
UNIT 5 **GANDHI'S VIEWS ON HUMAN NATURE**

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5.1 INTRODUCTION

Every thinker and leader forms and develops his own view of the world in general and human nature in particular. For them, mankind is their source of inspiration, and the field in which their ideas and thoughts have to be tried, tested and implemented. Their worldview in turn indicates the personality and background of the leader. Therefore, it becomes important to know the views of the leaders on human nature, to understand their personality, and the way in which they guided themselves and the people in course of their career.

The question of nature of man has engaged the attention of thinkers since the birth of ideas. Economists thought of man as an 'economic man', whose ideas and way of life was ordained by economic rationality. Political thinkers thought of man as 'political man', whose behaviour was oriented towards retaining his freedom and attaining his rights for existence. Similarly, Karl Marx thought of man as a product of class struggle. He was of the opinion that it would not be possible to know about the basic nature of man, unless a classless society was formed, and true nature of man is noticeable. He did not give any definite finding relating to the nature of man.

The western philosophers had both an optimistic and pessimistic view of human nature. Locke and Mill had an optimistic view of human nature, and the man, in course of his activities for self preservation, would engage himself in activities which are essentially beneficial to the society, and did not see much role for the government in manipulating

or changing the nature of man. St. Augustine and Hobbes and some other thinkers had a pessimistic view of man. Some philosophers ascribed Godliness to man, and some others manliness to God. When manliness to God was ascribed, it was an attempt to see a perfect man, and see the God in him, which was well nigh impossible, but only an aspiration for the ideal. Gandhi was well aware of the impossibility of achieving the goal of perfection, but he was determined to travel the road against all odds, to achieve purification of each soul, thereby of the entire society.

Aims and Objectives

After reading this Unit, you would be able to understand

- Gandhi's thoughts about the human nature
- His belief in the goodness of man, and how man can extricate himself from the brute in him, and achieve truth and non-violence.
- Gandhi's quest for perfectibility.

5.2 GANDHIAN APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING HUMAN NATURE

Gandhi studied the philosophies of India before he formed his own view of human nature. He had early acquaintance with Vaishnavism and Jainism. His admiration for the author of "*Vaishnava Jana*", Narasimha Mehta is well known. Many of his father's colleagues were Jains, Christians, Mussalmans, and Parsis. From early days, he had a curiosity about religions and started his quest to understand them. As he reached his adulthood, he began a systematic study and in course of time, was well acquainted with all the religions practised in India.

5.2.1 Gandhi and Advaita School of Shankara

Gandhi's main tenet of thinking on human nature comes from Vedanta, especially the Advaita philosophy of Shankara. Gandhi holds Shankara in high esteem. He says that there is hardly anything in the world's literature to surpass Shankara's rationalism, and calls him a 'prince among reasoners'. He has declared in no uncertain terms that he is the follower of "Advaita" school of Vedanta. He believed that each soul is a part of the universal soul, and each person becomes a part of the universal soul by ennobling himself. "What though we have many bodies? We have but one soul". He always quoted the Muslim thought: "Man is not God, but neither is he different from the light (or spark) of God".

This belief of Gandhi in the philosophy of Advaita, that is non-dualism, made him see the entire humanity as a part of the universe, and each individual, as a microcosm of the macrocosm. This is analogous to the Advaita concept of the individual soul (Jeevatma) and the universal soul (Paramatma), and the former being an indivisible part of the latter. According to this school, when ignorance (Avidya) goes away, the individual soul (Jeevatma) merges with the supreme soul (Paramatma) and the individual soul will not have a separate identity, and becomes one with the Paramatma.

An important corollary of this idea is the collective gain or loss, of the entire humanity, due to the good or bad that happens to it. If an individual does something good, it increases the welfare of the entire humanity, not of the individual alone. Similarly, a wrong

done by an individual not only affects the wrongdoer, but the whole community is affected by it. Gandhi saw the entire society, or the entire universe, as a cumulative result of the Karma it had undergone, and the future as the cumulative Karma likely to accumulate, a sum total of all individual "Karma".

5.2.2 Spirit and Matter: A Critique of Marxian Approach

Gandhi believed that the spirit of man would shape the environment around him, and he does not give so much interpretation to matter. This approach is in line with eastern thinkers, where the discourses relating to *spirit* are dominant, and self-realisation and salvation are important results to be achieved, unlike the matter based philosophers, where the economic good is to be achieved for social well being. Marx comes under severe criticism from Gandhi. He said, "If I have an awareness of that living principle within me, no one can fetter mind. The body might be destroyed; the spirit will proclaim its freedom. This to me is not a theory; it is a fact of experience".

Gandhi emphasised the principle that "man does not live by bread alone" when he criticised Marx for his concepts. He said that what was good about Marxism was its concern for the poor, but the concept was not exclusive to it. He wrote:

My quarrel with the Marxists is that even if the paradise of material satisfactions, which they envisage as their final goal, were to be realised on earth, it would not bring mankind either contentment or peace. But I was wondering whether we cannot take the best out of Marxism and turn it to account for the realisation of our social aims.

He appreciated Marxism to the extent that it addressed the problems of all the working class throughout the world, but Gandhi did not give credit to Marx for this concept, and said that many other thinkers have also made similar approaches. Even though he gave credit to Marx for his dynamism and empathy for the working class, he explicitly rejected his concept. He wrote:

"I do not consider economic factors to be source of all the evil in the world. Nor is it correct to trace the origin of all wars to economic causes. What were the causes of the last war (1914)? Insignificances.... Was not Helen the cause of the Trojan War, but why go so far? The Rajput wars, which belong to modern history, had never their origin in the economic causes."

5.2.3 Human Nature: A Historic Perspective

Gandhi did not have a pessimistic view of history. In 1922, he wrote, "History is more a record of wonderful revolutions than of the so-called ordered progress". Even though his concept of history was hopeful and universal, he did not see the darker side of history to glorify it. He firmly believed that God has a scheme for everything in this world, and everything works according to His scheme. His concept of history was based on his belief in the Karma theory, which states that man moves in the direction of his Karma. An old saying in Sankrit says that Karma will determine the way in which man travels, just as the digger of the well travels in a direction different from that of builder of a mansion.

There is a divine purpose, he thought, and everything which does not regard this divine purpose perishes. He gave the examples of Napoleon Bonaparte, who after conquering major wars had to spend the last days of his life as a prisoner in St. Helena. He also cites the example of Kaiser of Prussia, who was reduced to insignificance by the end of

his career. But Gandhi believed that individuals played an important role in the making of history. “Supposing Hitler were to die today, it would alter the whole course of current history”, he declared in 1942. However, his optimistic view of the world led him to say, “Human society is a ceaseless growth, an unfoldment in terms of spirituality” (*Young India*, September 1926).

Gandhi rejected the unilinear view of history. For him history was neither unilinear, nor static, but a spiral like movement, which established the supremacy of spirit over matter, within the parameters of Karma, the law of ethical causation, according to Raghavan Iyer (1973, p.104). Gandhi said, “life is not one straight road. There are so many complexities in it. It is not like a train, which once started, keeps running”.

5.3 GANDHI’S CONCEPT OF MAN

Gandhi’s views on human nature started emerging from the days he started his legal practice in London. At the foundation of his thinking is his upbringing, early influences of his home and surroundings, schooling, and the various books and journals he read all through his life. His reading includes the religious texts of all religions practised in India and various thinkers like Tolstoy, Ruskin, Thoreau, and many others. Even though he read all the ancient texts and scriptures, he had the courage not to accept many ideas which were contrary to his conviction.

5.3.1 Innate Goodness of Man

Gandhi claimed, in 1921, to be a fairly accurate student of human nature. He claimed that he is the “vivisector of my feelings. I have discovered that man is superior to the system he propounds”. He said that man can reach his higher status among living beings, and move from brutish nature to human nature only by self-restraint. He said that the most vital point of difference between the brute and the human is the *self-restraint*.

Gandhi was a believer in *innate goodness of man*. In 1920, he said, “I refuse to suspect human nature”. In *Young India* (25.12.26), he wrote: “The most practical, most dignified way of going on in this world is to take people at their word, when you have no positive reason to the contrary. I refuse to believe that the tendency of the human nature is always downward”.

5.3.2 Obedience to the Call of Conscience

Gandhi believed in *obedience to the call of conscience*. He said that the conscience has to be followed, even in the face of all adversities. He said, “when you have to obey a call which is the highest of all, i.e., the voice of conscience, even though such obedience may cost many a bitter tear, and even more, separation from friends, from family, from the state to which you may belong.... This obedience is the law of our being.” Gandhi referred many times to his ‘inner voice’ and the call of the ‘inner voice.’ But, ‘inner voice’ need not be equated with the conscience, as he felt that ‘inner voice’ may be message from God or devil, for “both are wrestling in the human breast”. This line is similar to the line of philosophers of enlightenment, who said that man is always good, but only ignorance and error lead to passion and desire, which prevent the man from realising his full potential. Similarly, the Adwaita philosophy, which Gandhi adopted, states that the individual soul is prevented from becoming a part of the universal soul, due to ignorance, and lack of proper knowledge, which is termed as ‘Avidya’. Only when the ‘Avidya’ goes away, man is freed from the bondage of ignorance, and becomes an indivisible part of the universal soul.

Gandhi's move towards the perfectibility of human beings has similar concept, grounded in metaphysics. But the end product envisaged by Gandhi was a moral, truthful and ethical man, who would be a part of the universal society, whose good deeds would contribute to the well being of the entire human race, rather than benefit the individual. Here, his concept is more like the precepts of the *Mahayana school of Buddhism*, where salvation of the entire world is sought, instead of salvation of the individual. Gandhi was a believer in the concept of rebirth, and thereby the theory of Karma, and its cause and effect relation. His concept of Karma is similar to the concept in Jainism.

5.4 MAN: BRUTISHNESS TO DIVINITY

Gandhi thought that all men start as brutes, but become human and divine through evolution. He said, "We were, perhaps, all originally brutes. I am prepared to believe that we have become men by a slow process of evolution from the brute" (*Harijan* 2-4-1938). He further wrote in *Harijan* (1-2-1935) that "Man must choose either of the two courses, the upward or the downward, but as he has the brute in him, he will more easily choose the downward course than the upward, especially when the downward course is presented to him in a beautiful garb".

The only factor that differentiated the brutes and our species of human beings is the principle of violence and non-violence. The moment man realises his status, he becomes a non-violent creature, and gives up the brute within him. The point that differentiates a man and the beast is man's self-restraint and renunciation. Only when the man achieves this, he becomes different from the beast and is able to achieve truth and non-violence.

Gandhi affirms that non violence is the law of the human beings and violence is the law of brute. The main difference between the man and the brute, he says, is the man's capacity to respond to the call of the spirit within him. He can rise above selfishness and violence, which indicates brutish nature, and assert the spiritual nature of man, which is truth and non-violence. "This is the fundamental conception of Hinduism, which has years of penance and austerity at the back of discovery of this truth", he stated.

Nobility of Man

Gandhi used to state again and again that he sees a divine element in man. "The divine powers within us are infinite"; because of this divine element, he believed that man was going higher in the scale of evolution. He believed in the "essential unity of God and man, and for that matter all the lives". He said, "The most practical and the most dignified way of going in the world is to take people at their word, when you have no positive reason to the contrary. I refuse to believe that the tendency of the human nature is always downward". He declared that men like him would cling to their faith in human nature, all appearance to the contrary notwithstanding. Here, the training which Gandhi received as a lawyer is evident. The jurisprudence declares that every person is innocent, until he is proved a criminal, and similarly Gandhi is of the opinion that every human being is good, unless the contrary is proved.

Gandhi always distinguished between the man and the institution to which he belonged. Deed is different from the doer, he always maintained. He stated: "Man and his deed are two different things. It is quite proper to resist and attack a system, but to resist and attack its author is tantamount to resisting and attacking oneself. For, we are all tarred with the same brush, and are children of the one and the same Creator, and as such the divine powers within us are infinite. To slight the human being is to slight those divine

powers, and thus to harm not only that being, but with him the whole world". Hence, he could clearly differentiate between the Englishman and the empire he had built. He said, "I have discovered that man is superior to the system he propounded. And so I feel that Englishmen, as individuals, are infinitely better than the system they have evolved as a corporation".

5.5 STEPS FOR UPWARD MOVEMENT: SOURCES OF INSPIRATION

In Gandhi's belief, truth and non-violence are the basic principles which differentiate a brute from the man, and lead the man from his ordinary human state to be a part of the universal soul. In order to distinguish himself from the brute, man has to strive ceaselessly, to rise, and truth and non-violence are the aids to achieve this purpose. Only then, man can place himself on a moral plane, superior to that of the brute. He said, "Mankind is at the cross roads. It has to make a choice between the law of the jungle and the law of humanity". He said the 'inner voice', the word which he used for man's conscience, would enable the man to judge what is upward or good and what is downward, or evil. Gandhi held that man would ever remain imperfect, and it will always be his part and endeavour to be perfect.

The concept of non-violence was strongly entrenched in Gandhi's mind since his early years. The Jain concept of non-violence, of not harming even the lowliest of creatures was his basic principle and guiding star all through his life. The Jain concept of "Anekantavada", a principle by which all the opinions are respected and honoured as valid opinions, also helped him to practise non-violence on a spiritual plane.

Another major source of Gandhi's principle of non-violence has been the writings of Count Leo Tolstoy, whose work, "The Kingdom of God is within you" had a lasting influence on Gandhi. Tolstoy's principle of 'non-resistance to violence' was adopted by him in all aspects, and was made the watchword of the freedom movement. Tolstoy favoured non-resistance to violence even in extreme circumstances, as a basic Christian tenet, and earned the wrath of Church. The isolation and suffering of Tolstoy made Gandhi a strong soldier of non-violence, and inspired him to stick to the principle even in most adverse circumstance. Of such people, Gandhi said, "the people who voluntarily undergo a course of suffering, raise themselves and the whole humanity but I also know that people, who become brutalized in their desperate efforts to get victory over their opponents, or to exploit weaker nations or weaker men...drag down themselves."

According to Gandhi, man should make efforts to improve his morality, and he is his own benefactor, he is his own destroyer. He should achieve morality by controlling his passions and desires, and should achieve a moral autonomy by exercising self-control. If we yield to our greed and desires, we cannot achieve morality. The individual morality has to be a part of the universal morality, without which individual morality is of no significance. It has been pointed out by Raghavan N. Iyer, that Dharma or morality cannot be divorced from universal or cosmic order, known in Vedic terms as "ṛta".

Vows of Sabarmati Ashram: An Experiment in Human Nature

When Gandhi established the Sabaramati Ashram after his return from South Africa, he wanted the inmates of the Ashram to take and follow eleven vows. These were known as "*Ekadasha vrata*" meaning eleven vows. These vows were meant for moral upliftment

and making the inmates of the Ashram fit for the service of the humanity. It was stated in the draft Constitution for the Ashram, circulated in May 1915 that the objective of the Ashram is to learn “how to serve the motherland one’s whole life and to serve it.” Firstly, **six vows** were circulated, and the six vows were:

1. The vow of truth.
2. Vow of non-violence
3. Vow of celibacy
4. Control of palate
5. Vow of non-stealing
6. Vow of non-possession.

If one goes through these vows, Gandhi’s assessment of human nature can be understood in a practical way. He wanted all those involved in serving the country to be fit and eligible to do so; therefore, he wanted a high degree of morality in such person. He said that each individual has got Rama and Ravana, God and Satan, good and bad in him, and it is necessary to tie down Ravana and Satan in each person and this can be done by a vow or a ‘Vrata’. Gandhi clarified to an objector that some confusion has arisen due to equating the word, “Vrata” with the word, ‘Vow’ and that both are not the same. After giving six vows, he later added five more. We can broadly see that the first six are individual oriented, and the remaining five are socially oriented.

Defending the vows, Gandhi said, “The strongest men have been known at times to have become weak. God has a way of confounding us in our strength. Hence the necessity of vows, i.e., invoking God’s assistance to give us strength at the crucial moment.”

The vows give a practical example of what Gandhi thought to be human nature, and how to train it for the service of the country. To put in a few words, the first six vows try to remove and neutralise the brute in man, so that he may make his efforts towards perfectibility. The last five vows, which have a social purpose, rather than self-improvement, should lead one towards his relational-self and universal-self, as to how a man should become part of the macrocosm, and how his actions should improve the general well-being of the country and the world.

5.6 HUMAN PERFECTIBILITY

Gautama, the Buddha, known for compassion and concern for mankind, was also a source of inspiration for Gandhi in his quest for perfectibility of human nature. He reiterated Buddha’s principle of “Aniccha” that everything in the world is subject to change, and that nothing is permanent. Buddha said that nothing in the world is static, and everything is changing. With this as the supporting principle, Gandhi said that we must reject “the theory of permanent inelasticity of human nature”. This way, he rejects both the optimistic and pessimistic theories about human nature, and proceeds to build his own theory based on morals and metaphysics. He said that the man is the maker of his own destiny, and “we can mend or mar the present and on that will depend the future”. This is similar to the Karma theory of Buddhism, which states that what we are today is the result of our past Karmas, and what we are going to be in future will be dependent on what we do today.

In his quest for human perfectibility, Gandhi emerges as a great optimist. Even though he did not expect that his ideal would be realised, he found no harm in trying to achieve it. He thought that low aim is worse than failing, and set the humanity on a higher goal. He said that “Human life is a series of compromises and it is not always easy to achieve in practice what one has found to be true in theory”. In spite of such assertion, he said: “Let us be sure of our ideal. We shall ever fail to realise it, but shall never cease to strive for it.” Even though he was for high ideals, he believed that the ideals must work. “Ideals must work in practice, otherwise they are not potent.”

He believed in travelling towards the ideal, however small the step may be. He was fond of Cardinal Newman’s poem, “Lead Kindly Light”, which used to be recited in the prayer meeting. Two lines of the poem, “I do not want to see the distant scene, one step ahead is enough for me” always used to inspire him. Buddha’s saying, “if you want to go to Shravasti, take a step in the direction, and you are one step nearer to Shravasti” also illustrates his attitude. “The faith in one’s ideals alone constitutes true life, in fact it is man’s all in all”, he said. He was aware of the ‘Samskaras’, or the acquired tendencies that come through birth and training, were difficult to change, but he firmly rejected the permanent inelasticity of human nature.

He, with his optimism, was always sure that however evil the man’s nature may be, it is always possible to change it. The philosophers, who either hold that man is good or evil, hold that the positions are unchangeable, and a cumulative process sets in and the climax has to be an extreme, and there is no intermediate position, where reversal of the existing tendency taking place is impossible. This is a rigid position, where it is not possible to see anything but the pre-determined quality, and this position was totally unacceptable to Gandhi. He was an idealist, and an optimist of human nature. He said: “The virtue of an ideal consists in its boundlessness. But although religious ideals must from their very nature remain unattainable by imperfect human beings, although by virtue of their boundlessness they may seem ever to recede farther and farther away from us, the nearer we go to them, still are closer to us than our hands and feet because we are more certain of their reality and truth than even our own physical being.”

The religious ideals, though unattainable, have their aim as salvation, or becoming one with God, or attaining the freedom from the cycle of births and deaths. Gandhi’s ideal for human perfectibility was to attain a universal morality through non-violence. In his own words: “In the application of the method of non-violence, one must believe in the possibility of every person, however depraved, being reformed under human and skilled treatment”.

5.7 CONCLUSION

Gandhi started his metaphysical journey, to reach his cherished goal of a society where all individuals would contribute to the good of the society, and take the world towards perfectibility. His immediate goal was political transformation, which was a part of universal well-being. He held that the source of all goodness is the human being, and if he is transformed, and morally regenerated, he would be a force to reckon with. When such individuals form the society, the society will have high moral fibre, which can take up any challenge, and political goal would only be a small part of the achievement. In a society which had a racial memory of thousands of years, he was a radical reformer, challenging the age old practices and tenets, but confronting them in his own way with truth and non-violence. He never showed an iconoclastic zeal, but was never tired of

achieving something radical and revolutionary, through education and persuasion. He wanted to educate the country through its traditional values. The discipline that was required of an ascetic was transformed into the discipline of a satyagrahi; and the self-restraint and rigour that was required of a satyagrahi was hailed as that of a modern day ascetic. Thus, he could find equivalents in the political movement and the religious movement, and could convince the masses that through upliftment of their souls, they could raise the soul of the nation.

Gandhi's assessment of humanism, which is at the base of understanding human nature, was essentially spiritual. Since he understood the pulse of the nation, he could not base his philosophy in anything but spiritualism, which is deeply rooted in the minds of the people. Great reformers like Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekananda, Dayananda Saraswati and many other social reformers also had to adopt the same idiom and language for achieving their social objectives. Gandhi held that each individual is an autonomous moral agent, subject to a universal moral law. He also believed that the best human actions always conformed to universal values.

Raghavan N. Iyer is of the view that "Gandhi's philosophical views come closest to that of Godwin, except for his belief in rebirth." But, he is one with Godwin, in thinking that if we were to arrive at perfection on a future date that would be an end of our improvement. Perfectibility is always a goal to be cherished, never possible to achieve, but one does not stop striving to achieve the goal. Only by making unrelenting and untiring efforts to achieve perfection, one would be on the path of perpetual improvement, which is essential to achieve oneness of humanity and unity of life. However, Gandhi believed that man proceeds towards perfectibility not on account of his natural inclination or sympathy, but on his capacity for self-determination. His concept of human nature has been dynamic, and it would have been a defeatist attitude for him if he were to believe in passivity of society. He wanted only disobedience to be civil and resistance to be passive, and for that purpose, he would require a fit, morally upright and active society. Only when the individual, who has to be a part of such movement, aims at perfectibility, he would find a warrior to fight his battles against the British Empire. Hence, in spite of metaphysical moorings of Gandhi's concept of human nature, the end product required was in flesh and blood. He needed a society, which would achieve morality, truth and non-violence, and political freedom would come as a by-product of the efforts to achieve perfectibility.

5.8 SUMMARY

The study of human nature has been an evergreen subject for all the thinkers and philosophers of the world. Plato in ancient Greece, divided men into three categories, according to the predominant element present in them. The three elements of human soul according to Plato are rationality, courage and appetite which corresponded to three virtues of wisdom, spirit and self-control.

There have been optimistic and pessimistic thinkers, who could see nothing but good and bad, respectively, in man. In the case of both, the conclusion was a foregone one, and the reasons they gave for their conclusions were different. The philosophers of the East, made 'spirit' oriented discussions, where the individual, his relation with the supernatural, and how the soul and universal soul were related were discussed. Many philosophers like Karl Marx and Fabians saw the human relation in terms of matter, like economic well-being, sociological differences, etc.

Gandhi, true to his eastern thinking, thinks of human nature in terms of individual self and universal self. His philosophy is influenced by Shankara's Advaita, which says that the individual soul and the universal soul are one. Gandhi holds that a man can become part of the universal soul by getting rid of the brute in him. He opines that only man is capable of attaining such a state, as he is capable of self-restraint and renunciation. He can also achieve the qualities of truth and non-violence, the qualities essential for being a "universal self".

Gandhi held that even though perfection is difficult, one should never fail to try for it. He said that just as we continue to strive for perfectibility for divine blessings, fully knowing that they are not achievable; similarly we should continue to make efforts in becoming part of the universal spirit. He does not approve of the Marxian ways, and has his own Karma based theory of history.

He believed in the basic goodness of man. Even though the tendency is to move downward in the scale of evolution, he was an optimist, and said that only thing that differentiates a man and the beast is the man's capacity to move upwards, towards truth and non-violence. This way, he believed man to be superior to other animals. Even though his goal was political, he wanted to achieve it through the reform of the individual, and through him, the reform of the society. He held that each good and the bad thing individual does, adds up to the sum total of the universal "Karma". His starting point is metaphysical, but the end of the journey is in universal well-being, in his analysis and discussion of human nature.

5.9 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. Discuss Gandhian approach to conceptualising human nature.
2. Explain the influences on Gandhi in conceptualising human nature.
3. Critically examine the notion of perfectibility of man in Gandhi.
4. Examine the devices recognised by Gandhi to achieve the transformation of brute in man.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 6 **GANDHI'S VIEWS ON TRUTH**

Structure

6.1 Introduction

Aims and Objectives

6.2 Meaning of Truth, Truth is God

6.3 The Importance of Truth in Human Life

6.4 Absolute and Relative Truth

6.5 Truth and God

6.5.1 Realisation of the Self

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6.6 Gandhi and the *Advaita* Perspective

6.7 Summary

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Suggested Readings

6.1 INTRODUCTION

‘The only two eternal principles are Truth and Non-violence (*Ahimsa*). I would even go further and say that the only eternal principle is Truth. For, although Truth and Non-violence are one and the same thing, if circumstances arise in which I have to choose between the two, I would not hesitate to throw Non-violence to winds and abide by Truth, which is supreme in my opinion’.

(The Diary of Mahadev Desai, p.271).

‘Truth comprehends everything. It is not in *Ahimsa*, but *Ahimsa* is in it. What is perceived by a pure heart and intellect is truth for that moment. Cling to it, and it enables one to reach pure Truth. We have to live a life of *Ahimsa* in the world of himsa, and that is possible only if we cling to Truth. That is how I deduce *Ahimsa* from Truth’.

(Harijan, February, 22, 1942).

Truth and Non-violence, the eternal and inseparable principles, were the most profound and positive forces that influenced Gandhi since his childhood. They are imbibed in his thoughts, words and deeds. Gandhi had an unqualified loyalty towards the principle of truth. ‘He gave it his most earnest thought, and practised it with a singleness of devotion, until he was convinced and proclaimed to the world ‘Truth is God’. Truth was ingrained in him to such an extent that he was unwilling to negotiate or compromise it with anything, including the freedom of his beloved country. As he said: ‘I would far rather that India perished than that she won freedom at the sacrifice of Truth’. Gandhi’s thoughts and ideas were deeply embedded in religion. To him, the whole Hindu tradition is a relentless pursuit of truth (Margaret Chatterjee, p.60). Accordingly, Truth and Non-violence, considered as allied concepts since times immemorial have had an intense impact on him. Gandhi’s

passion for truth is aptly summarised in the following words: 'Passion for Truth was the dominating urge in his life and it gave him immense power over the minds and hearts of men. It was this passion that led to his insistence on purity of means and his freedom from attachment to predetermined ends. The same passion also led him to confess publicly his errors-Himalayan or trivial' (U.S.Mohan Rao, *The Message of Mahatma Gandhi*, p. xii). Gandhi was a worshipper of truth; his life was nothing but an experiment with truth. He entitled his Autobiography 'The Story of My Experiments with Truth'. His theories emerged gradually as a result of intense search, deep meditation and active response to the trying socio-political situations in which he found himself' (D.Mangalath, p. 35). This Unit traces Gandhi's fervent adherence to truth all through his life and how he viewed truth as the supreme force that is directly entwined with all activities of life.

Aims and Objectives

After reading this Unit, you would be able to understand:

- The meaning and significance of truth in Gandhi's life
- The importance he attached to this concept and how he practised it
- The divinity he appended to truth and
- The significance of truth as a means to self-realisation.

6.2 MEANING OF TRUTH, TRUTH IS GOD

Gandhi did not provide us with a systematic account of reality regarding truth. He was, in that sense, not a metaphysician. Nevertheless one can find a systematic account in his experiences and how since childhood to the adulthood, from India to South Africa and then again to India, in the national freedom struggle and in his personal life, and in this course of life, how he treaded the path of truth and how he remained firm in his resolve to adhere to truth all through his life. Gandhi's thoughts and ideas have their firm roots in the Indian traditions and philosophical sources. Further he imbibed the finest humane points from all the religious scriptures to accommodate in his scheme of ideas. In that sense, 'Gandhi's understanding of the nature of reality, truth, God, non-violence, the world and beauty constitutes the core of his metaphysics' (Mangalath, p.37).

To Gandhi, truth is of its nature clear and self-evident; it is the means, instrument and the ultimate goal, all encompassed in one. His understanding of the concept does not confine to a mere uttering of truth; it is but reality, which has to be experienced. And in reality, nothing exists except truth. It takes several forms and situations to understand the concept of truth. Tahtinen explains it further thus: 'Gandhi understood by Truth several different things. Sometimes, he speaks of Truth as truthfulness or the attempt to achieve Truth and in this case, it is like an ethical norm. Sometimes he means epistemological truth, that which we can know. Sometimes he means absolute truth, God, fundamentally metaphysical reality. Sometimes he means the final goal of life, *moksha* or the liberation. At other times, he means the Natural Right, ethical justice which is of its nature generally valid and binding on all men' (The Core of Gandhi's Philosophy, p.24).

Gandhi writes in his Autobiography that truth is the sovereign principle, which includes numerous other principles (Ibid, Introduction, p.xi). He also defines the absolute and relative truth principles which would be dealt with in the later part of this Unit. Gandhi called himself as seeker of truth: 'I am but a seeker of Truth. I claim to have found a

way to it. I claim to be making a ceaseless effort to find it. But I admit that I have not yet found it. To find Truth completely is to realize oneself and one's destiny i.e to become perfect' (Young India, 17-11-1921).

Why did Gandhi view truth as God? It is apt to know in his own words that 'Truth is *satya*. *Satya* is derived from *Sat*, which means being or that which exists. It is the truth that exists or pervades all. This is akin to the omnipresence of God. Truth, therefore, is the essence of what we call God or truth is perhaps the most important name of God. Where there is truth, there also is knowledge which is true. Where there is no truth, there is no knowledge. The word *Chit* or knowledge is also associated with God. Where there is true knowledge, there is always bliss (*Ananda*). Even as truth is eternal, so is the bliss derived from it. Hence we know God as *Sat-Chit-Ananda*, one who combines in Himself Truth, Knowledge and Bliss' (From Yervada Mandir, Chapter I).

Gandhi's perception of God through truth is unique. If we are to give a full description of God who is formless and omnipresent, the best way is to perceive Him as truth. God has many names and forms and yet he is nameless and formless. Therefore the best way to realise Him is through truth. In this framework, Gandhi clarifies his statement 'God is Truth and Truth is God': 'I came to the conclusion that after a continuous and relentless search after truth, which began nearly fifty years ago, I found that the nearest approach to truth was through love, in the sense of ahimsa. When you want to find truth as God the only inevitable means is love, i.e non-violence'. Further, he prescribes a strict preliminary discipline in the spiritual realm and listening to one's Inner voice to realise God. Therefore one has to abide by several vows such as the vow of truth, brahmacharya, non-violence, poverty and non-possession. One has to impose these vows upon oneself to embark on this great journey to listen to our conscience first and proceed towards realising the truth and with all humility and finally reduce oneself to a zero. This, as Gandhi felt, would be ultimate way to realise God through truth (Young India, 31-12-1931). To sum up, Gandhi uses the words 'Truth' and 'God' as synonyms and God or truth, surpasses speech and reason; what remains is pure essence. While a non-atheist believes in the all-pervading form of God, an atheist by living truthfully accepts everything as one and universal without having an active faith in God. To an atheist 'Truth is God' makes no meaning. Either way, truth is held in esteem by all human beings.

Gandhi closely associated truth with non-violence; he attempted to realise truth by practising non-violence. To him, 'truth is my God. Non-violence is the means of realising Him'. He also opined that 'the only way to realise truth is the practice of ahimsa'. The realisation of truth through ahimsa is nothing but realising the unity of our being. He found it impossible to view *satya* and ahimsa as two distinct concepts; they were two sides of the same coin, where it is impossible to make out the obverse and reverse. They are two most important qualities that not only determine our conduct but also define our character. While truth is the end goal, ahimsa denotes the means to realise it. Gandhi firmly held that a steadfast adherence to and practice of ahimsa inexorably leads to the realisation of truth. Gandhi advocated educating the masses about the effectiveness of ahimsa, which would naturally follow the path of truth.

As explained by Margaret Chatterjee, in Gandhi's 'Truth is God', 'the word Truth is not substituted for God, but serves to elucidate what 'God' means for Gandhi. Gandhi's truth, was a unique combination of a personal style of life and a technique for tackling injustices, truth that is, no doubt, in a sense other than as philosophers commonly understand it'. Chatterjee also refers to the importance attached to truth in the ancient sacred texts: 'In

the Upanishads, the references to truth lie thick as leaves in the forests of Aryavarta. The Taittiriya Upanishad says 'Brahma is Truth eternal, intelligence immeasurable. Untruth is to be conquered with truth, as light overcomes darkness'. That Gandhi was influenced by these sayings is evident enough to show his reverence towards truth. One of the rules or vows of his Ashrams was a strict adherence to truth by their inmates. His constant reminder to them, wherever he went, was that 'truth is a synonym for final beatitude'.

6.3 THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUTH IN HUMAN LIFE

Truth holds primary importance in human life. Human relationships are based on the qualities of faith, tolerance, love, tenderness and humility. These qualities enhance the character of a human being and allow one to tread the path of humility. Humility augments the observance of truth. Gandhi explains the implications of truth as 'Brahma satya jaganmithya' (Brahma is real, all else unreal). This realisation enables one to have patience, adds to the tolerance and eliminates harshness in human beings. Since the human nature also has an animal instinct and is bound to give in to evilness, it tends to lead to egoism, which is a major hindrance in the path of truth and self-realisation. Further, adherence to truth in thought, word and deed sets an exemplary life and creates harmony among the human beings; in addition, it also helps one in living a harmonious life with all beings on this earth, which Gandhi felt, was the ultimate unity of all existence. In other words, Truth, the supreme Gandhian value, is the consummation of all that is spiritual in man. The Gandhian concept of Truth is no abstract correspondence to facts, not a photograph of facts. It is a total creative concept' (Nagaraja Rao, Mahatma Gandhi Centenary Lectures, p. 48).

To cultivate the divine quality of truth in man, it is necessary that man attain self-purification against worldly pursuits and passions. While self-purification helps in realising truth, truth helps in attaining self-purification, thus complementing each of its roles. Some of the best examples can be drawn from Gandhi's life, which have been mentioned in the preceding units. It can be said that Gandhi led by setting an example to all both in private as well as in public life-his inspiration to utter truth from the stories of King Harischandra, his honest confessions to his father, his resolve to keep the promise to his mother while he was overseas, his truthful approach during his struggles in South Africa and later in India-all prove his sincerity to adhere to what he believed as the highest divine form. He writes in his Autobiography about his ceaseless efforts to realise truth and how his life may be perceived as a message to all those who waver in the path of truth: 'The little fleeting glimpses that I have been able to have of truth can hardly convey an idea of the indescribable luster of truth, a million times more intense than that of the sun we daily see with our eyes. A perfect vision of truth can only follow a complete realisation of ahimsa'.

Truth is also the very path to self-realisation and further, towards the attainment of liberation. As Gandhi said, 'The body persists because of egoism. The utter extinction of the body or egoism is moksha (liberation). He who has achieved this will be the very image of truth or one may call it Brahman' (Harijan, 22-2-1942). Since truth and non-violence are as old as the hills, it is necessary that man realise this and constantly strive to tread the path of truth. Non-violence or ahimsa is a means in this process. Gandhi gave preeminence to truth over non-violence as truth is the ultimate and the end goal. Man, as Gandhi said, should therefore realise its strength and power.

6.4 ABSOLUTE AND RELATIVE TRUTH

Gandhi distinguished between Absolute and Relative truths. Truth as such is a supreme principle. It includes the Absolute and Relative dimensions. As Gandhi said, 'truth is not only Relative truth of our conception but the Absolute Truth, the Eternal Principle, that is God'. Thus the Absolute truth is God and the Relative truth is something what we perceive as truth. No proof is required to know the Absolute truth; it is eternal and infinite. Absolute truth 'shines with its own light and is its own proof'. Man can find it through his 'Inner Voice' and 'Conscience'. Relative truth, on the other hand, is not the truth but one's truth, as perceived by the individual. As Gandhi said, 'truth is not so simple as it appears to you. We must therefore be content with believing the truth as it appears to us'. Gandhi further explained it thus:

'I write the truth as I personally see it. Absolute truth alone is God. It is beyond reach. At the most we can say it is *neti neti* (not this, not this). The truth that we see is relative, many sided, plural and is the whole truth for a given time. Pure and Absolute truth should be our ideal...and reaching it is attaining *moksha*'. Gandhi's life was one constant pursuit of truth and through it, of God. The Vedas describe Brahman as 'not this' but for Gandhi, it was always 'He or It is'. As mentioned earlier, Gandhi was thoroughly taken in by the Upanishadic tradition that describes God as Truth, knowledge and infinite. Truth is God and therefore is nothing but an ultimate reality.

Relative truth enables man to reach his goal. Through this he can realise God. Gandhi expressed that he experienced Absolute truth, in a fleeting glimpse. Till man realises the Absolute truth, he should hold on to the relative truth as he perceives it. 'But as long as I have not realized this Absolute truth, so long must I hold by the relative truth as I have conceived it. That relative truth must, meanwhile, be my beacon, my shield and my buckler'. Gandhi believed that we ourselves are relative truth: 'We are all sparks of truth. The sum total of these sparks is indescribable, as-yet-Unknown-Truth, which is God'. By clinging to the Relative truth, man can reach Absolute truth. As explained by Daniel Mangalath, 'he who knows the truth regarding the world and lives accordingly is sure to reach the Absolute truth' (p.65).

Due to the circumstances and various situations, man's perception of truth gets narrowed down, thereby failing in his attempt to realise the Absolute truth, i.e. God. His perception suffers from 'subjective limitations'. Gandhi's view was that 'we shall always see Truth in fragments and from different angles of vision'. To quote Mangalath, Gandhi's expression is through the elements of 'relativism and subjectivism'. Undue insistence on truth, as he explains, one's truth may lead to self-deception, fanaticism and fundamentalism of different shades and forms with disastrous consequences' (p.157). The Jain doctrine of *syadvada* may be taken as an example of Gandhi's concept of relative truth as he perceived it. *Syadvada* is the 'doctrine of *may be*'; according to this doctrine, reality can be looked from others' views, which is not only different but also exhaustive. In this context, it literally means 'the doctrine of relativism as usually expressed by adding the prefix 'somehow' before a statement. Further, Gandhi, who was thoroughly taken in by this doctrine, insisted on not forcing one's view of truth as the right one on another. 'I have to follow the truth as it appears to me, because I cannot live without it. The truth as it appears to you may be truth for you, but not for others'. This subjective perception often runs into the trap of confusion and as an answer to this, Gandhi prescribes the cultivation of Pure conscience to reflect on the concept of truth in a more logical and meaningful

manner. 'Each man has to order his life in the light of the inner light which shines within. Hence relative truth is not valueless. It is the only truth that man has so long as he is bound to the phenomenal world. Gandhi does not consider the world as a mere illusion nor does he recommend flight from the world as the means to attain moksha, but rather responsible involvement and participation in the worldly affairs as the sure path to moral progress'. Gandhi leaves the wisdom of judgement in the hands of an individual, who he feels is capable of perceiving what is right and wrong, according to one's own norms of objectivity.

6.5 TRUTH AND GOD

There is a mysterious, unseen and supreme power in the universe, which we consider as God. He is the *Antaryamini* (the spirit immanent) and omnipresent. Gandhi, like most of us believed in this omnipotent power and the all pervading spirit. He also firmly held that 'there is an indefinable mysterious Power that pervades everything. I feel it, though I do not see it. It is this unseen Power which makes itself felt and yet defies all proof, because it is so unlike all that I perceive through my senses. It transcends the senses' (Young India, 11-10-1928). Gandhi, however, felt that it is possible to reason out the existence of God only to a limited extent. Definitely, there is a living Power, as he said, that is changeless, that holds all together, that creates, dissolves and re-creates. This, according to him, is the spirit of God. To Gandhi, God is Truth and Love. Gandhi reaffirmed God as an Impersonal principle, a Law or a Power or the 'sum total of all that lives'. To him, God, by nature, is ineffable and beyond the comprehension of human thought, reason and speech. Further, no description of God as given by human beings satisfied Gandhi. To him, a complete surrender to God was the ultimate self-realisation and the way to *moksha*. The means to realise him is two-fold. The first step is the realisation of self and secondly and ultimately, the liberation. Let us examine both these concepts at length.

6.5.1 Realisation of the Self

The way to the realisation of the self and to God lies in the manifold path like morality, humility and living faith. Self-knowledge is the highest form of wisdom. This is possible to attain with a strict disciplined life of truth and non-violence, and abstention from the pursuit of human desires, physical desires and comforts apart from making incessant efforts towards knowing oneself, one's purpose in life, and one's service to mankind, one's constant endeavours to follow a truthful and non-violent life. This knowledge makes us realise the significance of truth in life because Truth is an important means to realise God and self and the seeker of the truth should be humbler than the dust. It is humility that plays an important role. Devoid of anger, arrogance and other vices, this provides the seeker an insight into truth. Secondly, a living faith in God is also important because without faith, it is difficult to sustain the longing for God. One can reach spiritual heights only through this immanent faith in God. Gandhi believed that God becomes visible in this pursuit 'not as a person but in action which can only account for your deliverance in your darkest hour'. Gandhi accorded faith a primary slot in his scheme because 'Faith helps us to cultivate inner knowledge, self-knowledge, and thus leads to inner purity'. It is the faith, he believes that steers us through stormy seas, moves mountains and jumps across the ocean. Gandhi believes it as a living, wide awake consciousness of God within. Being human beings and an ignorant lot, men cannot realise God's revelation as an omnipresent power. Gandhi prescribes that all activities of man should be guided towards the realisation of the self or God-be it social, political or religious. Further, service to mankind

becomes a necessary part of this endeavour, which is an ultimate service towards truth and God. A life of morality, self-purification via celibacy, control of palate and senses is a sure means to realise self and hence God.

6.5.2 Liberation

Gandhi's persistent endeavour was to see God in all living beings and do immeasurable service to humanity to realise Him. Through this, Gandhi wanted to attain moksha or liberation. Writing in *Young India*, Gandhi expressed that, 'I have no desire for the perishable kingdom of earth. I am striving for the Kingdom of Heaven which is Moksha. To attain my end it is not necessary for me to seek the shelter of a cave. For me the road to salvation lies through incessant toil in the service of my country and therethrough of humanity' (*Young India*, 3-4-1924). Gandhi relied on non-violence and truth endlessly to attain the moksha. They alone, he believed, can ensure a compassionate life on this earth and moksha in the ether world. It is necessary to shed the violent instincts to attain salvation: 'I believe myself to be saturated with Ahimsa (non-violence). Ahimsa and Truth are my two lungs. I cannot live without them. But I see every moment, the immense power of Ahimsa and the littleness of man. Even the forest dweller cannot be entirely free from violence, inspite of his limitless compassion; the body itself is a house of slaughter, and therefore Moksha and Eternal Bliss consist in perfect deliverance from the body, therefore, all the pleasure, save the joy of Moksha, is evanescent, imperfect' (*Young India*, 21-10-1926). Self-purification, faith in God, self-realisation and ahimsa are the only means to realise truth and ultimately God. Gandhi firmly believed that God's name and grace are the main resources for those who aspire to attain moksha or liberation. Interestingly, Gandhi was biased towards following truth and gave it precedence, relegating the importance towards life, or even to Moksha. As he said, 'I cannot consider anything dearer to me than moksha. Yet even that moksha I would renounce if it were to conflict with truth and non-violence' (CWMG, vol.25, p.27). He writes in his Autobiography, 'let hundred like me perish, but let truth prevail'.

6.6 GANDHI AND THE ADVAITA PERSPECTIVE

Gandhi's thought, writes Bhikhu Parekh, was in harmony with the classical Indian traditions, especially, the *advaita* or monistic tradition. He now gave it a new twist, and argued that, since the cosmic spirit was manifested in all living, especially human, beings, identification with it consisted in identifying oneself with them in a spirit of universal love and service (Parekh, *Gandhi*, pp.43-44). Gandhi claimed to be an *Advaitist* and also supported *dvaitism* (dualism). Gandhi felt that a change pervades all life, making this world an unreal place that has no permanent existence. At the same time, inspite of all the seeming changes, something persists, which he terms as 'real'. Accordingly, he had no objection in being labelled as '*Anekantavadi*' or '*Syadvadi*'. He refused to conform to these concepts in the traditional sense, as interpreted by the learned ones. Gandhi had his own unique interpretations of these concepts and he saw no reason in debating with the traditionalists. Infact, he was neither a pure traditionalist nor a complete modernist. He believed in following a positive, neutral path embedded with virtues from different faiths. Owing to his stance, Gandhi was content to be objective in his approach and be tolerant of others' criticism of his views. He attributed it to different interpretations of the reality. He quotes the example of seven blind men who gave different descriptions of the elephant from their own view point. He attributes his '*anekantavada*' to the doctrines of 'satyagraha' and 'ahimsa'.

Gandhi's interpretation of truth and God is based on his own observations and experiences. For example, he believes in the concept of God and takes Him as creative as well as non-creative. He explains this stance as 'the result of the acceptance to the doctrine of the mayness of reality': 'From the platform of the Jains I prove the non-creative aspect of God, and from that of Ramanuja, the creative aspect. As a matter of fact we are all thinking of the Unthinkable, describing the Indescribable, seeking to know the Unknown' (21-1-1926). This is the reason for calling God by different names like Paramatma, Ishwara, Shiva, Vishnu, Rama, Allah, Khuda, Dada Hormuzda, Jehova, God and an infinite variety of names (Ibid.,).

Gandhi, in yet another explanation of the *advaita* and *dvaita* philosophy, sees God as one and many. His words deserve to be quoted in this context: 'He is one and yet many; He is smaller than an atom, and bigger than the Himalayas; He is contained even in a drop of the ocean, and yet not even the seven seas can compass Him. Reason is powerless to know Him. He is beyond the reach or grasp of reason'. Faith is important to realise His presence and Gandhi believed in His profound presence. He refused to turn away from his faith even if an atheist were to debate and defeat him in an argument regarding the presence or non-presence of God. He affirmatively asserted, 'God is, was and ever shall be'. He had an immense faith in God's compassion who showers His grace on all beings-whether believers or no-believers. God's grace transcends all. Gandhi took pride in being one of those millions who had an unwavering belief in the omnipresence of God, and declared that he is 'never tired of bowing to Him and singing His glory'.

6.7 SUMMARY

In his eternal quest for truth, Gandhi absorbed new ideas and discarded those he felt were outdated or irrelevant. The main purpose of this progressive thinking of Gandhi was to grasp the true form of truth and God through his incessant quest. If there was anything he did not wish to change was his path of truth and non-violence, in which he had eternal faith. He felt the path to be narrow and often like an edge of the sword but his constant tread on the right path made him perhaps the greatest votary of truth and non-violence in the history of mankind. To him, truth was God and vice versa, as he said in the later years; through this truth he endeavoured to realise himself, God and unity with all beings on the earth. Any reading of Gandhi would be incomplete without a mention of the twin principles-satya and ahimsa (truth and non-violence). This proves as an example of his profound faith in truth and his resolve to tread the path of truth under any adverse situation. It is apt to end with the closing sentences as written in his Autobiography where in he asks the readers to join him 'in prayer to the God of Truth that He may grant me the boon of Ahimsa in mind, word and deed'.

6.8 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. 'Truth is God and God is Truth'. Examine in your own words the significance attached to truth by Gandhi.
2. How important is truth in Human life, according to Gandhi's views?
3. What is Absolute truth? How different is it from Relative truth?
4. Write short notes on the following:
 - a) Realisation of the self
 - b) Truth and Liberation
 - c) Gandhi's Advaita Perspective

SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 7 GANDHI'S VIEWS ON NON-VIOLENCE

Structure

7.1 Introduction

Aims and Objectives

7.2 Meaning of Non-violent Resistance

7.3 The Intellectual Context

7.4 The Historical Context

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7.8 Critiques of Gandhi's Non-Violent Strategy of Resistance

7.9 Summary

7.10 Terminal Questions

Suggested Readings

7.1 INTRODUCTION

The career of Mohandas Gandhi (1869–1948) marked a watershed in the development of non-violent struggle. In leading the struggle first against racial discrimination against Indians in South Africa and then the struggle for Indian independence, Gandhi was the first to combine a variety of tactics according to a strategic plan in a campaign of explicitly non-violent action, and the first to conduct a series of campaigns toward long-term goals. Deeply religious, practical, and experimental in temperament, Gandhi was a shrewd, tireless, and efficient organiser who united cheerfulness with unshakable determination. He was not only a political strategist but also a social visionary. Gandhi's non-violence had three main elements: 1) self-improvement (the effort to make oneself a better person), 2) "constructive programme" (concrete work to create the new social order aimed at), and 3) campaigns of resistance against evils that blocked the way forward, such as the caste system and British colonial exploitation. Gandhi's success in linking mass action with non-violent discipline showed the enormous social power this form of struggle could generate. This was based on Gandhi's understanding of contemporary political trends as well as everyday life.

Aims and Objectives

This unit will try to make you understand:

- Gandhi's meaning of *Ahimsa*, its religious and philosophical roots in his ideology
- Its practical side and how Gandhi used it in conducting his *Satyagraha* and
- How he used it to fight many forms of domination, discrimination, prejudice and subordination.

7.2 MEANING OF NON-VIOLENT RESISTANCE

Non-violent action is not simply any method of action which is not violent. Broadly speaking, it means taking action that goes beyond normal institutionalised political methods (voting, lobbying, letter writing, verbal expression) without injuring opponents. Non-violent action, like war, is a means of waging conflict. It requires a willingness to take risks and bear suffering without retaliation. On the most fundamental level, it is a means by which people discover their social power. Non-violence is not the same thing as pacifism, for which there are many words. Pacifism is a state of mind. It is passive; non-violence is active. Pacifism is harmless and therefore easier to accept than non-violence, which is dangerous. When Jesus said a victim should turn the other cheek, he was preaching pacifism. But when he said an enemy should be won over through the power of love, he was preaching non-violence. The central belief of non-violence is that forms of persuasion that do not use physical force and do not cause suffering are more effectual. Gandhi invented a word for it: *Satyagraha*, from *satya*, meaning truth, broadly meaning it as “holding onto truth.”

Non-violent action takes three main forms: 1) protest and persuasion, 2) non-cooperation, and 3) intervention.

The first category includes such activities as speech-making, picketing, petitions, vigils, street theatre, marches, rallies, and sit-ins. When practised under conditions of governmental tolerance, these methods can be comparatively insignificant; when the views expressed are unpopular or controversial, or go against government policy, even the mildest of them may require great courage and can have a powerful impact.

The second category involves active non-cooperation. In the face of institutional injustice and discrimination, people may refuse to act in ways which are considered “normal”- to work, buy, or obey. This largest category of non-violent action includes refusal to pay taxes, withholding rent or utility payments, civil disobedience, draft resistance, fasting, and more than fifty different kinds of boycotts and strikes. Non-cooperation can effectively halt the normal functioning of society, depending on the type of action employed and how general its use becomes.

Finally, there is non-violent intervention, which can be defined as the active inclusion and unsettling presence of people in the natural processes of social institutions. This can include sit-ins, occupations, obstructions of everyday business in offices, the streets, or elsewhere, and creation of new social and economic institutions, including the establishment of parallel governments which compete with the old order for sovereignty. These methods tend to pose a more direct and instantaneous challenge than the other methods described earlier and to bring either a faster success or sharper repression.

7.3 THE INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT

The ideas that shaped Gandhian non-violence were drawn both from Western and Indian sources. The trial of Socrates as described in Plato's *Apology* had a deep impact on Gandhi. In 1908 he published a restatement of this work in English and Gujarati under the title *The Story of a Soldier of Truth*. Socrates was a model for all those who would resist non-violently the violence of the state. The moral principles of the *Sermon on the Mount*, as interpreted in Leo Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God Is within You* (1893), had a lifelong sway on him. Another of Tolstoy's writings, *Letter to a Hindu* (1908), made

Gandhi rethink the role of violence in the Indian society. Tolstoy had argued that the British were able to hold India by violence because Indians themselves believed in violence as the basis of society. That is why they submitted themselves to their rajas and maharajas, and treated the 'untouchables' with extreme brutality. Under these circumstances, the complaints of Indians against colonial violence seemed to him to look a lot like the complaints of alcoholics against wine merchants. The removal of colonial violence would not solve India's problems. They would be solved only if Indians made non-violence the basis of a new India. Gandhi was so convinced by the *Letter* that he translated and published it in both English and Gujarati. Gandhi's study of Western jurisprudence made him a lifelong defender of the idea of the rule of law and the legitimacy of the limited, constitutional state. The fight against violence needed such a state as its ally. Here Gandhi departed from Tolstoy's radical pacifism that rejected the state as such. John Ruskin's *Unto This Last* (1860) opened Gandhi's eyes to the veiled structures of violence in industrial capitalism. Gandhi paraphrased and published it in English and Gujarati (1908) under the title *Sarvodaya* (The welfare of all), a title that he later gave to his own economic philosophy. Finally, there was the question of nationalism and how to free it from ethnic or religious or terrorist violence. Here he found help in the liberal nationalism of Giuseppe Mazzini, whose *An Essay on the Duties of Man*, published in 1892, became one of the recommended readings for all those who wanted to understand Gandhi's own basic work, *Hind Swaraj* (1909).

However, it was the Indian philosophical thought that helped Gandhi to assimilate the ideas he had absorbed from the West. Here three philosophical traditions were noteworthy. The first was the pacifist tradition of Jainism, as interpreted by Raichand—businessman, poet and mystic, and a personal friend of Gandhi. His advice was that a non-violent way of life was possible only if one withdrew from politics and concentrated all of one's energies on achieving inner harmony. Gandhi accepted the point about inner harmony but rejected the idea of withdrawing from politics. On the contrary, he sought to link the mission for inner harmony with that of outer harmony in society and polity. The philosophy of yoga as expounded in the classic text, the *Yogasutra* of Patanjali, had also impressed Gandhi greatly. Like Jainism, it too believed in the inappropriateness between maintaining inner harmony and engaging in vigorous affairs of state. However, it had recommended five moral qualities as being compulsory for inner harmony. Non-violence was one of them; the other four were truthfulness, abstention from theft, celibacy, and self-control in the use of material earthly wealth. Gandhi willingly integrated non-violence into his ethical system—with one adaptation. He tailored it from being a moral virtue into a civic virtue, thereby making it suitable for political action. But the philosophy that influenced him most was that of the *Bhagavad Gita*. He interpreted it as teaching the negative lesson of the senselessness of war. On the affirmative side, he interpreted it as teaching that the good life called for the disinterested service of one's fellow human beings, sustained by a deep love of God. Obstacles to the good life came from violence and the unmanageable state of the passions, notably anger, hatred, greed, and lust. Self-discipline, therefore, was the psychological solution to non-violence. The philosophical basis underlying Gandhi's theory of non-violence is adapted from that core underpinning the *Bhagavad Gita*. Humans are composites of body and soul (*atman*). As such, body force and soul force were both seen as dynamic mechanism in human affairs—the first as a fact and the second as a norm. The body was the source of violence and the passions; the soul was the cause of kindness and of the knowledge of good and wickedness. It was because the divine soul was a constitutive aspect of human beings that non-violence remained the model of their behaviour. A materialistic and acquisitive view of human life, in Gandhi's view, could not

justify, much less uphold, a non-violent way of life. The philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gita* also gave Gandhi's non-violence its ethical pragmatism. Since humans are composite beings, faultless non-violence was possible only in the soul's disembodied state, not in its personified state. In its embodied state, the will to live always brought with it the will to use power in legitimate and genuine self-defence. In the embodied state, one must always abstain from blameworthy violence—that is, disgusting violence used for dishonest gains. Defensive violence used in legitimate self-defence is not judged culpable.

7.4 THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Elements of Gandhi's philosophy were rooted in the Indian religions of Jainism and Buddhism. Both of these advocate *ahimsa* (non-violence), which is “absence of the desire to kill or harm”. The *Acaranga Sutra*, a Jain text, describes the fundamental need for non-violence: “All beings are fond of life; they like pleasure and hate pain, shun destruction and like to live, they long to live. To all, life is dear”. *Ahimsa* is a way of living. For Gandhi, *ahimsa* was the expression of the deepest love for all humans, including one's opponents; this non-violence therefore included not only a lack of physical harm to them, but also a lack of hatred or ill-will towards them. Gandhi rejected the traditional dichotomy between one's own side and the “enemy;” he believed in the need to persuade opponents of their injustice and prejudice, not to punish them, and in this way to win their friendship.

Gandhi also firmly believed that if violence was used to achieve any end – even if it was employed in the name of justice- the result would be more violence. He, for instance, discarded the idea of a just war. But such practicality and expediency in matters of non-violence was irrelevant to Gandhi. Thomas Merton writes:

“In Gandhi's mind, non-violence was not simply a political tactic which was supremely useful and efficacious in liberating his people from foreign rule. [. . .] On the contrary, the spirit of non-violence sprang from an inner realization of spiritual unity in himself.”

Gandhi's main tactic in his fight against the British was what he called *Satyagraha*, which means “Soul-Force” or “The power of truth”. Gandhi developed *Satyagraha* as the practical extension of *ahimsa* and love; it meant standing firmly behind one's ideals, but without hatred. *Satyagraha* took the form of civil disobedience and non-cooperation with evil. Civil disobedience involved breaking a specific law if it was believed to be unjust, and then facing the consequences. The Salt March of 1930 was one of Gandhi's greatest successes in civil disobedience. Salt was an essential item and the British monopoly on salt production had led to massive taxes on the vital substance.

The other element of *Satyagraha*, non-cooperation with evil, consisted of pulling out all support for an unjust system, such as the British rule of India. This tactic need not break any law, but might include boycotting British products, refusing to work for British employers, pulling one's children out of British schools, refusing to supply the British with services, and not paying taxes. In 1920, after the British army massacred 400 unarmed demonstrators, Gandhi organised a nation-wide *Satyagraha* which used non-cooperation techniques such as the ones above, as well as public demonstrations, in order to “withdraw Indian support from the vast, monstrous, machine of Empire until it ground to a halt”. Sadly, however, at the end of British Empire, Gandhi's dream was not rewarded. Gandhi was horror-struck by the communal conflict in India, and by the resulting calls for the creation of a separate Muslim state of Pakistan. Widespread distrust and hatred was

growing between Hindus and Muslims and, on the eve of India's independence, riots erupted all over India. The country became a bloodbath, in which it was estimated that a million lives were lost. Many believed that Gandhi's non-violence had failed. But had it? In these "months of chaos and terror," Gandhi spent his time in the most violent areas: "Each night he preached Peace and Love and prayed," Writes the Historian Stanley Wolpert, "Gandhi walked from village to village through the heart of that violent madness, preaching *ahimsa*. Mohandas K. Gandhi, the "Great Soul," was anything but a failure. In a world seemingly dominated by violence and hatred, Gandhi reincarnated the ancient idea of *Ahimsa*, non-violence, as the only way of living in peace.

7.5 THE MEANS-ENDS PROBLEM

Gandhi defined Non-violence or *ahimsa* as any 'action based on refusal to do harm'. It was not simply a willingness not to kill only. Gandhi refined the meaning of the word in the following words:

"*Ahimsa* is not the crude thing it has been made to appear. Not to hurt any living thing is no doubt a part of *ahimsa*. But it is its least expression. The principle of *himsa* is hurt by every evil thought, by undue haste, by lying, by hatred, by wishing ill to anybody."

In this wider way, Gandhi tried to relate the concept not as a merely negative state of harmlessness but to his notion of love, of doing good even to the evil-doer. But this did not mean to help the evil-doer in continuing his mischief or tolerating any form of domination or oppression passively. On the contrary, Gandhi evolved the technique to resist the oppressors by dissociating from him. Gandhi, while identifying love and non-violence, linked it to the problem of means and ends and to his conception of truth. The idea of love and truth were closely related in Gandhi's scheme of things so much so that it was difficult to separate them. For him, *ahimsa* was the means and truth was the end. Gandhi believed that means ought to be practical, within the easy reach of anyone courageous enough to practise it. In other words, only selected few could have arms, but non-violence could be used as a weapon by everybody. Truth, a relative truth, was the goal or the end towards which a person must strive to reach because in Gandhian perception absolute truth as well as absolute non-violence was difficult to achieve. Gandhi believed that perfection was not within human capacity but if we maintain a balance between means and ends, then it was within human reach to attain the goal. The testing ground of truth was, however, and must be according to Gandhi, non-violence or refusal to do harm. The use of violence, from Gandhian viewpoint, would destroy the truth, on whichever side it lay because that was harmful to human needs. Non-violence or *ahimsa* became for Gandhi, the sole criterion, the only determining yardstick by which to judge human action. It was the supreme value that separated brute from a civilised human-being. Gandhi's overall approach in many things was quite flexible, but here was his supreme dogma. Briefly stated, the only test of truth was action based on the refusal to do harm to others. Gandhi realised that he was putting forward a means to fight injustice and any form of domination but this was only an ideal. There were bound to be some limitations to achieve this ideal. But Gandhi emphasised the need to sharpen this means of struggle. How is it to be done? It meant to undergo conscious suffering in one's cause, without submitting to the will of offender or wrong-doer by pitting against the tyrant one's whole soul-force. Self-suffering in *Satyagraha* was neither a kind of 'weapon of the weak', nor was not cowardice but an instrument of moral persuasion. The resort to self-suffering was a kind of substitute for violence to others, one directed it inwards towards self-suffering,

injury to one's own person rather than harming others. Refusing to indulge in violence and inviting suffering upon oneself and yet not submitting to the humiliation and dominance was the basic essence of Gandhi's Non-violent approach to conflict resolution.

Gandhi opposed the utilitarian approach which subordinated means to ends. He argued that if means are completely subordinated to ends then the ends which will be realised would be quite different from the one the human actors initially visualised. Gandhi stressed that as human beings, we cannot control results. Since results or the final outcome was never sure in Gandhian scheme of things, Gandhi focussed only on the means or methods. Emphasising the organic link between ends and means, Gandhi said: "The means may be likened to a seed, the end to a tree; and there is just the same inviolable connection between the means and ends as there is between the seed and the tree." If the society is a kind of brotherhood of its individual members, how can this brotherhood be maintained and protected by lies and violence? In a similar way, if one paves the road to power with both corpses (however justified that may be) and good intentions, it is likely that with the passage of time good intentions will get diluted and corpses would be more and more numerous. Gandhi never doubted the efficacy of non-violent methods of struggle. Given a just cause, capacity for endless suffering and avoidance of violence, victory is certain, such was his approach. This approach was against the non-active pacifism. Inaction under the conditions of oppression and tyranny, according to Gandhi, was 'rank cowardice and unmanly' and he said that he would rather see someone incapable of non-violence resist violently than not to resist at all. He often argued that violence was any day preferable to impotence.

7.6 THE PROBLEM OF VIOLENCE IN GANDHI'S OWN WORDS

We here reproduce Gandhi's own article written by him in his Journal *Young India* in 1920. It would give you an idea about the way Gandhi thought about the violence and non-violence problem.

The Doctrine of Sword: M.K.Gandhi

In this age of the rule of brute force, it is almost impossible for anyone to believe that anyone else could possibly reject the law of final supremacy of brute force. And so I receive anonymous letters advising me that I must not interfere with the progress of non-co-operation even though popular violence may break out. Others come to me and assuming that secretly I must be plotting violence, inquire when the happy moment for declaring open violence to arrive. They assure me that English never yield to anything but violence secret or open. Yet others I am informed, believe that I am the most rascally person living in India because I never give out my real intention and that they have not a shadow of a doubt that I believe in violence just as much as most people do.

Such being the hold that the doctrine of the sword has on the majority of mankind, and as success of non-co-operation depends principally on absence of violence during its pendency and as my views in this matter affect the conduct of large number of people, I am anxious to state them as clearly as possible.

I do believe that where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence I would advise violence. Thus when my eldest son asked me what he should have done, had he been present when I was almost fatally assaulted in 1908, whether he should have run

away and seen me killed or whether he should have used his physical force which he could and wanted to use, and defended me, I told him that it was his duty to defend me even by using violence. Hence it was that I took part in the Boer War, the so called Zulu rebellion and the late war. Hence also do I advocate training in arms for those who believe in the method of violence. I would rather have India resort to arms in order to defend her honour than that she should in a cowardly manner become or remain a helpless witness to her own dishonour.

But I believe that non-violence is infinitely superior to violence, forgiveness is more manly than punishment, forgiveness adorns a soldier. But abstinence is forgiveness only when there is the power to punish, it is meaningless when it pretends to proceed from a helpless creature. A mouse hardly forgives cat when it allows itself to be torn to pieces by her. I therefore appreciate the sentiment of those who cry out for the condign punishment of General Dyer and his ilk. They would tear him to pieces if they could. But I do not believe myself to be a helpless creature. Only I want to use India's and my strength for better purpose.

Let me not be misunderstood. Strength does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will. An average Zulu is any way more than a match for an average Englishman in bold capacity. But he flees from an English boy, because he fears the boy's revolver or those who will use it for him. He fears death and is nerveless in spite of his burly figure. We in India may in moment realize that one hundred thousand Englishmen need not frighten three hundred million human beings. A definite forgiveness would therefore mean a definite recognition of our strength. With enlightened forgiveness must come mighty wave of strength in us, which would make it impossible for a Dyer and a Frank Johnson to heap affront upon India's devoted head. It matters little to me that for the moment I do not drive my point home. We feel too downtrodden not to be all angry and revengeful. But I must not refrain from saying that India can gain more by waiving the right of punishment. We have better work to do, a better mission to deliver to the world.

I am not a visionary. I claim to be a practical idealist. The religion of non-violence is not meant merely for the Rishis and saints. It is meant for the common people as well. Non-violence is the law of our species as violence is the law of the brute. The spirit lies dormant in the brute and he knows no law but that of physical might. The dignity of man requires obedience to a higher law to the strength of the spirit.

I have therefore ventured to place before India the ancient law of self sacrifice. For Satyagraha and its off-shoots, non-co-operation and civil resistance, are nothing but new names for the law of suffering. The Rishis, who discovered the law of non-violence in the midst of non-violence, were greater geniuses than Newton. They were themselves greater warriors than Wellington. Having themselves known the use of arms, they realized their uselessness.

Non-violence in its dynamic condition means conscious suffering. It does not mean meek submission to the will of the evil-doer, but it means the putting of one's whole soul against the will of the tyrant. Working under this law of being, it is possible for a single individual to defy the whole might of an unjust empire to save his honour, his religion, his soul and lay the foundation for the empire's fall or its regeneration.

And so I am not pleading for India to practice non-violence because it is weak. I want her to practice non-violence being conscious of her strength and power. No training in arms is required for realization of her strength. We seem to need it because we seem to think that we are but a lump of flesh. I want India to recognize that she has a soul that cannot perish and that can rise triumphant above every physical weakness and defy the physical combination of a whole world. What is the meaning of Rama, a mere human being, with his host of monkeys, pitting himself against the insolent strength of ten-headed Ravan surrounded in supposed safety by the raging waters on all sides of Lanka? Does it not mean the conquest of physical might by spiritual strength? However being a practical man, I do not wait till India recognizes the practicability of the spiritual life in the political world. India considers herself to be powerless and paralysed before the machine guns, the tanks and the aeroplanes of the English. And she takes up non-co-operation out of her weakness. It must still were the same purpose namely, bring her delivery from the crushing weight of British injustice if a sufficient number of people practice it.

I isolate this non-cooperation from Sinn Feinism, for, it is so conceived as to be incapable of being offered side by side with violence. But I invite even the school of violence to give this peaceful non-co-operation a trial. It will not fail through its inherent weakness. It may fail because of poverty of response. Then will be one time for real danger. The high-souled men, who are unable to suffer national humiliation any longer, will want to vent their wrath. They will take to violence. So far as I know, they must perish without delivering themselves or their country from the wrong. If India takes up the doctrine of the sword, she may gain momentary victory. Then India will cease to be the pride of my heart. I am wedded to India because I owe my all to her. I believe absolutely that she has a mission for the world. She is not to copy Europe blindly, India's acceptance of the doctrine of the sword will be the hour of my trial. I hope I shall not be found wanting. My religion has no geographical limits. If I have a living faith in it, it will transcend my love for India herself. My life is dedicated to service of India through the religion of non-violence which I believed to be the root of Hinduism.

Meanwhile I urge those who distrust me, not to disturb the even working of the struggle that has just commenced, by inciting to violence in the belief that I want violence. I detest secrecy as a sin. Let them give non-violence non-co-operation a trial and they will find that I had no mental reservation whatsoever.

Source: Young India, Ahmedabad, Wednesday, 11th August, 1920

7.7 SATYAGRAHA AND NON-VIOLENCE

Gandhi's Practical tool in implementing his idea of Non-violence was *Satyagraha*. This has been translated as passive resistance, non-violent resistance, non-violent direct action. It literally means '*Eagerness for Truth*' and contains Truth, Non-violence and Self-suffering as basic elements. He had developed this technique of mass mobilisation in the fight against racial policies pursued by the colonial rulers in South Africa with a moderate success. Gandhi repeatedly stressed its essence that Non-Violence was the law of the human race and was infinitely greater than and superior to brute force. He further linked it with his spiritual/moral viewpoint and maintained that in the last resort it does not avail to those who do not possess a living faith in the God of Love. He believed that Non-violence affords the fullest protection to one's self-respect and sense of honour, but not always to possession of land or movable property, though its habitual practice does prove

a better barricade than the possession of armed men to defend them. Non-violence in the very nature of things is of no assistance in the defence of ill-gotten gains and immoral acts. Individuals and nations who would practise non-violence must be prepared to sacrifice (nations to the last man) their all except honour. It was, therefore, inconsistent with the possession of other people's countries, i.e. modern colonialism which is frankly based on force for its defence. It was superior to armed struggle because as Gandhi was to demonstrate through his practical political campaigns, non-violence was a power which could be wielded equally by all – children, young men and women or grown up people, provided they have a living faith in the God of Love and have therefore equal love for all mankind. When non-violence was to be accepted as the law of life it must pervade the whole being and not be applied to isolated acts. Moreover, Gandhi's view was based on the assumption that if lawful activities were good enough for individuals, the collectivity of human beings as community or nations required armed resolution of conflicts. As we have already pointed out, Gandhi's advocacy of non-violence was closely connected to his attitude towards ends and means. He believed that violent methods for achieving a desired social result would inevitably result in an escalation of violence. The end achieved would always be contaminated by the methods used.

7.8 CRITIQUES OF GANDHI'S NON-VIOLENT STRATEGY OF RESISTANCE

Gandhi's views on non-violence were severely criticised by his political opponents. Many revolutionaries argued that force and armed struggle were necessary to end any regime of oppression. Some believed that as there was a fight back for survival in nature among various species, so there is also a similar kind of struggle among races and nations. Failure to recognise this, they argued, made the Gandhi's model of conflict resolution utopian because the real life was based on the principle of 'survival of the fittest'. In the Indian context, the Leftist leadership thought that Gandhi's principle of non-violence, whose moral force propelled several mass movements forward in their initial phases, repeatedly held back the struggles at key moments. As a result, privileged groups in the urban centres and countryside were able to detach the struggle for political independence from the struggle for radical social change and thus thwarted Gandhi's own goals of social justice. The British were gone, but the bureaucracy and police they built up still functioned with little change and continued to repress workers' and peasants' uprisings. Gandhi's will had been strong, but class forces proved stronger. They further argued that Gandhi never promoted the class forces-workers that could have helped him in his final struggle to unite Hindus and Muslims. Only class struggle could have achieved what Gandhi's purely moral mission attempted. The movement did not have to turn out in such a mess. Potentially revolutionary situations existed in the periods 1919-22 and 1946-47, but no mass party with revolutionary goals had been forged to steer the movements to victory. In the post-Second World War movement, the same social forces that had overthrown the Russian Tsar in 1917 were at the centre of the upsurge-the industrial working class, along with peasants and workers in uniform. But in India's case, the country's only mass party saved the British from being overthrown by taking power "peacefully" themselves-at the price of leaving the class rebellion to be consumed in the fires of communalism. Moreover, the Leftist viewpoint argued that different alignments of class forces were possible, since most classes opposed British rule. The independence movement would have produced a different outcome if industrial workers and the agricultural proletariat had been able to form a revolutionary socialist party-and drawn the middle class and small-holding peasants

behind their class-struggle leadership. Instead, Gandhi's party reversed these relations, with the bourgeoisie included in the leadership with the middle classes of village and city. Gandhi's life was history's longest experiment in non-violent political action. The result of the experiment is fairly clear: an exploitative class structure cannot be broken without violence somewhere along the way. Property rights, defended by state violence, have never yielded to the peaceful pressure of the exploited class. In other words, no exploiting class has ever left the stage of history without being pushed. Revolutionaries often made fun of Gandhi's idea of 'change of heart of the tyrant' as impractical day-dreaming. But one thing is fairly clear that even if non-violence failed to win the heart of enemies, state repression created widespread sympathies among the fellow countrymen and community and was a helpful instrument in mobilising public opinion both at home and abroad.

7.9 SUMMARY

Gandhi faced a problem of evolving practical and viable instruments in his fight for powerful British Empire. The nation had been thoroughly disarmed and any attempt to resist was met with severe repression by the colonial state. Combining contemporary methods of legal but extra-constitutional mobilisations with innovatively used century old notions of non-violence, he was able to 'invent' a unique method of *Satyagraha*. Gandhi's central dogma was *Ahimsa* or Non-violence and this was to be his means of achieving the truth. The radical side of this method was that it can be used by every single individual regardless of age, physical strength and gender if he/she possessed only a moral courage to oppose any form of oppression or dominance. The idea of non-violent resistance to superior force might look utopian and impractical at the surface but it proves to be a potent weapon in Gandhi's age as well as subsequently.

7.10 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. Describe briefly the intellectual and historical context of Gandhi's idea of Non-violence.
 2. What is the meaning of *Ahimsa*? Are its critiques justified?
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SUGGESTED READINGS

1. Anthony J. Parel., *Gandhi's Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 2006.
2. Gene Sharp., *The Politics of Non-violent Action*, Harvard University's Center for International Affairs, Boston, 1973.
3. Joan V. Bondurant., *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1988.
4. M.K. Gandhi., *Non-Violence: Weapon of the Brave*, Orient Paperbacks, New Delhi.
5. Raghavan N. Iyer., *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2000 edition.

UNIT 8 GANDHI'S VIEWS ON RELIGION

Structure

8.1 Introduction

Aims and Objectives

8.2 Gandhi's Concept and Understanding of Religion

8.3 Gandhi on Islam and Christianity

8.4 Gandhi's Views on Hinduism

8.5 Gandhi's Interpretation of *The Gita*

8.6 Inner Purification

8.7 On God and Universal Religion

8.8 Summary

8.9 Terminal Questions

Suggested Readings

8.1 INTRODUCTION

'To understand Gandhi's activity', writes his biographer Romain Rolland, 'it should be realized that his doctrine is like a huge edifice composed of two different floors or grades. Below is the solid ground work, the basic foundation of religion. On this vast and unshakable foundation is based the political and social campaign.' Before studying Gandhi's concept and views on religion, it is apt to know what religion is. Nesy, writing on the subject, observes religion as a privilege of man. It is a distinctively human activity. Man has an inherent religious element in him, he possesses a religious instinct. He has a spiritual constitution to apprehend his natural limitations and an urge to seek something beyond himself. Gandhi was thoroughly influenced by religion, to say all religions, but dominantly by Hinduism. According to Gandhi, religion is a very personal matter (Harijan, 28-12-1936). Religion helps in accepting and realising God. Religion is also closely related to morality. This unit deals with Gandhi's concept of religion, his perception of different religious teachings and how he linked it up with every aspect of life.

Aims and Objectives

After reading this unit, you would be able to:

- Understand the concept of religion and God as viewed by Gandhi.
- Understand the impact of different religions on Gandhi.
- Examine the role of religion in his thoughts and actions.
- Understand the deeper impact of spirituality on Gandhi.

8.2 GANDHI'S CONCEPT AND UNDERSTANDING OF RELIGION

Gandhi's ideas, writes Unto Tahtinen, were based upon religious tradition, not political, juridical, philosophical or economic. The origin of Gandhi's political and economic ideas is to be found in religious tradition. Gandhi often expressed the view, according to Saiyidain, that whatever power he possessed for working in the public or political field, was drawn from the depths of religious faith. Thus religion was not only a core but also an integral part in Gandhi's life. To begin with, Gandhi defined religion as that, which brings us face to face with our Maker (M. K. Gandhi, *My Religion*, p.3). Writing in *Harijan*, Gandhi perceived religion as the one that pervades all of one action. It means, he said, 'a belief in ordered moral government of the universe. This religion transcends Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, etc. It does not supersede them. It harmonizes them and gives them reality' (*Harijan*, 10-2-1940, p.445). Religion, as he understands it, is a permanent element in human nature which counts no cost too great in order to find full expression and which leaves the soul utterly restless until it has found itself, known its Maker and appreciated the true correspondence between the Maker and itself (*Young India*, 12-5-1920, p.2). Gandhi firmly opined that man cannot live without religion. Two factors are closely interrelated with Gandhi's concept of religion, morality and true service of mankind. Stressing on how important morality is to religion, Gandhi firmly rejected any religious doctrine that 'does not appeal to reason and is in conflict with morality'. Further, he held that 'there is no such thing as religion overriding morality. Man, for instance cannot be untruthful, cruel and incontinent and claim to have God on his side'. Secondly, Gandhi's concept of religion transcends service to humanity. After a perusal of all religions, Gandhi carefully chose those principles that worked for the service of the mankind, especially the downtrodden. As D. K. Dutta aptly summarises, 'religion, for Gandhiji, is to be searched out in the service of mankind. He dedicated and devoted his whole life to the service of the masses, which, infact was the essence of his religion' (D. K. Dutta, p.137). The religious influences in Gandhi's life were drawn from many a source. The foremost among them stands the family that had a Vaishnava tradition. His mother's religious beliefs and rituals made a positive impact on Gandhi; he was later initiated into "Ramanama" by his caretaker Rambha Tai, primarily to ward off the fear of ghosts and evil forces. His household was a meeting ground for Jains and Muslims, friends as well as visitors, which made Gandhi to understand the 'supreme' in various forms and ways. The rendering of the Holy Scriptures like 'Ramayana' and various hymns instilled in him a deep understanding of one's dharma. This may be interpreted as the ground work on which were based his lifelong principles of truth and non-violence. Besides Gandhi's friends, Muslims, Parsis, Jains and those from other faiths and their way of life made him realise the importance of faith and treat them with respect and interest. At the time of his journey to the foreign shores for higher studies, Gandhi knew very little of his own religion and that of others. Nesy quotes that, 'at the invitation of Theosophist friends to read the original Sanskrit of Bhagavad Gita, Gandhi recollected 'I was ashamed, as I had read the divine poem neither in Sanskrit nor in Gujarati.' (p.44). This marked the beginning of the unfolding of a man who, in future, turned out to be one of the proponents of a universal religion of love, truth and non-violence. The readings of Sir Edwin Arnold's translation of *The Gita* into 'Song Celestial' and 'The Light of Asia', 'The New Testament', Thomas Carlyles' essay on 'The Hero as Prophet' have all made a deep impact on his understanding of religion and how all the religions preached one language of love, morality and truthfulness was thoroughly understood by him. His interactions with Raychandbhai cleared many of his doubts in moments of spiritual crisis.

The Role of Religion in our life

As had already been mentioned, Gandhi was of the firm opinion that man cannot live without religion. Gandhi expressed the view that ‘man without religion is man without roots. Therefore, religion is the basis on which all life structure has to be erected, if life is to be real’. According to him, the problems from national to international, political to moral are best solved by religion. D. K. Dutta says, ‘Gandhi was of the opinion that religion is the root or key to all these problems. These can be solved in and through religion. It can be stressed that he (Gandhi) breathed religion’ (p.138). Religion was the basis, inspiration and mainspring of all his activities. Further, his belief in God may be termed as the mainspring of his religious consciousness. Gandhi’s insistence was more on the moralistic dimension since man, being inherently good and divine, needs to progress towards self-realisation, which is a much higher goal than that of industrialising society or pursuing material wealth and wants. The very existence of man is based on such ethical values that can be strengthened by his faith in God and religion that encompasses unity and harmony. The ethical values thus enhance the development of an individual and the absence of the same triggers dehumanisation. With the pursuit of materialism replacing ethical values, man stoops to much lower levels antithetic to the very purpose of his life and existence that has a spiritual goal. Further, materialistic pursuits weaken the rationality and wisdom in man, giving way to chaos and confusion, and finally leading to crisis and unrest. Gandhi advocated faith in religion and God to prevent mankind to slip into the life of misery and treachery.

Moreover, the so-called development of science and technology, which the scientists proclaim as an essential means to progress of man have failed in their promise of greater happiness to mankind. With the human mind becoming prey to prejudices, passions and aggression, the virtues of love, humanity and sympathy have been relegated to the background causing untold misery to mankind. Gandhi tried to interpret religion as the solution to such problems. Gandhi advocated that philosophy, religion and spirituality should go hand in hand with other aspects. Precisely, for this reason, he linked religion with politics and other activities. As he said, ‘I must try to live in society and yet remain untouched by its pitfalls’. Gandhi’s religion was not a formal religion, not Hindu religion; not a mere uttering of the name of God; neither customary nor narrow and definitely not the practice of untouchability.

Religion, as Gandhi viewed it, meant self-realisation, knowledge of self, where God rules every breath, that which prompts us to follow the path of truth and non-violence, that which deals with ‘the science of soul’ and that which is in consonance with the obedience to the Law of God. This is inherent in every individual and binds him closer to God. To him, truth and non-violence are eternal, equal to religion, equal to God. Religion, as Gandhi felt, expresses itself with the help of these two concepts. No doubt, Gandhi advocated strict adherence to these two virtues that are much crucial in taking man closer to God. Religion thus holds an impermeable place in our life.

8.3 GANDHI ON ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY

Gandhi accorded equal respect for and interest in all religions. To him, all religions are more or less true, proceed from the same God and converge to the same point. He had some interesting interactions with people from other religions, following different faiths. Gandhi viewed in all religions a basic unity, simplicity and humanity, an essential teaching of all religions.

On Islam

Gandhi observed Islam 'to be a religion of peace', love and above all, that of brotherhood of man. He was very much impressed with its tenets of faith in only the God and its unqualified submission to God (K. N. Tiwari, *World Religions and Gandhi*, p.33). Gandhi was firmly convinced that the taking up of sword by some of its followers had nothing to do with, nor in accordance with the teaching of the holy book 'Koran'. He also decried the charges of fanaticism on Islam, as many of the passages in the Holy Book speak of religious tolerance and peace. Gandhi remarked that, 'my association with the noblest of Mussalmans has taught me to see that Islam has spread not by the power of the sword, but by the prayerful love of an unbroken line of its saints and fakirs.' (Young India, 10-7-1924). Gandhi was drawn to some of the most tolerant and universalistic tenets of Islam. Firstly, it speaks of the spiritual upliftment of all human beings and secondly, by assigning the role of messenger rather than attributing divinity to Prophet Mohammed; the religion has displayed its simplicity and purity, making it a pure monotheistic religion. The sufferings and humiliation on The Prophet, which were endured in graceful silence, impressed Gandhi. To him, suffering was an example of peaceful and non-violent approach, the prominent characteristic of a Satyagrahi. Gandhi was also attracted by the blending of politics and religion in the history of Islam, the principles he held close to his heart. Tiwari observes that 'Gandhi found in the history of Islam, the blending of the political with the religious and this perhaps reassured him in his faith that politics could not be separated from religion and that the political struggle required long and patient suffering' (Ibid, p.36). Islam highlighted the virtue of prayer, fasting, alms-giving, hospitality and code of personal conduct. This had a profound impact on Gandhi and found many of the injunctions of the discipline of Brahmacharya / Celibacy. Virtues like obedience to parents, avoidance of adultery, cheating and lying, refraining from theft, murder, etc. are also emphasised in Islam to which Gandhi too prescribed in the code of ethical virtues.

On Christianity

Gandhi was much impressed and inspired by Christianity as it contained the gospel of love and a spirit of sacrifice. His Satyagraha which was a forceful non-violent means to conquer evil was based on some of the tenets of Christianity. The gospel of personal suffering to win over the enemy was a lesson that was learnt by his readings of *The New Testament*. He was deeply touched by the 'Sermon on the Mount', which he considered 'as the gift of Christianity' to the world. To him, it was almost akin to the reading of 'The Gita'. He was convinced that the 'Christianity's particular contribution is that of active love. No other religion says so firmly that God is love' (Young India, 31-12-1931). Gandhi revered Jesus for his practice of true love and non-violence, whose life was a living example of love and sacrifice towards all. To Gandhi, 'Jesus on the cross chose to meet evil unarmed and unafraid with love and good will for even those who were ready to kill him' (Tiwari, p.39). It is this spirit of sacrifice that had a deep impact on Gandhi's mind.

Gandhi, at the same time, did not like that the true principles of Christianity were not adhered to by its followers. As he affirmed, the Western Christianity, 'in its practical working, was a negation of Christ's' Christianity. I cannot conceive Jesus, if he was living in the flesh in our midst, approving of modern Christian Organisation, or public worship' (Young India, 23-3-1926). He advocated the equality of all religions, tolerance and sympathy for all.

Gandhi's interactions with the Christian brethren during his stay in London and South Africa brought him closer to them in his effort to imbibe the teachings. But he requested those who were forthcoming to convert Indians to Christianity to refrain from conversion. To him, a man of any religion, should be a better human being.

At the same time, Gandhi was pleased to see some of the Christians change their views for the better, who made efforts to recognise the merits of other religions. Gandhi, through his correspondence with Tolstoy, endeavoured to deepen his understanding of The New Testament; Tolstoy's 'The Kingdom of God is within You' awakened in him a passionate spirit of love and sacrifice. Gandhi's interactions with C. F. Andrews and H.S.Polak further helped him in fostering a spirit of brotherhood and develop special kinship with them. Since all religions were equal to him, he venerated them without distinction.

Jainism and Buddhism

Jainism and Buddhism, as Gandhi viewed them, were very much similar to Hinduism and did not consider them as independent of each other. The influence of Jainism bore the most visible impact on Gandhi. His concepts of non-violence and fasting were mostly in consonance with its traditions. Gandhi had the fortune of being part of his father's interactions with Jain monks early in his life. The moral and spiritual dimension of the religion strengthened Gandhi's ideas of non-violence towards all beings. The other ethical virtues related to Jainism such as purity, chastity, celibacy, non-possession, compassion, truth, non-stealing, non-attachment have had a direct impact on Gandhi. Fasting too constitutes an important part of the Jains' tradition of 'Vratas'. They also require abstinence from any physical adornments and temptations to physical desires. Though Gandhi acknowledged these tenets to other religions too, his basic understanding of these concepts may be attributed to his earlier exposition to Jainism.

As regarding Buddhism, Gandhi was attracted by its 'non-recognition of the caste distinctions'. Gandhi was impressed with 'the one thing that Buddha showed India was that God was not a God who can be appeased by the sacrifice of the innocent animals'. Those who do so, were guilty of double sin, as he viewed it. Gandhi perceived dharma as 'God', who is not distinct from His own law. The law and law-maker are thus one and the same, the laws being eternal and unalterable just as its maker (Tiwari, p.31). Buddha preached and practised Ahimsa in true letter and spirit. Since anger begets anger and hatred begets hate, the source of all evil, it may be countered by Ahimsa through the right conduct as prescribed by Buddha. Buddhism also emphasises self-discipline and moral conduct, through its eight-fold path. The universalistic and humanistic message of Buddhism was deeply imbibed by Gandhi.

8.4 GANDHI'S VIEWS ON HINDUISM

Gandhi, writes D.M.Datta, 'believed that every individual is born with definite hereditary tendencies, in a cultural and physical environment and is therefore, capable of development in a particular way. It is futile and unnecessary to ignore the religious heritage with which an individual is born' (D.M. Datta, pp.46-47). In spite of his extensive reading on different religions, his interactions with people from all faiths and his perception of the virtues associated with different religions, Gandhi acknowledged that Hinduism would suit him the best. Though this religion had its own crippling practices and pre-conceived notions, it is the essential ethical virtues and principles as cited in various texts like the *Upanishads*, *Vedas* and *The Gita* that pacified Gandhi the most. Datta further states that 'the presence

of God in all beings, the love of all creatures, the ethics of self-discipline, and selfless service, leading to liberation' appealed to Gandhi (D. M. Datta, p.47). Gandhi considered Hinduism as not an exclusive religion; he opined that 'there is room for the worship of all prophets of the world in it. It is not a missionary religion. Hinduism tells everyone to worship God according to faith or dharma, and so lives at peace with all religions' (Young India, 6-10-1921). He was deeply impressed by its assimilative characteristic and its profound stress on the unity of all beings, which is fundamentally moralistic and spiritualistic in essence. The absolute oneness of all beings and omnipresence of God, in animate and inanimate beings as well represents its universalistic nature. Its insistence on Ahimsa towards respect for all living beings, including animals, made a profound impact on Gandhi.

At the same time, Gandhi was pained at the discrimination Hinduism allows in the form of caste system and the curse of untouchability. These not only negated its universalistic nature but also remained as severe drawbacks of the religion. Gandhi was a religious reformer in the context of his utter dislike for untouchability, irrational ideas and superstitions. He felt that these features run contrary to Hinduism's universalistic appeal and cease to have moral basis. To him, 'the task of religion is to guide man in his spiritual and moral development' (Unto Tahtinen, pp.20-21). Gandhi had his own understanding and interpretation of religion which he consistently subscribed to. Gandhi imbibed the positive features from other religions and combined it with Hinduism. Hinduism speaks of attaining salvation through knowledge, action and devotion and absolves itself of any rigidity and giving way to liberal approach. It is this aspect of Hinduism to which Gandhi subscribed and termed it as accommodating: 'Hinduism is a grand evolutionary process and not a narrow creed. Hinduism is a living organism liable to growth and decay, and subject to this law of Nature' (Young India, 8-4-1926). According to him, 'to be a Hindu is to believe in God, the immortality of the soul, transmigration, the law of Karma, Moksha etc. and to try to practice truth and ahimsa in daily life' (Tiwari, p.15). As against the Western concept of religion, Hinduism rules out indulgence and multiplication of wants as these hamper one's growth to ultimate identity with the universal self (Harijan, 26-12-1936). Gandhi believed in the purity and sanctity of Hinduism. He felt that 'it is not buried in its ample scriptures but is a living faith speaking like a mother to her aching child' (Harijan, 3-10-1936).

Gandhi as Sanatani Hindu

Gandhi called himself as a Sanatani Hindu for the reasons that are given below. It is apt to describe it in his own words:

1. "I believe in the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Puranas and all that goes by the name of Hindu Scriptures, and therefore in Avatars and rebirth;
2. I believe in the varnashrama dharma in a sense, in my opinion, strictly Vedic but not in its present popular and crude sense;
3. I believe in the protection of the cow in its much larger sense than the popular;
4. I do not believe in idol-worship".

Gandhi was assertive when he declared his non-belief in the exclusive divinity of Vedas and to follow any Hindu Scriptures with blind faith, oblivious to its demerits. Gandhi had firm faith only in the unchangeable and easily understood fundamental truths of Hinduism, though he was aware of its limitations. Gandhi likens Hinduism to the river Ganga that is

pure and unsullied at its source but which takes along the impurities in its way. He advocated the purity of the votaries if the purity of Hinduism is to be retained. The Vedas, Shastras and Upanishads, Smritis, Puranas and Itihasas have grown at different times and in different contexts and appear to be contradicting each other. Nevertheless, Gandhi did not approve of any practice associated with Hinduism that instigated social evils like animal sacrifice, meat-eating, cruelty to human beings, polyandry, child marriages and outcastes (Young India, 8-4-1926). In his quest for self-realisation, Gandhi followed virtuous principles in everyday life and became an eternal symbol of hope and faith. To him, truth was the highest form of God and religion. He clearly stated it in his own words thus: 'What I want to achieve, what I have been striving and pinning to achieve is self-realisation, to see God face to face, to attain moksha. Man's ultimate goal is to attain salvation'. Gandhi prescribes service to all as the most effective way to attain salvation. Gandhi abhorred stagnation, sectarian belief and exclusivity of religion.

8.5 GANDHI'S INTERPRETATION OF *THE GITA*

The *Bhagavad Gita* or *the Gita* was the most influential source of Gandhi's religious thought. He was greatly influenced by its teachings in every walk of life. Gandhi's first reading of The Gita was a translated version, 'The Song Celestial' by Edwin Arnold, in 1890. He later took the translated version and it was his spiritual dictionary and infallible guide to conduct (B. R. Nanda, p.55). Gandhi quoted thus regarding *The Gita*: 'when I see not one ray of light on the horizon, I turn to the Bhagavad Gita and find a verse to comfort me. I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming sorrow. My life has been full of external tragedies and if they have not left visible and individual effects on me, I owe it to the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita'. Gandhi was much impressed by the principle of 'equality' of mind under the joyous and adverse circumstances alike; to remain unaffected by 'pleasure or pain, victory or defeat, without hankering after the fruit of action' was a trait Gandhi tried to imbibe and implement all through his life. He often found solace in the reading of The Gita, and considered it as a source of solution to all the problems he faced from time to time. In later years, Gandhi himself interpreted Gita, which was meant for everyone and published it in Gujarati in March, 1930. He named it as 'Anasakti Yoga', a result of prayerful study and experience (Young India, 12 November, 1925).

Margaret Chatterjee, a prolific writer on Gandhi's religious thought, interprets Gandhi's understanding of The Gita in the following words: 'The new things claimed by Gandhi are these: that the Mahabharatha and Gita are allegorical; that the Gita teaches Ahimsa (for renunciation is impossible without observance of ahimsa) and so the attitude of Anasakti (the spirit of renunciation or selflessness) is the basis of Karma (action). The Avatar idea indicates man's wish to become like God rather than indicates God's descent to man. It is possible for every human being to become perfect, as God is, and it is necessary for us to aspire towards it. As for the 'gospel' element in the Gita it is Bhakti or devotion, the gospel of Jnana or knowledge. Life should be a harmonious whole of these three. But the key to all of these is the doctrine of anasakti (selflessness)' (Margaret Chatterjee, pp.35-36). Liberation from further bondage of action and renunciation as the best form of Ahimsa appealed to Gandhi with much fervour. Gandhi's explanation of The Gita stresses more on the ahimsa and ethos of work and service. Swadharma (the inner destiny) enables the man to pursue the path of self-discovery and selfless service, which would determine one's capacity to attain Moksha. Gandhi thus insisted service to mankind

with detached and selfless approach, which he thought, is the essence of the Gita, a timeless guide to man's approach to life.

Gandhi was a persistent practitioner of the creed he believed in and the Gita's Karma-yoga greatly influenced him. 'Gandhi's annotation of the Gita in the light of ahimsa has stressed the intimate relation between the truth of philosophy and the daily life and thought of the people as he tried to mould them with equal significance' (R.N.Bose, *Our Gandhian Heritage*, Tagore Research Institute, Calcutta, 1970, p.50). Gandhi views the Gita as not an aphoristic work but a great religious poem; he advised all to study the deeper meaning in it as one derives richer meaning and was meant for all ages, people and teachings. It is upto the seeker to judge the depth of it and extract from it the greatest treasure of life.

8.6 INNER PURIFICATION

Without inner purification, Gandhi stressed, there would neither be ahimsa nor the satya. Keeping in mind the unity of all existence, Gandhi emphasised that 'identification with everything that lives is impossible without self-purification; without self-purification, the observance of the law of Ahimsa must remain an empty dream, God can never be realized by one who is not pure of heart' (Autobiography, pp.614-16).

Self-purification encompasses purification in all walks of life. Only when one attains self-purification, one would be in a position to instill in others to do so, thus leading to the purification of one's surrounding. The path to self-purification is laid down by innumerable sufferings and tests, which would examine one's capability to achieve the goal. 'The path is steep and hard', Gandhi wrote emphasising that if one has to attain perfect purity, 'one has to become absolutely passion-free in thought, speech and action, to rise above the opposing currents of love and hatred, attachment and repulsion' (Ibid). In order to attain this stage, man has to consider and put himself last among his fellow creatures, and strive continuously to attain salvation. Ahimsa is the best means, according to Gandhi, to attain this state.

Ahimsa, a much comprehensive principle, has a much deeper meaning in man's life and he cannot live without a conscious and unconscious tilt towards committing Himsa. Therefore ahimsa requires him to remain true to his faith and also remain a firm votary of truth if he has to develop compassion and self-restraint. Similarly also with firm adherence to truth, man should keep himself open to correcting his wayward behaviour and upon realising the mistake of committing wrong, should not only confess but also atone for it. Self-purification, if it has to be interpreted at a higher level, is the means that not only connects man to God but also helps in the enhanced enlightened consciousness that is complementary in nature to the former. Thus a religious life is a life of self-purification, a dedicated life to God as well as man (M. Chatterjee, p.94). Gandhi's experiments in letter and spirit were acts of attaining self-purification. Three most important ways of Gandhian self-purification include fasting, prayer and celibacy.

Gandhi undertook fasting as a means for paying for sin or violent streaks that surfaced in humankind from time to time. For example, he undertook fast following the violent incidents during the civil disobedience movement. To him, fasting was a spiritual effort, striving, penance and self-purification. The appeal to God, in whatever form, to rid the mankind from hatred and violence and inculcate in them a constant force of brotherhood marked the essence of Gandhi's prayer meetings.

Celibacy helps in the physical self-restraint and bestows mental freedom on man and is one of the best methods of achieving self-purification that has an abundant energy that is needed in a Satyagrahi. Gandhi also prescribed vegetarianism as one of the methods of purification wherein eating is an essential component, that has a direct effect upon man's mental faculties and which prevents him from becoming slave to animal instincts. Gandhi's methods have much religious significance as one scripture or other has prescribed these methods as effective tools to tame one's mind and make it subservient to the one and only supreme force, i.e. God.

8.7 ON GOD AND UNIVERSAL RELIGION

'There is an indefinable mysterious power that pervades everything. I feel it, though I do not see it. It is this unseen power which makes itself felt and yet defies all proof, because it is so unlike all that 'I perceive through my senses. It transcends the senses'.... a living power that is changeless, that holds all together, that creates, dissolves and re-creates. That informing power or spirit is God' (Young India, 11-10-1928). Gandhi's concept of God cannot be defined as a typical or characteristically similar to Hindu conception of God, though Gandhi himself time and again proclaimed his staunch Hindu affiliation. Nevertheless, the impact of Hinduism was evident on this concept. God is not only formless, characterised by the law of love and dharma; God is truth, eternal, immeasurable and a power beyond human grasp. Gandhi characterised God as both personal and impersonal. This can be seen in the distinct *Advaitic* perspective distinguishing between the lower and higher levels of reality. Gandhi believed in the absolute oneness of God. Though he never termed Hinduism as polytheistic, he acknowledged the way Hindus would worship different Gods and Goddesses, but all leading to the one formless God.

Gandhi also characterised God as truth and also as a living faith. God, to him, is love, truth, ethics, fearlessness and a source of light, life and beyond and ultimately the 'conscience' (Young India, 5-3-1925). Gandhi's relentless search for truth made him realise that the law of love, in the form of non-violence and not as a passion, had few followers or believers. Even the so-called atheists who professed their non-faith in God were votaries of truth. He reminded that the concepts of truth as in the Hindu philosophy and also in Islam clearly stated the universality of God as the Supreme power, and it is the truth, via a spiritual realm, that takes us near to God. He reiterated this in the following words. 'I worship God as Truth only. I have not yet found him, but I am seeking after him. I am prepared to sacrifice the things dearest to me in pursuit of this quest. Even if the sacrifice demanded to be my very life, I hope I may be prepared to give it. But as long as I have not realized this Absolute Truth, so long must I hold by the relative Truth as I have conceived it' (My Religion, p.42).

'Satya or sat is that abiding, all-comprehensive, all-inclusive ground which holds and sustains everything' (Tiwari, p.61). Various forms and different names are attributed to God in order to enable man to establish his eternal relationship with the Supreme power and see God in all living and non-living beings. As Gandhi remarked, 'when I admire the wonder of a sunset or the beauty of the moon, my soul expands in worship of the creator. I try to see him and his mercies in all these creations' (Young India, 13-11-1924).

Universal Religion

By religion, Gandhi did not mean any conventional religion but 'that religion which is at

the root of all religion and that this fundamental religion harmonises the historical religions and makes them valid' (My Religion, p.3). He explained further that 'just as a tree has one trunk but many branches and leaves, so there is one true and perfect religion, although it is divided into many as it appears through a human intermediary' (From Yervada Mandir, p.39). Gandhi reiterated that 'God is Truth and 'Truth is God'. It was interpreted that he did this not only because of his experience in his search for God and adherence to truth but also to unite all Indians as difference of religions posed a major obstacle towards achieving Independence (Tahtinen, p.21). This was meant to be a psychological appeal to all, including atheists, so as not to divide on the basis of ideology. Gandhi's firm conviction that all religions lead to one God is based on his findings of all good and virtuous traits, almost similar in nature, in different religions. Further, Gandhi attributed the 'personal' dimension to religion for personal faith enables one to achieve perfection in the practice of one's own religion. Secondly, Gandhi did not attach any ritualistic importance to religion so as to suit different individuals in their approach to attaining God. Individuals should also enrich themselves by reading scriptures of others' faith and religion in order to foster unity and understanding among all. But without ethical and truthful angles, religion, however perfect a man may try to follow, serves no purpose in his self-realisation. For it blinds the man to any moral aspect which is not only essential for one's own spiritual progress but also in the service to others. All religions, their scriptures and values are of equal importance, to segregate them on the claims of superiority, Gandhi said, is not only deceitful but also deplorable. As he said, 'In God's house there are many mansions and they are equally holy' (My Religion, p.29).

The Concept of universal religion as propounded by Gandhi is best summarised in the words of Tahtinen: 'Gandhi's religiousness does not exclude or reject the criticism of religion, since the recognition of the fundamental equality of all religions does not destroy the distinction between religion and irreligion. We must not tolerate irreligion. Sanctifying a cruel custom is not religion, but irreligion. Religion which does not take the practical things of life into account and does not try to explain them is not true religion.' (Tahtinen, p.23).

8.8 SUMMARY

Gandhi's religion is essentially a universal religion, devoid of customs, superstitions and irrational givings. For him, truth and non-violence were the ultimate forms of unity of mankind. He denied being christened as 'saint', 'yogi' or 'ascetic' and described himself as a seeker of truth, the ultimate eternal truth. It had nothing to do with theology, as Bhikhu Parekh put it, which over-intellectualised religion. True or pure religion, to him, transcends but does not supersede organised religions, and constitutes their common basis and connecting link. In today's world of religious disharmony, it is apt to recollect Gandhi's words: 'the need of the moment is not one religion, but mutual respect and tolerance of the devotees of the different religions. We want to reach not the dead level, but unity in diversity. Any attempt to root out traditions, effects of heredity, climate and other surroundings is not only bound to fail but is a sacrilege. The soul of religions is one, but it is encased in a multitude of forms. The latter will persist to the end of time. Wise men will ignore the outward crust and see the same soul living under a variety of crusts' (Young India, 25-9-1925).

8.9 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. What do you understand by Gandhi's concept of religion?
2. Discuss Gandhi's views on different religions.
3. 'Hinduism is the basis of Gandhi's religious thought'. Discuss at length.
4. Write short notes on the following:
 - a) Inner / Self-purification
 - b) Gandhi's concept of God.
5. How important was 'The Gita' to Gandhi as a source of spiritual strength?

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