradigm dominant in Western psychology. Together they show why

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Received: October 31, 2025; Revision Received: January 12, 2026; Accepted: January 15, 2026

Sarvodaya can be read as a psychology of unity-in-diversity: it reconciles the freedom of the person with the common good through disciplined, non-violent action.

Unity of Individual in Psychology of Sarvodaya Thought:

Gandhi's oft-quoted conviction that "the sum total of the energy of mankind is not to bring us down but to lift us up" anchors the psychological core of *sarvodaya* in the "law of love," a centripetal force he regarded as more basic than the centrifugal pull of violence. Indu B. Tikekar's pioneering treatise *Integral Revolution* (1970) expanded this insight into a systematic "psychology of liberation," arguing that every vow Gandhi prescribed—truth-telling, non-possession, bread-labour, fearlessness—is best understood as a cognitive-affective discipline that loosens the ego's grip on the body-mind complex and allows the deeper, relational self (*atman*) to guide behaviour. Contemporary analysts, too, observe that Gandhian psychology moves beyond conflict resolution in the clinical sense (Srivastava & Singh 2023) to a transformative pedagogy in which the *change of heart* must be "total... at the cognitive, conative as well as affective levels." This demands practices that re-pattern desire and perception: *bread-labour* trains the senses to feel pleasure in cooperative production rather than competitive accumulation, and thereby "substitutes the struggle for existence by the struggle for mutual service." Likewise, community meditation adopted by later Sarvodaya workers in Sri Lanka begins with breath awareness, extends loving-kindness to friends and foes, and finally directs that psychic energy toward just social structures. At each step the psyche is both the laboratory and the beneficiary: self-discipline lightens personal suffering while simultaneously constructing a moral economy grounded in dignity of labour, economic equality and decentralised decision-making.

Gandhi's philosophy, rooted in nonviolence and truth, extends beyond its historical context. Psychologically, it encourages empathy, resilience, and inner transformation. Understanding and applying these principles in our lives can lead to a more compassionate and harmonious society, aligning with Gandhi's vision of a peaceful world. (Srivastava, 2023)

If Gandhian psychology roots social order in an inner realisation of unity, the contrast with mainstream Western psychology is instructive. Western models, formed in empiricism and materialism, treat the self as an autonomous agent seeking mastery over environment and personal happiness. Indian psychology, by contrast, sees the ego (*ahamkara*) as provisional and emphasises the *relational self* whose identity is braided with community and cosmos. This philosophical divergence produces different therapeutic logics: where behaviourism or CBT aim to adjust individual cognition, Gandhian *satyagraha* trains groups in disciplined civil resistance, insisting that "nothing is so easy as to train mobs, for the simple reason that they have no mind," and therefore must be schooled in voluntary law-observance and self-suffering before they qualify for civil disobedience. The educational thrust is democratic: real *swaraj* means "acquisition of the capacity by all to resist authority when abused," a capacity grown through experiential learning and collective action rather than bestowed by elites. In this light, Tikekar's "integral revolution" is psychological because it redefines power as the flowering of conscience, and theological because it locates that flowering in a cosmic order where love, not brute force, is the deepest reality. Where Western scholarship often measures peace as the absence of overt conflict, Gandhian Sarvodaya measures it as the creative presence of disciplined, inter-subjective goodwill—an achievement made plausible, Tikekar insists, by the undeniable historical fact that even a single individual can embody it, thereby proving its universal human attainability.

Together these perspectives illuminate how the unity of the individual and society in Sarvodaya psychology is neither a mystical abstraction nor a naïve optimism. It is a rigorously articulated programme in which inner transformation and outer justice advance in tandem, each validating and reinforcing the other in the long march toward a harmonic social order.

Gandhi gave stressed to philosophy of ‘advaita’ to establish the gospel of Sarvodaya of concept of welfare amongst individual. This should be noted that Gandhi believed in the ‘anuvarta’ theory and trusteeship where every individual belongs to idea of social trusteeship. This is an extended version of Vinoab’s idea of democratic values (Srivastava, 2016). The idea is that a wantless man who believe in non-possession, nonviolence and satyagrah , a true spiritual man and To Gandhi, Spirituality of individual provide benefit to whole nation. Gandhi said “Unity of Man I DO not believe...that an individual may gain spiritually and those who surround him suffer. I believe in advaita, I believe in the essential unity of man and, for that matter, of all that lives. Therefore, I believe that if one man gains spiritually, the whole world gains with him and, if one man falls, the whole world falls to that extent. (Gandhi, 1924). I do not believe that the spiritual law works on a field of its own. On the contrary, it expresses itself only through the ordinary activities of life. It thus affects the economic, the social and the political fields (Gandhi, 1925). If we would serve Him or become with Him, our activity must be as unwearied as His. There may be momentary rest in store for the drop which is separated from the ocean, but not for the drop in the ocean, which knows no rest. The same is the case with ourselves. As soon as we become one with the ocean in the shape of God, there is no more rest for us, nor indeed do we need rest any longer. Our very sleep is action. For we sleep with the thought of God in our hearts. This restlessness constitutes true rest. This never-ceasing agitation the key to peace ineffable. This supreme state of total surrender is difficult to describe, but not beyond the bounds of human experience. It has been attained by many dedicated souls, and may be attained by ourselves as well. (Gandhi, 1925)

Sarvodaya and the Approach of Indian Psychology

The test of the Sarvodaya ideology should be considered to be not so much in producing a logically consistent philosophic system, as in accepting the challenge of the complex and intricate day-to-day problems of human life. The eternal values of Truth and Love based on the unity of Life are a heritage from the past. What characterises the Sarvodaya movement is its aspiration to realise these values to their logical end in practical life. Consequently, in the process of social transformation, strife and compulsion are ruled out from the technique of revolution. Mutual love and understanding should be the only means of such transformation. Humanity has witnessed a perennial line of experience and experiments that have shown some individuals at least as nearing the realisation of the ideal. Sarvodaya leaders put forth the non-dualist contention, that whatever has been proved possible even once in the history of humanity through the life of a single individual, is capable of realising itself throughout the human world.

If such an edifice is to be built, one should legitimately expect that it requires the foundation of the psychological nature of man. The idealistic ‘should’ needs the support of the realists ‘can’. We shall have to enquire what the psychological fundamentals of man, according to, Sarvodaya are. They should be consistent with the findings of the psychologists both in the East and the West.

The science of psychology has displayed different trends in the East and the West. The world of experience consists of two aspects of experience—subjective and objective. It is true that their contours get at many points intermingled, and their spheres suffer expansion and contraction. But the consciousness of one's sensations, desires, pain and pleasure, marks itself off from that of the objects of the world outside, e. g. of blue sky, green fields and flowing streams. It is generally accepted that the Eastern people have turned inward and dived deep into the subjective consciousness, while the Westerners find more satisfaction in investigating the truth of the external world. The psychological findings of both of them, naturally, bear the stamp of their respective tendencies. While epistemology and metaphysics play a very important role in Indian psychology, the methods of natural science colour the findings of the western psychological quest. In the west modern psychology is a new and zealous branch of natural Science, man has been developing since the dawn of the last century. Though no unanimous and final conclusions about the nature of man have been reached so far, still they provide a rough criterion of judging the aspirations of humanity.

Psychology in India has never been separated from the philosophical search. Philosophy has served to enlighten every enquiry whatever about the animate and the inanimate world here in modern times as well as in ancient periods. Men of genius almost invariably kept the compass of their metaphysical standpoint as the guidance for their voyage of life. Redemption from the turmoil of the cycles of birth and death, detachment from pain and pleasure of mind, and attainment of enlightening self-realisation through the knowledge of the ultimate Reality have been the ideas of both the orthodox and the unorthodox schools of philosophy. Since Avidya or Maya—ignorance and deceptive knowledge are the root cause of painful and weary existence on earth, true knowledge can alone help to make it worth living and blissful besides assuring the goal of salvation. As a result epistemology and analysis of the nature of individual self or psyche demand attention, since therein lies the key to the diagnosis and remedy of ignorance. Attachment to mental and bodily sensations, clinging to individual self, is generally considered to be the result of that cosmic ignorance which would be dispelled either by the merger of the individual soul in the ultimate spiritual Reality, or by the cessation of individuality, or by keeping the individual purusa aloof from the alluring dance of prakriti. The path of salvation passes through the strenuous discipline of body and mind. Mental faculties and bodily sensations are dealt with only with a view to transcend them and reach a stage where all earthly longings are rendered pointless and therefore worthy to be discarded. It is the aspiration for peaceful and blissful state of living, and not the urge merely to enquire and ascertain the nature of human psyche, that characterises the psychological search in Indian philosophy.

The Sarvodaya thinkers are not exceptions to this tendency of the Indian spiritual leaders. Search after Truth had been Gandhi's purpose in life. God as Truth was the ultimate all-pervading Reality to him. He considered all spheres of life as proper subjects for religious approach. Through each and every activity, he believed, man should strive to reach the ideal of truth-realization—which for him was the same as self-realization. Vinoba too, left home, while still young, in the hope of unravelling the secret of ultimate Reality—Brahman. The whole of creation either consciously or unconsciously, but incessantly, is marching towards the goal of liberation. In nature, up to man, this striving is unconscious, —hence, the beginning of conscious-effort to reach the goal through new impressions (samskaras) and discipline. The realization through actual experience of the ultimate spiritual unity, within and without, in and through, human existence is the fixed star of concentration for the Sarvodaya thinkers.

The Sarvodaya thinkers also trace the cause of bondage to the ignorance of this ultimate Reality. All strife and the consequential unhappiness in human world is due to the lack of understanding of this ultimate oneness, due to the misconception that body and mind, along with their own limitations and impressions, constitute a separate and ultimate unit with which each individual is to be identified. Knowledge of the ultimate oneness is, therefore, the fundamental cure, according to them.

Soul is all consciousness and all knowledge, it is the maya or prakriti that covers it and spreads ignorance. Mind with its flickery nature belongs to the realm of prakriti. However subtle it may be, however speedy and alert it may look, it is ultimately an evolute of matter. That is why, in order to uncover the all-knowing soul, one has to go beyond it. Like everything in the realm of prakriti it is constituted by the three gunas—sattva, rajas and tamas. Sarvodaya thinkers are not worried about the constituent factors of our empirical nature. Whether we accept the Sankhya theory of evolution and its description of phenomenon, or we agree with the modern scientific theory about the phenomenal world, what they emphasize is the phenomenal nature of mind which has at its background a spiritual reality. They do not concern themselves, even with the epistemological intricacies which dominate the age of Systems. Mind and intellect know the world only because they are pierced through by the all-consciousness-soul. And ultimately what is prakriti but the spontaneous expression of the ultimate Reality? That is why mind, along with its impressions instead of being hindrance, can serve to uncover the ultimate Reality if it is properly trained. Rigorous discipline of mind thus occupies an important place in Sarvodaya teachings.

The Gandhian Sarvodaya also linked with other parameters of Gandhian political economy. The psychological aspect of Sarvodaya also explain the dynamics of nonviolent economic order. To Gandhi, an individual who possess non-possession is a pure ethical man. He does not consume for his own need but also taking consideration for some one's else requirement. So, Psychology of Sarvodaya also emphasizes the need-based economy. It establishes a harmonic relationship between man and society.

The reciprocity of relations between man and society was well recognized by Gandhi. Man is not man without society. He is the soul of any society and society must provide opportunities for his development. Where either fails, the other has a duty to resist non-violently. Moral resistance through nonviolence must be the guiding principle to regulate the relationship between individual and society. Gandhi viewed the evolution of human civilization as a steady progress towards nonviolence. The way he wanted to reconstruct society into a nonviolent one was through revolutionizing the values by which that society lived. This change in values should be reflected in all aspects of the society's life and it included the minimization of the use of machines so as to free man from the evils of industrialisation. Gandhi also insisted upon man's harmony with nature and his economic self-sufficiency. So he advocated programmes like khadi, small scale industries, hand spinning etc. He called upon human kind to reconstruct human society on the rocky foundations of truth and nonviolence? (P.I. Devaraj and Syamala K., 2009).

Gandhi, as an engineer of the nonviolent mind, gave us insights into discovering our own psychological capital: Seeking a nonviolent solution over a violent one, winning the adversary with continued love and trust, be morally inclusive, mitigate the boundaries between us and them (attribution theory), developing a sense of self efficacy, bridging the gap between one's attitude and behaviour, and managing self-control (Vinod K. Kool, 2013)

Faith in the ultimate Reality that expresses itself through love sustaining the world, is the basis of Gandhi's and Vinoba's basic contention that fundamentally man is good by nature. Love reveals through the creative, constructive and evolving nature of the world—so too it does in man. This ultimate goodness is the hope of all striving towards progress. "I believe that the sum total of the energy of mankind is not to bring us down but to lift us up, and that is the result of the definite, if unconscious, working of the law of love." The Sarvodaya thinkers are at the same time keenly aware of the fact that the human world is not all blissful and happy. This makes one conscious of the evil factors in man's nature which may only be an outer layer. "Every one of us is a mixture of good and evil" says Gandhi. To him Darwin's evolutionary theory speaks at least a partial truth. There can be no doubt about the animal ancestry of man. And since struggle for existence holds good in the animal kingdom before the appearance of man on the stage of earth, there is no wonder if latent animality peeps through human existence. Though the principle of heredity is not the sole determining factor, still the common ancestry, or what the psychologist Jung called "racial unconscious", leaves no exception. Dealing with the problem of dacoits in the Chambal Valley, Vinoba has emphasized that the dacoits and police—the wicked (may be so-called or true) and gentlemen—all have a similar nature—a combination of good and bad. The three gunas in infinite ways form varieties of human mind and one and all have to suffer until the veil of these gunas is torn off. Greed and covetousness, hatred and anger, base desires and meanness of attitude, inclination towards self-preservation at the cost of others—all these many times prove stronger in the tug of war between the two parties, evil and good, on the battle-field of man's mind. But there is every possibility of a dacoit turning into a sage by the strength of his will, by discipline, and thus by realizing the truth about life. If man were wholly wicked and if strife were his real nature, this human world would have been extinct long ago. What is the criterion to decide man's true nature? Obviously, we have to depend on the actual experience of mankind throughout the past ages. Man has waged thousands of wars since he came in conflict with other man or group, but each time he has strived to secure peace. From 1500 B.C. to 1860 A.D. eight thousand treaties were arranged to secure permanent peace. Peace has its own value. Otherwise man would have divided his time into three periods—Pre-war, war and post-war periods. Sarvodaya thinkers ask—if war were natural, could man have found pleasure and romance in the tales of war? Could we have recorded it? Instead, we find the history of mankind encumbered by the disgusting and brutal stories which are valued as novel and worthy of record. On the other hand, the peaceful and loving family-life of the millions of common humble people has not deserved even a mention in these records. What is naturally becomes ordinary and needs no advertisement, since it exists by right; it yearns not for recognition, since it is the very stuff of living itself. Recorded history is the reminiscence of the negation of man's fundamental and true nature. That is why Gandhi said "The moment he awakens to the spirit within, he cannot remain violent." Same is true of the other harmful aspects of human mind. Like Spinoza, Sarvodaya thinkers consider these as diseases demanding remedy—but, do not diseases themselves point to the fundamental state of health?

Such undaunted faith in man's goodness validates the value of discipline through education. The need for discipline itself reveals the dual nature of man—one aspect ever flickery, changing its objects and identifying itself with them every moment—the other demanding steady and quieting discriminative attitude. The strength of these two aspects varies from man to man, that is why discipline should also vary according to the capacity of each man. This seems to be one meaning of what Gandhi said, that there are as many religions as there are individuals. Discipline and education have to consider the capacity of man. Therefore,

genuine self-control “must brace one up” while the mechanical one “unnerves or saddens one.”

In Sarvodaya the yogic practices reaching the samadhi stage are not as much emphasised as the practices in karma-yoga. Gandhi says, “I am a stranger to yogic practices.” Vinoba very beautifully points out how the three steps in the yoga of spirituality are ascended by the Jnana-yoga or Sankhya, Dhyana-yoga and karma-yoga... the first step indicates theoretical knowledge of the Ultimate Reality and the other two constitute its living. If liberation is to be conceived as the target of spiritual life—the arrow of Dhyana-yoga is meant to hit it. But Sankhya-yoga should point out its nature“. He, therefore, maintained “let not the leaders distrust ... the people’s ability to control themselves ... nothing is so easy as to train mobs for the simple reason that they have no mind, no pre-meditation.” Hence, men and women of all ages were considered by him to be fit for Satyagraha. The technique of Satyagraha also reveals the faith in man’s capacity to understand. Man is homo sapiens. His ultimate goodness or the capacity to love includes his rationality that enables him to grasp the truth of life. Gandhi intended that Satyagraha be a discipline and education both to the Satyagrahi and the so-called opponent.

But are body and mind suppressed through this discipline? We find critics accusing Gandhi of rigorism and asceticism. Indeed Gandhi does approve of “mortification of flesh” since to him body—this earthly tabernacle is not her (soul’s) natural or permanent abode, it is hindrance in her onward journey. Vinoba disallows eyes to look at many things and ears to hear unworthy words. It is difficult to say what such rigour can achieve if the mind is not fixed on the self, and if it is fixed, such rigorous observances are unnecessary. It is, of course, true that none of the Sarvodaya thinkers recommend dry discipline for its own sake and, moreover, they emphasize the need of paying due attention to bodily needs. They have warned that one should be mindful of one’s limitations. Sharpening of intellect is sought to be achieved through physical labour and other aids. It is psychologically approved that intellectual development through the actual dealing with problems of life is achieved better than through mere theoretical and book-learning. In this sense the whole scheme of New Education is intended to develop body, mind and intellect to their full capacity along with the knowledge and practice of control over them. Education is the way to dispel the veils of these through their proper use and control in order to uncover by the means of knowledge, the Ultimate Reality.

Psychoanalytic Insights into Human Potential and Sarvodaya.

Comparable signs of hope appear in psychoanalytic psychology. Working to heal mentally ill patients, Freud concluded that sexual instinct—operating both consciously and unconsciously through sublimation, repression, and redirection—shapes individual and social life. Late in his career, however, he shifted toward a dual theory of life and death drives. Freud’s collaborators diverged further: Adler highlighted the “ego” and Jung the “libido” as the key motivating forces. Adler argued that every child possesses an innate capacity for warmth and affection, which can mature into a cooperative spirit when early family experiences are supportive. He believed these formative circumstances carve out a relatively stable “style of life.”

Jung broadened “libido” to encompass both Freud’s and Adler’s meanings, and he saw the unconscious as not merely personal but also collective. Esteeming what he called “the deeply human religious instinct,” Jung moved beyond Freud’s pleasure principle and Adler’s quest for power. The analyst’s task, he held, is to guide the client toward direct contact with this

collective unconscious and a sense of unity with all humanity—and ultimately with the cosmos—so that life becomes meaningful.

Among later Neo-Freudians, Karen Horney accepted Adler's "style of life" yet insisted it is not fixed forever; each person, she said, contains "constructive forces" driving growth and the unfolding of hidden potential. Erich Fromm, the humanist psychoanalyst, went further, portraying humans as reservoirs of vast unconscious powers. In his view the unconscious houses the universal self, bearing both humanity's dark past and bright future. True freedom comes when an individual becomes fully aware—emotionally and intellectually—of this deeper self, transcends a narrow ego, and attains harmony with the entire universe. The therapist's role resembles that of a Zen master, aiding the seeker in "emptying" the ego. In genuine Zen *satori*, a person awakens to life's full reality, a state untouched by greed, fear, or ego-driven passions that warp objectivity and productivity. Both humanist analysts and Zen teachers believe that when consciousness expands, destructive desires simply dissolve. They see this as the cure for the alienated, "civilized" modern individual—and as the ultimate resolution of humanity's existential tension between downward pull and upward transcendence.

In *Man the Unknown*, Alexis Carrel likewise emphasizes humankind's vast, unexplored inner strength, saying our "potentialities are almost inexhaustible." He is alarmed by a modern Western civilization that prizes wealth, comfort, and health through science yet neglects the human being as an integrated unity of body, mind, and spirit a neglect, he warns, that is corroding society as a whole.

CONCLUSION

The psychological interpretation of Sarvodaya, as illuminated by Gandhian principles and later thinkers like Indu B. Tikekar, reveals a profound synergy between inner transformation and societal harmony. At its core, Sarvodaya is not merely a social or political ideology but a psychology of unity—one that bridges the individual's spiritual awakening with collective welfare. By grounding itself in truth (*satya*), non-violence (*ahimsa*), and selfless labor (*bread-labour*), it offers a transformative framework where the ego dissolves into relational consciousness, and personal discipline becomes the foundation for a just society. This alignment of inner and outer realms underscores Gandhi's vision of *swaraj*—self-rule as both a personal and collective emancipation, where love and rationality replace coercion and conflict.

The contrast between Gandhian psychology and Western paradigms further highlights its uniqueness. While Western models often prioritize individual autonomy and cognitive adjustment, Sarvodaya embraces the interconnected self (*atman*), where healing and growth arise from transcending the ego and embracing cosmic unity. This approach, validated by psychoanalytic insights into human potential (Fromm, Jung) and Carrel's emphasis on unexplored inner strengths, positions Sarvodaya as a timeless remedy for modern alienation. Its efficacy lies not in dogma but in lived practice—a call to embody non-violence, need-based economics, and spiritual discipline as pathways to a harmonic social order.

Future Scope

An analytical understanding of the *Bhagavad Gita* and other Hindu philosophical texts could deepen the conceptual foundations of Sarvodaya. The *Gita*'s teachings on *karma yoga* (selfless action), *advaita* (non-duality), and *dharma* (righteous duty) resonate strongly with Gandhian ideals, offering richer psychological tools to explore the interplay between

individual duty and universal welfare. Similarly, Vedantic and Yogic philosophies could elucidate the mechanisms of ego transcendence and collective consciousness central to Sarvodaya. Future research might also integrate contemporary psychological theories—such as positive psychology or transpersonal psychology—to empirically validate Gandhian practices like *satyagraha* and community meditation. By bridging ancient wisdom and modern science, Sarvodaya could emerge as a globally relevant paradigm for holistic human development.

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Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Srivastava, V., Komal, & Karn, A.K. (2026). Gandhian Psychology & Sarvodaya: A Psychological Interpretation of the Gandhian Social Order. *International Journal of Social Impact*, 11(1), 018-027. DIP: 18.02.003/20261101, DOI: 10.25215/2455/1101003