
UNIT 13 GANDHI: THE FIRST CRUSADER OF HUMAN RIGHTS

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13.1 INTRODUCTION

The concept of human rights is as old as the human civilisation. Since human beings started to lead an organised life, the issue of human rights caught the fancy of those in the helm of affairs. All societies and cultures have developed some conception of rights for their members. The struggle for recognition of some basic rights of individual against political, social, economic and cultural oppression, injustice and inequalities has been an integral part of the history of all human societies. The recognition that every individual is entitled to enjoy certain basic rights merely by worth of being born in human species has evolved through this struggle. In the ancient scriptures, there have been references on basic human rights, though not referred by that name. In this context the Indian values regarding human rights, perhaps, have the oldest lineage. The 'Rigveda', which is the oldest document, declares that all human beings are equal and they are all brothers. The 'Atharvaveda' advocates equal right of all human beings over natural resources like air, food and water, likewise right to happiness (*Sarve jana sukhino bhavantu*) let all people be happy, right to education, right to practice any religion, right to social security, right to get fair treatment and protection etc., have been accepted and emphasised in various vedic and post-vedic ancient Indian literature and these emphasise the rights.

In the European context, two parallel trends have contributed to the evolution of the concept of human rights. First is the liberalist tradition advocated by philosophers such as Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and Bentham. They advocated extreme powers for the State, which was often utilised against the individuals. This school of thought was much clearly reflected in French and American Revolutions which had very clear conception of the

rights that must be assured to human beings if they were to live with security and dignity. Considered as natural rights, these were summed up in the Lockean formula of 'Life, liberty and property' and represented the struggle of men against various forms of intrusions and oppressions.

In contrast to this approach, the Marxist concept about human rights puts greater emphasis on group (Social) rights. Marxists believed that the full realisation of individual's self is possible only within the context of a society. Consequently they gave more importance to the economic and social rights than the individual rights.

The American Declaration of Independence maintains that "All men are created equal that they are endowed with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness that to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, that whenever any form of government becomes distinctive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute new Government".

Aims and Objectives

After studying this Unit, you should be able to understand

- Gandhi's contribution to society as the first crusader of human rights;
- As to how the Indian struggle for independence was the struggle for human rights;
- The very essence of Satyagraha as the notion of human rights.

13.2 SOUTH AFRICAN EXPERIENCES

13.2.1 Gandhi: A Born Democrat

Gandhi had a keen sense of personal rights. He claimed to be a 'born democrat' and had a passionate desire for the reign of rights in the world. The entire life and activities of Gandhi were a revelation of his fighting spirit in quest of justice, truth and right. In quest of the rights of man, he struggled against all illegitimate and unjustified social traditions, irrational political conventions, colour prejudices and other barbaric customs and privileges. He was opposed to the ravages of imperialism and foreign exploitation because they compromised the dignity and rights of man. In his actual life and writings one finds the agony and torment of his heart whenever he had to meet a situation that thwarted and crushed the individual and denied him his rights.

13.2.2 In South Africa

From his earliest years, almost instinctively, he accepted human equality. Hence in his political career he always stressed the rights of man. Soon after his return from England, when the Political Agent of Kathiawad insulted him, he wanted to 'proceed against' him judicially and could be restrained only by the advice of Pherozeshah Mehta. That was 'the first shock' of his life.

In South Africa when he was taken to the court by his employer, he had an unpleasant experience, for the judge ordered him to remove his turban in accordance with the prevalent practice and norms of the court. Every person had to remove his head gear on entering the court room. He refused to do so and left the court in protest as he viewed the order as an insult to an Indian. He defended his action in the local press which raised

a heated controversy that gave him some publicity. There does not appear to be any fault of the judge who ordered him to remove his turban. For, Gandhi was entirely a stranger there as he had no case. Possibly his employer took him to the court to make him familiar with the procedure of the courts in South Africa (Malhotra, 2001, p.29). But his deep sense of dignity and rights compelled him to leave the court.

However more humiliating and horrid experiences were in store for him when the young barrister was sent to Pretoria in Transvaal to help his employer's counsel in the case for which he had been called from India. In terms of his status he set forth with a first class ticket. Dada Abdulla came to the station to see him off. He advised him to get bedding on reaching Maritzburg, the capital of Natal by paying five shillings. But Gandhi did not pay heed to this advice as he was carrying his own bedding. At this station a servant asked him whether he required bedding. On his refusal another official came and asked him to go to the van compartment irrespective of the fact that he had a first class ticket; when a European- on entering the compartment- reported that a black skinned person was traveling in the first class compartment. On his refusal he was thrown out of the compartment followed by his luggage. It was a bitter cold night. In a dark waiting room he shivered in the cold. One thought that haunted him throughout the night was whether to return to his home country in order to avoid such a humiliating treatment in a foreign country or to fight for his rights as a brave person. He decided to fight. Ordinary human beings would have accepted the injustice as a fait accompli and led a peaceful life without telling this incident to others. Extraordinary persons like Gandhi thought this to be unfair and rebelled against it. Satyagraha was born in the mind of Gandhi in that railway station. This was the most momentous decision in Gandhi's life. A few decades later, in a chat with an American missionary, who asked him about his most creative experience of his life, Gandhi stated that the struggle in his mind in the dark waiting room of Pietermaritzburg was the most revolutionary experience of his life. For, self-respect was his natural trait and it was unmanly for such a person to submit to injustice simply because of the colour of his skin.

More indignities were awaiting him during this journey. At that time there was no direct rail-road link between Durban and Pretoria. So part of the journey had to be covered by coach up to Johannesburg. Racial discrimination was more rigorously observed in Transvaal. Dark skinned passengers were not permitted inside the coach. So Gandhi was given a seat outside on the coach box. In the course of the journey, the leader of the coach asked him to sit on a sack cloth on the footboard as he himself wanted to sit on the coach box to enjoy the fresh air. Nothing could be more humiliating for a proud person to sit at the feet of any person. He refused and so blow after blow from the hefty leader of the coach started falling on him till other passengers intervened and agreed to accommodate him inside the coach (Gandhi, 1927, p.105). On reaching Pretoria, he called a meeting of the Indians living there through a Muslim merchant, Tyeb Sheth, his opponent in the law suit, in order to make them aware of their deplorable condition in a foreign country and explore methods for raising their position. Most of those who attended it were Muslims as there were very few Hindus in Pretoria. The burden of his speech was that in order to raise their status in South Africa, Indians must be aware of their rights. He urged them to form an association to bring their hardship and disabilities to the attention of the authorities.

When Natal legislature tried to disfranchise the Indian, Gandhi drafted a petition against this. The submission of the petition was followed by letters to the editors, Memorial to

the Natal Premier and a petition to the Governor. All these show high degree of erudition. He appears to have worked hard to justify the claims of his clients. He made full use of the researches of European Indologists and western admirers of democracy and liberty to support the claim of Indians for franchise. He was quite familiar with the writings of Mill, Burke, Bright, Henry Maine, Hunter, Maxmuller, Schopenhaur as well as contemporary bureaucrats and heads of governments who had come in contact with the Indians. His main arguments were;

1. That the Indians were the British subjects and the treatment meted out to them was against the British sense of justice.
2. That the Indians made substantial contribution to the economy and welfare of the colony (Natal).
3. That the Indians were cultured and so can exercise their right to vote judiciously.

13.3 CONCEPTION OF RIGHTS

One of the prime themes in Gandhi's political philosophy is the conception of right because the entire theory of Satyagraha is based on the notion of the individual's inalienable right to resist a coercive social and political system. Against the claims of state omni competence, Gandhi puts up the right of the internality of judgement.

He declared in his Ethical Religion that conscience is the voice of God, the final judge of the rightness of every deed and thought. He wrote in 1919 that "there are times when you have to obey a call which is the highest of all, i.e. the voice of conscience, even more, separation from friends, from family, from the state to which you may belong, from all that you have held as dear as life itself. For this obedience is the law of our being" (The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, XV, p.138). Further, in matters of conscience, the law of majority has no place. Repeatedly, in South African courts and subsequently in India, he appealed to a higher court than courts of Justice, the "Court of Conscience" that supersedes all courts. "The human voice can never reach the distance that is covered by the still small voice of conscience. The only tyrant I accept in this world is the still small voice within" (Young India, 02- 03-1922).

His belief in the holiness and sanctity of the inner voice was only a religious way of registering his fidelity to the right of individual conscience to resist despotic power. By his advocacy of the superior binding character of the commands of inner conscience, he has rendered a great service to the appreciation of the concepts of right in the modern world. He regarded the restoration of the rights of the dispossessed as the indispensable condition for the establishment of justice and peace in the world. Without the exercise of legitimate rights, the individual cannot attain the realisation of moral personality. Hence the conception of unconditional obedience to the determinate political or legal superior could have absolutely no place in Gandhi's thought because the individual has, according to him, a moral right to oppose a law, command, decree or direction that goes against either divine laws or against the canons of conscience. Gandhi, hence, would thoroughly and categorically repudiate the divine right of kings to rule.

13.4 SATYAGRAHA IN SOUTH AFRICA

Gandhi's advocacy of rights was revealed in the famous Satyagraha in South Africa from September 11, 1906 to January, 1914. He wanted the recognition of the right to equality

of the Asiatic races in South Africa. The issues that were involved there referred mostly to civil rights: (i) The first demand of the Indian community was the abolition of the annual tax of three pounds imposed in 1894 on the indentured Indian labourers who desired to settle in the province of Natal at the end of their covenanted term of service. The original plan of the Whites in Natal was to impose an annual tax of 25 per head. But it was reduced to 3. Gandhi considered this 3 tax as 'inhuman' and atrocious (Gandhi, 1927, p. 113). (ii) The second demand was the civil right to unrestricted freedom of movement in the Union territories. (iii) The third demand concerned the legal legitimisation and validation of all non-Christian marriages whose moral and legally binding character was being threatened by a judicial decision of the Cape Colony. The decision of Justice Searle of the Cape Supreme Court delivered on March 4, 1913, invalidated all non-Christian marriages. The Government refused to accede to Gandhi's request for getting either this decision negated or the law, interpreted by the judge, amended. The other demands were (iv) with regard to the removal of the anti-Asiatic bias in the immigration policy of the Union government and (v) an assurance that the existing laws affecting Indians would be justly administered with due consideration of vested rights wheresoever existing. Thus the basic demands of the Indian community did not primarily refer so much to the political right of participation in the institutional and administrative mechanism of the government as to the civil and personal rights of the citizen.

As a man of the people, Gandhi stood for the civil rights of the lowliest and the humblest. Against the prerogatives of racial ascendancy, he advocated the right to equality of all residents of the country. He was never convinced of the glories of racial imperialism. Hence, even when he believed in the benefits of British rule, he valiantly fought the unfounded dogma of the supremacy of the white man in Africa. Although in South Africa, Gandhi launched Satyagraha for the vindication of the civil rights of Indians, he was opposed to the latter claiming any superiority to the Black peoples.

Gandhi was gentle and humble but he could not tolerate any attack on the political rights of Indians. While his leadership of the Satyagraha in South Africa was based on his fearless advocacy of the cause of civil rights, the Indian theatre witnessed an extension of his activities in quest of political rights. In India, he had to fight the unchallenged sway of an arrogant imperialism. He gave the slogan of non-cooperation in 1920 which became the prelude to the defiant war-slogan of "Quit India". With eminent courage and devotion, he fought for India's political rights. His leadership of the movement of Indian nationalist independence from 1920 to 1947 was a momentous struggle for the assertion of the political right of Swaraj.

13.5 RIGHT TO REBEL

In one of his early speeches in Madras, he advocated "the right to rebel" as the indefeasible right of a British citizen. In 1920, he interpreted political right as equivalent to the acquisition of Swaraj. In his famous Trial Speech of 1922, Gandhi condemned the Rowlatt Act of 1919 as designed to rob the people of all real freedom although its declared purpose was only to suppress sedition. He said that the Section 124 A of the Indian Penal Code under which he was being tried was designed to suppress the liberty of the citizen. His emphasis upon the right of freedom of political expression is also brought out in this speech. He says: "Affection cannot be manufactured or regulated by law. If one has no affection for a person or system, one should be free to live the fullest expression to his disaffection so long as he does not contemplate, promote or incite to

violence". In 1928, Gandhi was content with dominion status provided it was granted within one year. But in 1929 he blessed the Congress proposal for Purna Swaraj or complete independence. For the realization of political right, it was essential to cultivate an indomitable will. "If we develop the force of will we shall find that we do not need the force of arms" (Ibid., 29-05-1924).

As an outspoken champion of civil rights, Gandhi- at least indirectly- attempted to get a legal and social recognition of the worth of man as a moral being. Thus Gandhi interpreted the conception of civil right as being vitally connected with the moral conception of the personality of man. Kant confessed that Rousseau had made him aware of the meaningfulness of the feelings and sensibilities of the common man. Similarly, it can be justifiably said about Gandhi that the conception of the rights of the plain forgotten Indian peasant assumed a concrete shape through his efforts. He fought in order that the distressed and disinherited people could become "apostle of life-giving freedom" and could hold aloft the brilliant torch of individual rights.

13.6 CONCEPT OF SWARAJ AND THEORY OF SATYAGRAHA

Concept of Swaraj

Gandhi was the first in Indian history who gave a mass or democratic orientation to the concept of freedom. Political independence in the sense of transfer of power from one set of rulers to another set did not satisfy him. The freedom he sought was not merely the absence of alien bondage. It was something more than that. His perceptive mind could easily diagnose the basic malady of political self-government unaccompanied by economic freedom. It did not require him much intellectual attainment to see that politically free nations were nominally free in the sense that power did not belong to the people. This keen sense of reality led him to enunciate his ideal of Swaraj. As he was interested not in name but in the substance of things, it was only natural that he would prefer the content and not the shell or outward form of political self-rule. His politics was not power-oriented in the current sense of the term, but he knew well enough that power to whom? Who will wield that power? Gandhi did not suffer from equivocation on this point as was the case with many nationalist leaders of his time. The key point of his concept of Swaraj was that power must belong to the people. It was not legal sovereignty that he aspired to, the sovereignty or supreme power that he aspired to; the sovereignty or supreme power that he wanted was for the people at large. The people were not an abstract concept for him. A careful study of his writings would suggest that he meant by the people primarily the toiling people in the fields and factories. As India was (and still is) a predominantly agricultural country he spoke more in terms of the Indian peasants. It is true indeed that he represented peasant India- the real India as Gandhi used to call it- more than anybody else. It was for this toiling and suffering humanity that he wanted freedom- freedom from political subjugation, economic exploitation and social tyranny- and his concept of Swaraj evolved not out of academic theorising but out of his personal encounter with living reality. He understood that constitutional Swaraj- a liberal political concept- would not touch the fringe of the basic maladies that India suffered from. His realistic mind and sensitive soul could see through the inadequacy of upper-class Swaraj- Swaraj of moneyed men and educated classes. That explains why he always insisted on poor man's or people's Swaraj.

Theory of Satyagraha

As a votary of freedom and dignity of the individual, Gandhi championed throughout his political life the rights of the racially humiliated, colonially subjugated, economically dispossessed and socially depressed humanity. The theory of Satyagraha is based on the notion of the individual's inalienable right to resist a coercive social and political system. He hoisted the standard of non violent revolt against injustice, bondage and denial of rights. In all his activities a passionate desire for the reign of right is evident. Whether in South Africa, or in India, he championed the cause of individual conscience as against the forcibly imposed dictates of political power. One commentator has aptly remarked: "Gandhi's philosophy of right is cardinal point in his Philosophy of politics" (Varma, 1959, p.170). As the prophet of *Satyagraha*, he stood for the inalienable moral right of man to stand against untruth and injustice. But one of the greatest fighters for the assertion and vindication of human rights that he was, he was also a constructive thinker. He stressed the correlation between rights and duties.

13.7 RIGHTS AND DUTIES AND SOCIAL SERVICE

Gandhi thought that rights are the opportunity for self-realisation. They are innate in the sense in which moral values are innate. *Vedanta* teaches that right to self-realisation accrues through self culture and spiritual self-determination of the reason endowed individual, free, equal, and divine in nature. The way to self realisation is the realisation of one's spiritual unity with others by serving them and doing one's duty to them. It is in one's duty towards the social good that the true source of rights is to be found. This was one of his basic tenets which changed very little with time. Gandhi, who believed in the Gita gospel of selfless action, wrote in 1925: "The true source of rights is duty. If we all discharge our duties, rights will not be far to seek. If leaving duties unperformed we ran after rights, they escape us like a will o' the wisp. The more we pursue them, the farther will they fly. The same teaching has been embodied by Krishna, in the immortal words: 'Action alone is thine Leave thou the fruit severely alone.' Action is duty: fruit is the right" (Ibid., 08-01-1925).

And, "No people have risen who thought only of rights. Only those did so who thought of duties. Out of the performance of duties flow rights, and those that knew and performed their duties came naturally by the rights. .. He who thinks not of the right gets it, and he who thinks of it loses it. That is the rule of conduct which I would like to place before you" (Ibid., 15-01-1925).

While championing the cause of equal right of every man to the necessities of life, he stressed on the corresponding duty. He wrote in 1931: "Every man has an equal right to the necessities of life even as birds and beasts have. And since every right carries with it a corresponding duty and the corresponding remedy for resisting any attack upon it, it is merely a matter of finding out the corresponding duties and remedies to vindicate the elementary fundamental equality. The corresponding duty is to labour with my limbs and the corresponding remedy is to non-co operate with him who deprives me of the fruit of my labour" (Ibid., 26-03-1931).

Similarly, he said in 1939: "Rights accrue automatically to him who duly performs his duties. In fact the right to perform one's duties is the only right that is worth living for and dying for. It covers all legitimate rights. All the rest is grab under one guise or another and contains in it seeds of himsa" (Harijan, 27-05-1939).

In a cable to H. G. Wells, in reply to his *On The Rights of Man*, Gandhi wrote: “You will permit me to say that you are on the wrong track. I feel sure that I can draw up a better charter of rights than you have drawn up. But what good will it be? Who will become its guardian? If you mean propaganda or popular education, you have begun at the wrong end. I suggest the right way. Begin with a charter of Duties of Man, and I promise the rights will follow as spring follows winter. I write from experience. As a young man I began my life by seeking to assert my rights, and soon discovered that I had none not even over my wife. So I began by discovering and performing my duty by my wife, my children, my friends, companions and society, and I find today that I have greater rights, perhaps, than any living man I know. If this is too tall a claim, then I say I do not know anyone who possesses greater rights than I” (Ibid., 13-10-1940).

In the same vein he told Julian Huxley, the then Director General of UNESCO, in 1947: “I learnt from my illiterate but wise mother that all rights to be deserved and preserved come from duty well done. Thus the very right to live accrues to us only when we do duty of citizenship of the world. From this very fundamental standpoint perhaps it is easy enough to define the duties of man and woman and correlate every right to some corresponding duty to be first performed. Every other right can be shown to be a usurpation hardly worth fighting for” (Ibid., 08-06-1947).

Emphasis on Social Services

The Gandhian theory of rights lays emphasis on social service rather than on self regarding propensities of the Individual. As Gandhi wrote: “..people who obtain rights as a result of performance of duty, exercise them only for the service of society, never for themselves.”

Gandhi’s position is quite in contrast to that of the Utilitarians for whom the assertion of rights is more fundamental than the performance of duties. For Gandhi, rights are created, not by the State or any other group, but by the individual himself as he acquires and develops fitness for the right by the pursuit of *satya* and *ahimsa*. The State does not create rights, it only recognises rights. Individual freedom and social obligation being not incompatible, in Gandhian thought, rights will not require the long arms of the state for their enforcement in the ideal society envisaged by him.

Gandhi’s emphasis on duties as being prior to rights may lend the impression that his outlook was conservative. The conservative view holds that duty is of greater importance and priority than right. The citizen fulfils his duties as a member of a given section of society. It is his moral obligation to fulfil these duties. In one of Gandhi’s writings on the subject one comes across a statement of like nature. He wrote in 1939 “... rights of true citizenship accrue only to those who serve the state to which they belong.” But was Gandhi truly a conservative? Dr. Bondurant’s observations deserve attention. She says: “In traditional Hindu polity, emphasis upon duty is extended to the king. The king, above all others, is obliged to fulfil his kingly duties towards his people, and proper fulfilment of such duties is the sole justification for expecting his subjects to obey him. Gandhi, who would make every man a king, consistently emphasized duties as prior to rights. But the effect of his reasoning was not precisely conservative in nature.” “Rights accrue automatically to him who duly performs his duties”, Gandhi wrote. But these rights, Bondurant argues, are not to be rigidly confined to rank and order on the conservative structuring of society arising out of caste.

13.8 SUMMARY

Gandhian rights, fundamentally, are rights to pursue and realise values. The supreme right of human freedom, then, becomes not merely an absence of restraint, the detachment of the individual from all relations and bonds, but freedom to achieve things, made possible only (a) by the overcoming of obstacles and (b) by assuming the obligations of co operative effort. Gandhi's emphasis on duty as prior to rights can be explained in terms of the social obligation that an individual owes. Other regarding activities or devotion to an ego transcending cause implies service. Service is the outward expression of an obligation that an individual feels for otherselves and for the society as a whole. His concept of Swaraj as personal Swaraj underlies this assumption of the obligation of individuals to co operative effort. This subjective stress in Gandhian thought is evident in all his writings. It was his sincere belief that only reformed individuals could realise freedom, the supreme right, and that reformation from within enables one to stand up against unjust and immoral laws.

13.9 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. Do you agree that Gandhi was the first crusader of Human Rights in India?
2. "The very essence of Satyagraha is the notion of the human rights." Comment.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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Young India, 1919 to 1931.

UNIT 14 GANDHI'S APPROACH TO HUMAN RIGHTS

Structure

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 - Aims and Objectives
- 14.2 Charter of Earned Rights
- 14.3 Political Rights
- 14.4 Civil Rights
- 14.5 Religious Rights
- 14.6 Economic and Educational Rights
- 14.7 Rights and Duties
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- 14.9 Terminal Questions
 - Suggested Readings

14.1 INTRODUCTION

The most salient feature that stands out unmistakably in every aspect of the social revolution that Gandhi worked out in India is the deep respect with which he held man. The task of substituting new social schemes for the old ones is ultimately a task of dealing with men who constitute the society. And so in attempting such a task Gandhi had to deal with the millions of his countrymen belonging to various social groups. In his approach to these diverse classes, he had a marvelous consistency in his attitude which can well be described as a sincere respect for the dignity of the human personality.

It was actually much more than a mere attitude. It was a natural outflow, an instinctive expression of the deep seated conviction of the Mahatma. It was this conviction about the inviolable dignity that he attached to every single person that proved to be his spring of action. The existing conditions of Indian society were such a blatant violation of the basic rights of the human personality that naturally flow from his high dignity, that they clashed with his convictions and jarred on his sensibilities; and of sheer necessity Gandhi was prodded on to take the momentous decision to make his 'happiness dependent upon that of the poorest' till he would 'wipe every tear in every eye'.

To have, therefore, any fair understanding of the view Gandhi had of man, and of the dignity and respect he attached to that human personality, one will have to take into account his various activities and analyse them. For the Gandhian revolution in its essence aimed at resetting man into his rightful position where the adverse elements of an egoistic society had pulled him down and de-personalised him.

Aims and Objectives

After studying this Unit, you would be able to understand

- Gandhi's approach to Human Rights;
- Different kinds of rights an individual can exercise; and
- Emphasis on Duties than Rights.

14.2 CHARTER OF EARNED RIGHTS

Gandhi did not delineate coherent characters of rights as he was not an academician. Any action, which would affect, distort or violate the inherent dignity of a human being, would amount to violation of his/her human rights. Keeping this aspect in mind, he concluded that human rights are the basic rights of a person that is essential for the realisation of his/her personality, as an individual as well as a member of the society in which he/she lives. They are based upon the belief that all persons are born free and with equal dignity and natural rights.

An outline of the rights that he wanted the people to earn, secure and enjoy does nevertheless, emerge from his writings scattered over two scores of years of his active political life. For the purpose of systematic presentation, the rights he advocated and fought for are classified under the broad categories of political, civil, religious, economic and educational rights.

14.3 POLITICAL RIGHTS

In Gandhi's list of political rights may be included the right to vote, right to participate in one's governance, right to liberate one's country from the foreign yoke, and the right to warn, to resist and to disobey a bad government. He subscribed to the notion of "universal adult franchise exercised by a disciplined and politically intelligent electorate". He, however, prescribed quite a few qualifications for the people who would be entitled to vote in elections. In the first place, he wanted the voters to be within the age group of 18/21 to 50 years. Once prescribing the minimum age limit he hoped that when the Congress government comes into power, "the large majority of men and women of 21 years and above will have been enfranchised." Though he specifically wanted 21 years to be the minimum age-limit for the general body of voters, his statement recorded by *Harijan* indicates that he would not have objected to its fixing even at 18 years. The maximum age limit, on the other hand, was prescribed by him with the sole intention of debarring the people above fifty years of age from voting. He thought that "old men like himself . . . were of no use as voters", and, as such, "he would have a bar against persons beyond a certain age, say fifty" (*Harijan*, 2-3-1947). The prescription by Gandhi of this maximum age limit was the outcome of his belief in the *varnashrama* of *Vedas*. The *Vedas* compartmentalise the life of man into four stages of 25 years each, namely, the *Brahmacharyashrama*, the *grihashthashrama*, the *vanaprasthashrama* and the *sanyasashrama*. Accordingly, Gandhi would include in the list of voters only those citizens who belong to the second stage of life, the *grihashthashrama*, or are nearing it. Secondly, he wanted the literacy test to be necessary for every voter in order to enable him "to value his freedom" before he actually comes to exercise it. Emphasising the necessity of such test for every voter, he said:

"I have come round to the view that a literacy test is necessary for two reasons. The vote should be regarded as privilege and should therefore carry some qualifications. The simplest qualification is a literacy test. And if the ministry appointed under the literacy franchise is sincere and solicitous about the disqualified illiterates, the much desired literacy would come in no time" (Ibid., 14-1-1947).

And, in order to speedily wipe out unemployment, he prescribed an additional qualification of 'manual labour'. Of the literates belonging to the age group of 18 50 years, Gandhi would give the right to vote only to those who serve the State by willingly undertaking manual labour. In *Young India*, he proclaimed that by Swaraj he meant "the government of India by the consent of the people ascertained by the vote of the largest number of the adult population . . . who have contributed by manual labour to the service of the state" (Ibid., 2-3-1947).

Gandhi was eager to secure the right to vote to all those citizens who fulfil these three qualifications, irrespective of their caste, colour, creed, sex, religion, property, qualifications, or place of birth. The actual exercise of this right, he, however, would leave to the discretion of the voter. He wanted suffrage to be the citizens' 'privilege' rather than their 'duty'. He would allow the conscientious objectors to abstain from voting, for his South African Satyagraha had taught him that "a very powerful effect can be produced by abstaining from exercising the franchise".

Gandhi also upheld the citizens' right to participate in the conduct of government through their *bona fide* representatives. He fought for securing this right to his countrymen for he sincerely believed that like all other peoples, Indians, too, had an innate "capacity to regulate national life through national representatives." The additional ground of his demand for this right was that they were actually "fighting for" securing this instinctively deserved right. Moreover, he subscribed to the maxim: "He who pays the piper has the right to call the tune". In other words, he thought that since people send their representatives to the Assemblies "loyally to carry out" their wishes, they have a right to the government of their choice.

Freedom from foreign rule, he believed, was a pre-condition to the attainment of self-rule or Swaraj. He, thus, inaugurated and led several Satyagraha Movements for securing this right to his countrymen. And, it was during the course of these movements that he appealed to them "to lose all, if they will save their souls and gain the freedom which is their birthright". He desired both Great Britain (the foreign ruler) and her allies "the United Nations" to recognise India's birthright of freedom from foreign rule. At the same time, he called upon Indians to exhibit a high degree of political awareness needed for securing this freedom, for he thought that "there is no room for cowards in a society . . . which loves freedom" (Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, XXXII, p.337).

He also urged them to exercise their birth-right to warn, dismiss or resist a bad government by "undergoing hardships and self sacrifice" and by attaining a high degree of political awareness. Once, justifying the attitude of South African Indians towards their government, he said: "we often talk of the disabilities . . . and we have a right to complain about them and to seek redress". He justified peoples' right not only to warn their government if it went wrong, but also "to protest and to carry on any agitation" against it, if it perpetuated its wrongs. In extreme cases, he also recognised their right to "remove the Government if they wished to", that is if they found it to be incorrigible. His abiding belief was that the notion of "responsible government includes the power to

dismiss ministers”, if they commit excesses or overstep their limits. In specific cases, he thought it to be “the birth right and duty of the people to disobey orders which on mature consideration, they regard as unjust or oppressive”. He, nevertheless, insisted that they ought to earn even this instinctively deserved right by first “obeying the many laws of the state”. He found the confirmation of his views in Thoreau’s statement: “Mankind has the right to refuse allegiance to and resist the government when its tyranny becomes unendurable”. Gandhi was only eager to persuade everybody that civil disobedience is the inherent right of a citizen. In short, Gandhi upheld citizens’ right to make the government and also to unmake it.

14.4 CIVIL RIGHTS

Gandhi’s Satyagraha struggles were characterised by his strenuous defence of the rights which he thought the citizens would enjoy in a state which is free from foreign rule. He believed that “Civil liberty consistent with the observance of nonviolence... is the breath of political and social life...the foundation of freedom ... the water of life” (Harijan, 24-06-1939). Following were the various civil rights that he specifically claimed and advocated from time to time: (i) Right to Citizenship; (ii) Right to Legal Equality; (iii) Right to the Freedom of Speech and Expression; (iv) Right to form associations and to hold public meetings; (v) Right to the Freedom of Movement; (vi) Right to the Freedom of Residence, and (vii) Right to Legal Remedies.

Gandhi thought that a person ought to be recognised as a citizen by the singular fact that he was born in the state whose citizenship he seeks. He upheld the principle of *jus soli*, irrespective of the descent of the citizen. He said: “The Jews born in France are French in precisely the same sense that Christians born in France are French”. Giving his own example he observed:

“If I were a Jew and were born in Germany and earned, my livelihood there, I would claim Germany as my home even as the tallest gentile German may, and challenge him to shoot me or cast me in the dungeon; I would refuse to be expelled or to submit to discriminating treatment” (Ibid., 26-11-1948).

He also pleaded for the recognition of citizenship by naturalisation. He urged the South African Government to define the status of Indians residing in various South African Colonies and to accord to them the rights of citizenship on the footing of equality with the original inhabitants. Claiming the right of Transvaal Citizenship for his countrymen domiciled in Transvaal, he declared: “We think we have as much right to be in this land as the Whites have. The Negroes alone are the original inhabitants of this land. We have not seized the land from them by force; we live here with their goodwill” (Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, X, p.340).

Consonant with his belief in the Divine equality of men, Gandhi wanted that all should be equal in the eyes of the man-made law, irrespective of the type of their citizenship. He also desired that equal protection of laws be available to all the citizens, whatever be their caste, class, colour, material possessions, numbers, race, religion, sex or social status. He was eager to stop the exploitation of man by man, for he had realised that people suffered because of these distinctions and that this sense of high and low had vitiated their lives.

Once expressing his opposition to the distinctions based on caste or class, he observed:

"I hold all classes of people - Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra, Rajput, Mahar, Chamar all alike, and I regard the distinctions based on birth as immoral" (Harijan, 2-5-1936). He objected to the apartheid policy of the South African Colonies on the ground that it entailed the regulation of immigration on the basis of the colour of man's skin. He, further, desired that in extending equal protection of laws to all the citizens, poverty or riches should not stand in their way. Nor should this equality be denied to any one on the ground that he belongs to a particular minority group, for he believed that "Even a minority of one can expect perfect justice". He also maintained that freedom without equality of all, irrespective of race or religion, was not worth having. Similar was his view about distinctions based on sex. He thought that in the scheme of God and nature, both man and woman are equal. No less was he convinced that the abolition of untouchability was man's right. He, thus, was averse to discrimination amongst the various sections of citizens on any one or more of these grounds.

Gandhi's notion of citizens' equality extends specifically to the unrestricted use of public places and services. Gandhi wanted that all citizens should, without any distinction, have the equal right to the use of wells, tanks, roads, schools and places of public resort maintained out of State funds or dedicated by private persons for the use of the general public.

Citizens' legal equality was the solid foundation on which Gandhi built the edifice of civil rights. The very first of these rights was the freedom of speech and expression. He not only claimed this natural right for all his countrymen but also specifically directed his individual Satyagraha of 1940-41 against Government of India's refusal to allow the people freely to preach non-cooperation with them in their Second World War effort. He desired that everyone should have perfect liberty to preach by pen and tongue. His notion of this freedom was comprehensive enough to include the freedom of healthy, well informed, balanced criticism. He wanted everyone to say: "it is for me to judge when to say something and when to hold my tongue". In *Young India* he observed: "Liberty of speech means that it is unassailed, even when the speech hurts; liberty of the Press can be said to be truly respected only when the Press can comment in the severest terms upon and even misrepresent matters, protection against misrepresentation or violence being secured not by an administrative gagging order, not by closing down the Press but by punishing the real offender, leaving the Press itself unrestricted. Freedom of association is truly respected when assemblies of people can discuss even revolutionary projects, the State relying upon the forces of public opinion and the civil police, not the savage military at its disposal to crush any actual outbreak of revolution that is designed to confound public and the State representing it" (Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, XXII, pp.176-77).

He clamoured for the achievement of this freedom for his countrymen because he sincerely believed it to be the foundation of Swaraj and dharma and a pre-condition for evoking the best in the opponent. He was also sure that no Government, however despotic or coercive it may be, can stop the exchange of views for a long time. In *Harijan*, he observed that even if the Government dared, "Inter relation of ideas cannot be prevented". Yet, he knew that "there are seasons for speech and action, as there are seasons for silence and inaction". Two restrictions he specifically put on the exercise of this right. First, that the people should exercise this right in such a manner as not to influence the matters *sub-judice*; and, secondly, that its exercise must not result in the outbreak of violence.

Gandhi's list of civil rights also includes the freedom of association, assembly and movement. He thought that man's instinct of sociability required that he should have freedom to form associations (including political parties) and unions of his choice. Conversely, he required the state not to prohibit the peaceful associations or assemblies in an arbitrary manner. For instance, he sent strongly worded protest notes to the Government of India when the latter declared the Congress organisation "unlawful", with the intention of suppressing the freedom movement in 1942, he wrote to the Viceroy:

"The whole Congress movement was intended to evoke in the people the measure of sacrifice sufficient to compel attention. It was intended to demonstrate what measures of popular support it had. Was it wise at this time of the day to seek to suppress a popular movement avowedly non violent? ... however much I dislike your action, I remain the same friend you have known me. I would still plead for a reconsideration of the Government of India's whole policy" (Pyarelal, 1959, p.32).

On another occasion, he justified the demand of his associate, Jamna Lal Bajaj, for the lifting of the ban on the Jaipur Rajya Praja Mandal, by declaring that the Jaipur "civil disobedience struggle will cease, the moment the bans are lifted and the right of free association, holding public meetings, etc., is conceded". He also extolled Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia's defiance, of the Goan Government's order, and proclaimed that Lohia had "thereby rendered a service to the cause of civil liberty and especially to the Goans".

In the course of Satyagraha Movements, both in South Africa and India, Gandhi and his associates stood up to condemn and defy the unnecessary restrictions imposed by the Governmental authorities on their exercise of the freedom of movement. They also endeavoured to persuade the rulers of princely States to allow Indians from other parts of the country to enter their states without hindrance, provided, of course, their objective was not to create lawlessness. He fought for these rights for he considered them to be essential for awakening the ignorant masses to a sense of their duty as citizens.

His fight for the South African Indians' right to the freedom of residence was only a corollary to his demand for the freedom of movement. He was opposed to the South African Government's policy to confine Indians to particular locations and bazaars just because they belonged to the coloured races of Asia. He incessantly asked the Government to abrogate the legislation that imposes disabilities on them "because they wear a brown skin". He proclaimed that the imposition of such restrictions was not only inhuman but also undeserved. Indians, he thought, had earned this right, in common with the original inhabitants by voluntarily and cheerfully serving South Africa - the land of their adoption.

It was in order to check flagrant violations of the citizens' earned rights that Gandhi insisted on the recognition of their additional right to legal remedies. He wanted that the citizens should have a right to obtain legal and political protection against acts of violence, compulsion or intimidation. The citizens should rather have the constitutional right to get their fights enforced through the courts of law in cases of their violation. Once, deploring the absence of this right in the Dealers' Licences Bill of Natal, he made the following statement:

The Dealers' Licences Bill is ... the worst of all. It...gives absolute power to the licensing authorities to refuse, to issue or renew licenses without the right to the aggrieved party to appeal to the highest tribunal of justice. It is thus subversive of one of the most cherished principles the British Constitution (Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, III, p.92).

At the Round Table Conference, he specifically asked the Indian Princes to grant to their people the right to constitutional remedies, i.e. the right to get their rights enforced through the courts of law. In South Africa, he had also demanded the appellants' analogous right to see the documents on record of the court, by declaring that "if a man has a right to appeal, he ought to have a right to see the documents which are on record" (Ibid., IV, p.138).

14.5 RELIGIOUS RIGHTS

Gandhi was a staunch upholder of secularism and wanted the people to be true to their conscience. He advocated the people's right to profess, practice and propagate the religion of their choice, without any hindrance. He thought that communal animosity was a serious contravention of man's conscience, which entitles one to follow the religion of one's choice and which simultaneously obligates him to tolerate the free exercise of this right by the fellow human beings. He said:

"Let people's religions be different. You worship a Being a single Entity as Allah and another adores Him as Khuda. I worship Him as Ishwar. How does any one stand to lose (by this arrangement)? You worship facing one way and I worship facing the other. Why should I become your enemy for that reason? We all belong to the human race; we all wear the same skin; we hail from the same land. When the facts are as simple as that, it will be nothing but folly and short sightedness to bear, implacable enmity towards one another" (Ibid., XI, p.175).

He, thus, insisted that so long as men differ in temperament, their paths are bound to differ. Conversely, he rejected the possibility, and even the necessity, of a particular religion being one day recognised as common for all mankind. In his letter to Jamnadas, he observed: "Personally, I think the world as a whole will never have, and need not have, a single religion" (Ibid., XII, p.94).

His abiding faith in the conscience of man implied that every individual had the right to choose his religion and to practice and profess it without hindrance, so long as he obeys the common law of the land. He, thus, required the State to respect the liberty of individual non violent conscience, however inconvenient it may be. He thought that freedom of worship would become a farce "if interference became the order of the day".

He also wanted that everyone should have the right to study, interpret, accept or reject the tenets of any religion. Once, claiming for himself the right to study and interpret the message of Islam, he said: "Islam was not a creed to be preserved in a box. It was open to mankind to examine it and accept or reject its tenets" (Harijan, 23-2-1947).

Finally, his advocacy for the freedom of religious worship and study also enabled him to uphold the analogous right of a person to "intelligent conversion", that is, to voluntary change of belief and faith. But, he was basically opposed to forcible conversion which he thought to be a flagrant violation of the Divinity man shares with God. Once, explaining the mission of his life, he proclaimed: "Love is the basis of our friendship as it is of religion. I seek to gain Mussalman friendship by right of love. And if love persists even on the part of one community, unity will become a settled fact in our national life" (Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, XX, p.318).

14.6 ECONOMIC AND EDUCATIONAL RIGHTS

Economic Rights

In Gandhi's list of economic rights may be included the right to work, right to just and adequate wages, and the right to hold and dispose off property. His discovery of unemployment as a major symptom of India's social disorganisation had impelled him to ask the people to claim the basic necessities of their life only after rendering physical labour as per their capacity and choice. Conversely, he enjoined the State to guarantee the right to work to all unemployed men and women so that they may be able to earn their bread by the sweat of their brow. The work ensured to each individual should, as far as possible, be of his choice. Not only that, the State should not force any citizen into work, it should also not force any one to do the work which is not his choice. In other words, every citizen should be ensured the right to work of his choice.

In his enthusiasm to expect the State to recognise the citizen's right to have the work of their choice, Gandhi would go to the extent of requiring the State to provide to every bodied person a variety of employment opportunities so that he may opt for the work of his choice. He once said: "A variety of work should be put before the people and they should have one month's notice that if they made no choice of occupations suggested, nor did they suggest some other acceptable occupation but declined to do any work, though their bodies were fit, they would not be able to give them doles after the expiry of the notice. It was wrong for any citizen to accept rations without some physical work" (The Hindu, 11-02-1947). The idea is that no able bodied citizen should live on charity and that there must always be enough occupations in a well ordered State for all those who are willing to work.

Though Gandhi allowed each individual to claim the occupation or profession of his choice, he was not radical enough to reject the traditional varna or class system under which each individual followed "the profession of his ancestors for earning his livelihood". He wanted to retain the varna system, which divided the Hindus into *brahmanas* (teachers of religion), *kshatriyas* (soldiers), *vaishyas* (merchants or farmers), and *shudras* (servants or employees, earlier termed as "untouchables"), for he believed that every person inherits the particular characteristics and qualities of his progenitors. At the same time, he thought that *varna* does not compel anyone to follow the parental occupation against his aptitude. It rather allows each individual to determine his occupation or profession in terms of his physical ability, mental aptitude and personal choice. Such a liberal interpretation of the traditional *varna* system of the Hindu society enabled Gandhi to synchronise with it the individual's democratic right to work.

Gandhi also upheld the citizen's right to limited hours of work. He wanted that nobody should be compelled to work for more than eight hours a day, so that he has his earned rest and leisure to look after himself, his family and to render to the society whatever service he can. Eight hours work should secure to each worker just and adequate wages (Gandhi, Delhi Diary, 1948, p.200). The State should see to it that the wages for such an honest work are sufficient to ensure satisfaction of worker's basic needs of food, clothing and shelter. This should be the minimum that the State should ensure to every one irrespective of the nature of his work. Over and above this basic minimum, the wages could vary according to the needs of the worker concerned. Gandhi also upheld the individual's analogous right to hold and dispose of the wealth he thus earns. He should be allowed to acquire, hold and dispose of property. If, however, the state wants to take

over his earned property for public purposes, he should be duly compensated. Gandhi fought for securing these economic rights to his countrymen in the course of his Satyagraha movements in South Africa, Ahmedabad, Bardoli and Kheda.

Educational Rights

Gandhi attached primary importance to the problem of education. He knew that swaraj and democracy have no meaning in the context of a society in which the majority of the people are illiterate. He, thus, felt the imminent necessity of requiring the state to promote education and to speed up the literacy campaigns. At the same time, he was eager to relate education to the conditions of life in India. The scheme of education he hammered out is popularly known as the Wardha Scheme of Education, after the name of the place where a two-day conference was held in October 1937 to discuss and examine his propositions.

In order to enable every citizen to understand and experience the real meaning of swaraj and democracy, his scheme provided for the right to a seven-year free and compulsory vocational primary education. In the beginning, Gandhi had desired that education at all levels should be optional and not compulsory. He thought that compulsion was unnecessary if the people wanted education. It would rather be harmful if they did not opt to be educated. However, the stern reality of mass illiteracy in India ultimately led him to allow compulsory education at the primary level. On the eve of the Wardha Conference, he declared:

"I am a firm believer in the principle of free and compulsory primary education for India. I also hold that we shall realize this only by teaching the children a useful vocation and utilizing it as a means for cultivating their mental, physical and spiritual faculties" (Harijan, 09-10-1937). He wanted the state to make the primary education free so that the obstacles from the way of those who cannot afford it may be removed. In other words, "education to be universal must... be free." He also insisted that this state managed compulsory and free vocational primary education should be spread over a period of seven years, between the age group of seven to fourteen, so that at the end of this period the students become self-supporting.

In his scheme of education, individual's rights to higher vocational education are to be ensured by the state in collaboration with the private enterprise that would pay for the training of the persons required by them. Gandhi wanted to leave higher vocational education to be financed by the private enterprise so that the universities do not cost the state much, practically nothing beyond the cost of running a central education department. The rationale of leaving higher vocational education with the private enterprise was two-fold. In the first place, he had realised that "no government can provide fully for all the education which the people need". Secondly, he would not like the state to pay from the general revenue for all higher education also because its purpose is narrow and demand limited. He summed up his conclusions as follows: "1) I am not opposed to education even of the highest type attainable in this world; 2) The state must pay for it whenever it has definite use for it; 3) I am opposed to all higher education being paid from the general revenue." Thus, he subscribed to the maxim: "He who needs the expertise shall pay for its training too" (Ibid., 9-7-1938).

Gandhi did not deny to women the right to study any branch of human knowledge. He, however, observed that they traditionally are the masters of household and should devote themselves to the education primarily of domestic affairs. The nature of women's biological

and social functions being different from that of men, they should be taught management of the home, the things they should or should not do during pregnancy, and the nursing and care of children.

Gandhi made no distinction between man and woman in so far as their educational rights were concerned. He was uncompromising in upholding the equality of the sexes and was eager to restore to women their traditional and natural right to rule the home. Gandhi also championed the right of the educationally backward classes to special treatment in matters of education so that they may also come up to the level of the educated ones and enjoy their rights equally with others. They should be free to preserve and develop their own script, language and culture.

14.7 RIGHTS AND DUTIES

There is a well known incident which illustrates Gandhi's attitude towards duties and rights. H. G. Wells once drew up a Charter of Human Rights and sent it to Gandhi asking for his subscription to it. Gandhi cabled him back: "Begin with a charter of Duties of man, and I promise the rights will follow as spring follows winter" (Ibid., 13-10-1940). His reply amounted to putting a premium on the duties of man. He thought that the true source of rights is duty and urged his countrymen to discharge their various obligations willingly and cheerfully. He upheld the *Gita's* gospel of '*nishkama karma*' by giving it a fresh interpretation. Explaining its dictum of *karmanyevadhikaraste ma phalesu kadacana*, he observed: "Action alone is thine. Leave thou the fruit severely alone. *Action is duty; fruit is right.*" This was an attempt only to "correlate every right to some of corresponding duty to be first performed". He believed that "those only are true rights which flow from due performance of one's duties".

14.8 SUMMARY

In consonance with his views on the cultural inheritance of man, Gandhi also subscribed to a coterie of natural rights, describing them variously as "birth rights", "primary rights", or "inherent rights". These rights are, however, natural only in the sense in which Green uses the term "natural", that is, "they arise out of and are necessary for the fulfilment of a moral capacity without which a man would not be a man". In other words, these are natural in the sense of being innate.

Gandhi, thus, simultaneously subscribed to two different theories of rights, namely, the rights which the people earn by first performing the corresponding duties, and the natural rights which they deserve instinctly, i.e. by virtue of their cultural heritage. Put together, these constitute his charter of earned rights. Despite his conviction that "Rights accrue automatically to him who duly performs his duties", Gandhi admitted the hard reality that only those succeed in actually securing the deserved rights who shout, strive and are ready to sacrifice their all.

14.9 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. Discuss Gandhi's Views on Human Rights.
2. Rights and Duties are two sides of the same coin. Comment.
3. What are the different types of rights that man can enjoy as basic rights?

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Young India, 1919 to 1931.

UNIT 15 GANDHI'S PROGRAMME ON SOCIAL REFORMS

Structure

- 15.1 Introduction
 - Aims and Objectives
- 15.2 Removal of Untouchability
 - 15.2.1 Temple Entry
- 15.3 Caste System
- 15.4 Communal Problems
- 15.5 Dignity of Womanhood
 - 15.5.1 Ill-treatment of Women
 - 15.5.2 Child Marriage
 - 15.5.3 Dowry and Purdah System
 - 15.5.4 Other Evils
- 15.6 Social Equality
- 15.7 Prohibition
- 15.8 Summary
- 15.9 Terminal Questions
 - Suggested Readings

15.1 INTRODUCTION

Gandhi's contribution in the field of social reform was important for the reconstruction of the life of the nation. It can be said that the whole of his constructive programme was devoted to social reform. When Gandhi advised the Congress to accept office in the provinces under the 1935 Act, he told the Congress Ministers, that he expected them to carry forward the constructive programme, as far as it lay with them. Politicians, who did not believe that national independence could be achieved through truthful and non violent means, considered Gandhi as merely a social reformer, doing good work, but having no practical conception of politics. Even the Swarajists, who believed that they could non cooperate from within the Councils, thought, during the interval between the suspension of satyagraha on account of violence at Chauri Chaura and its resumption in 1930, that Gandhi was merely concerned with social reform and had ceased to take interest in politics and considered Gandhi as merely a social reformer. The Mahatma did not believe that the imperial ambitions of Britain were alone responsible for our slavery. It was the neglect of national duty, the social reforms which he considered as *dharma* that was primarily responsible for it. The constructive programme was devised to reform our national character. A reformed India would be a free India.

Aims and Objectives

After studying this Unit, you should be able to understand

- Gandhi's approach to social reforms; and
- How a reformed India would have been a free India.

15.2 REMOVAL OF UNTOUCHABILITY

The first and foremost item of this reform was the removal of untouchability, a cruel and inhuman institution. It violates human dignity and blinds the sensibility of both the oppressor and the oppressed. Untouchability was against the spirit of democracy and also raised economic problems. The untouchables were the poorest section of Indian society. Their avenues of employment were strictly limited; they lived apart, in unhygienic surroundings, on the outskirts of villages and cities. Though they were Hindus and believed in and worshipped Hindu gods and goddesses, they were not allowed to enter Hindu temples. Public institutions like schools, hotels, hostels, etc., were closed to them. Gandhi rightly felt that they who denied justice to those who suffered injustice at their hands had no right to demand justice for themselves from their oppressors.

In tackling the problem of untouchability Gandhi did not call upon the untouchables to join in the struggle for the assertion of their human rights. They were even incapable then of doing so. They took their lowly position as having been ordained by God. During the campaign against untouchability, the so called higher castes often visited their lowly homes. If they asked for water from them, they would refuse to give it, saying that it would be '*adharma*' for them to offer water to high caste people. It was such a degradation to which a large portion of the population was reduced. Gandhi, therefore, called upon the caste Hindus to make all the sacrifice necessary for the removal of untouchability. He said that they would thus be rendering only belated justice for the grievous injury inflicted by their ancestors on the untouchables through the centuries.

About untouchability Gandhi said: "To remove untouchability is a penance that caste Hindus owe to Hinduism and to themselves. The purification required is not of 'untouchables' but of the so called superior castes. There is no vice that is special to the 'untouchables', not even dirt and insanitation. It is the arrogance which blinds superior Hindus, to their own blemishes and which magnifies those of the downtrodden brethren whom they have suppressed and whom they keep under suppression. Religions like nations are being weighed in the balance. God's grace and revelation are the monopoly of no race or nation. They descend equally upon all who wait upon God. That religion and that nation will be blotted out from the face of the earth which pins its faith to injustice, untruth or violence."

He poured out the anguish of his soul when he said : "I do not want to be reborn. But if I have to be reborn, I should be born an untouchable, so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings, and the affronts levelled at them, in order that I may endeavour to free myself and them from that miserable condition. I, therefore, pray that if I should be born again, I should do so not as a Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya or Shudra but as an Atishudra." In framing the Congress constitution he made it a condition precedent for anybody joining the national organisation that he declare himself against untouchability. This was incorporated in the annual pledge that every Congressman had to take.

15.2.1 Temple Entry

The equality that Gandhi claimed for the untouchables in Hindu society included the right to enter Hindu temples. It did not matter to him if these temples were built or endowed by caste Hindus. This insistence of Gandhi on temple entry was misunderstood by some intellectuals. This was generally due to the influence of Marxist thought, which explains every human activity and institution in economic terms. Such an interpretation is manifestly untenable in the case of untouchability in India, as is the racial and colour prejudice in Western communities, in their homelands and their colonies. Untouchability in India, as the race and colour problems in the West, rests upon the idea of the superiority of one section of people over another on account of their birth. The untouchable continues to profess the Hindu religion, worships the same gods and goddesses but is denied access to the Hindu temples. Once the untouchable is allowed entry into Hindu temples, the stigma attached to his community will no more be there, being deprived of its so-called religious sanction. About this Gandhiji says: "Temple entry is the one spiritual act that would constitute the message of freedom to the 'untouchables' and assure them that they are not outcasts before God". "It is not a question of Harijans asserting their right of temple entry or claiming it. They may or may not want to enter that temple even when it is declared open to them. But it is the bounden duty of every caste Hindu to secure that opening for Harijans".

"If all that there is in the universe is pervaded by God, that is to say, if the Brahmana and the Bhangi, the learned man and the scavenger, the Ezhava and the Pariah, no matter what caste they belong to- if all these are pervaded by Lord God, in the light of this Mantra, there is none that is high and none that is low, all are absolutely equal, equal because all are the creatures of that Creator. And this is not a philosophical thing to be dished out to Brahmanas or Kshatriyas, but it enunciates an eternal truth which admits of no reduction, no palliation. And if that is so, how can anyone here dare to arrogate superiority to himself or herself over any other human being? I tell you, therefore, that if this Mantra holds good, if there is any man or woman here who believes that the temples are defined by those who are called Avarnas, that person, I declare, would be guilty of a grave sin".

Gandhi made it a point not to enter a Hindu temple which was not open to Harijans. His religion did not require of him to enter a temple. But he sometimes did it as a mark of courtesy. Even this courtesy he did not extend to the temples where Harijans had no free access. Gandhi set up the Harijan Sevak Sangh, which was to work for the removal of all their disabilities. This organisation continues to function even to this day. It consists not only of politicians but also all those who on humanitarian grounds are against untouchability. To set an example, Gandhi brought a Harijan family to live in the Ashram. He adopted their daughter as his own. He also blessed all the marriages that were celebrated between Harijans and caste Hindus. Some of these marriages took place in his own Ashram. In 1932 he even endangered his life to see that the disabilities of the Harijans were removed while they remained in the Hindu fold. He opposed the award of the British Prime Minister giving them separate electorates. He knew that a vast majority of them did not want to abandon their religion in spite of the fact that they could have equality with other citizens by merely changing it. Then even the Hindus would not regard them as untouchables.

15.3 CASTE SYSTEM

The movement against the caste system in India is almost as old as caste itself. Buddhism and Jainism were reformist movements which were partly aimed against caste. The Bhakti movement of the middle-ages was mainly directed against the caste system. Sikhism was similarly opposed to caste. The various reformist movements in the second half of the Nineteenth Century like the Brahma Samaj, Prarthana Samaj, Arya Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission, Theosophical Society, etc. all believed in human brotherhood and the leveling up of Hindu society.

Gandhi separates what he considers to be the inessentials of the caste system from its essentials, rejects the former and declares the latter to be beneficial for society. He tackles the problem on three fronts: (i) untouchability and its attendant strictures, (ii) the thousands of endogamous or semi-endogamous groups called caste, and (iii) varna or the four-fold functional division of society. He regards untouchability as 'immoral' and therefore, in need of complete eradication, caste as unnecessary and undesirable.

Gandhi believed that there is no inseparable connection between untouchability and the caste system; untouchability can be eradicated without abolishing caste altogether. He argues in favour of the abolition of the multiplicity of castes and their reduction into the four varnas; the eradication of untouchability is not dependent even on this proposed simplification of the caste system, not to speak of its abolition altogether. Gandhi had asked for a message from Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the leader of the untouchables, for the inaugural number of Harijan. Ambedkar refused to send any message, and instead sent a statement for publication in the inaugural issue of the journal. Dr. Ambedkar observed untouchability as a by-product of the caste system, and it could be abolished only when the 'odious and vicious dogma' of caste was altogether abolished. Gandhi published this statement in the first issue of Harijan with the following comment:

"As to the burden of his message, the opinion he holds about the caste system is shared by many educated Hindus. I have not, however, been able to share that opinion. I do not believe that the caste system, even as distinguished from varnashrama, to be an 'odious and vicious dogma'. It has its limitations and its defects, but there is nothing sinful about it, as there is about untouchability, and if it is a by-product of the caste system it is only in the same sense that an ugly growth is of a body, or weeds of a crop. It is as wrong to destroy caste because of the outcaste, as it would be to destroy a body because of an ugly growth in it, or a crop because of the weeds' (Harijan, 11-2-1933).

Yet, since in practice the caste system represents a social hierarchy based on the idea of high and low, and since it is an unnecessary outgrowth of the four varnas which alone are fundamental and essential to the organisation of a society, he considers the multiplicity of castes to be undesirable and superfluous. "The division, however, into innumerable castes is an unwarranted liberty taken with the doctrine (of varnashrama). The four divisions are all-sufficing".

15.4 COMMUNAL PROBLEMS

Gandhi was a protagonist of the concept of common good of all the inhabitants of India; he believed in the spiritual unity and equality of mankind and in Hindu-Muslim unity on moral grounds. He never made distinctions among people on racial, religious and caste

grounds. His Satyagraha in South Africa was launched to redeem the civic rights of the Indian community amongst whom the Muslims constituted a majority and controlled the larger share of wealth.

Gandhi supported the Khilafat movement because he deeply felt that it was initiated on the grounds of restoring justice and also because it offered “an opportunity of uniting Hindus and Muslims as would not arise in a hundred years”. In a letter to the Viceroy in 1920, he wrote: “I consider that, as a staunch Hindu wishing to live on terms of the closest friendship with my Mussalman countrymen, I should be an unworthy son of India if I did not stand by them in their hour of trial”.

In 1920, Gandhi had emphasised Hindu-Muslim unity as a precondition for Swaraj. He had said that Hindus and Muslims should unite on the issue of fighting for freedom. This unity would have hastened the process of the achievement of political independence and would have negated the cry for the partition of the country. Gandhi did not advocate Hindu-Muslim unity mainly for social and political reasons. In 1924, he undertook a twenty-one day fast for Hindu-Muslim unity and claimed that the fast was dictated by God and thus was the call of the highest duty. In the eyes of God, all men are equally his children and Gandhi was deeply anguished at the growing communal schism and tensions in the country.

The solution that Gandhi provided for the Hindu-Muslim problems was threefold. First, a sincere and devout understanding of the fundamental moral bases of the two religions was essential. He himself had studied Sale's translation of the Koran in the early years of his stay in South Africa. He ‘learnt of the Prophet's greatness and bravery and austere living’. He read Washington Irving's *Life of Mahomet and his Successors*. From the chapter entitled ‘Comparative Study of Religions’ in his *Autobiography*, it is clear that Gandhi read Carlyle's chapter on Muhammad's practical instinct as reformer and his monotheism have been ‘a constant strength and support to him’. C. F. Andrews mentions that for Gandhi, Ali, Hassan and Hussain were representatives of the concept of ‘suffering injury without retaliation’ (Andrews, 1931, pp.163-64). Gandhi was encouraged to find that in moments of despair and confusion, Muhammad also fasted and prayed. He admired the patriarchal simplicity of the early Caliphs of Islam. In 1924 Gandhi wrote: “When the West was sunk in darkness a bright star rose in the eastern firmament and gave light and comfort to a groaning world. Islam is not a false religion. Let Hindus study it reverently, and they will love it even as I do”. He believed that communal struggles are rooted in an insufficient understanding of the tenets of the two religions and cultures. He stated that to say that “Hinduism and Islam represent two antagonistic cultures” is a denial of God for “I believe with my whole soul that the God of the Quran is also the God of the Gita”. He accepted that all the religious scriptures of the world should be studied in a spirit of genuine humility. He disclaimed the use of religious scriptures as armoury for pugnacious disquisitions and sectarian animosities. He preached, instead, a process of “heart-unity”. Gandhi opined, in the Koran, non-violence is sanctioned as a duty while violence is permitted only as a matter of necessity.

The second basic point in Gandhi's approach to the communal problem was that he pleaded for generosity on the part of the majority community. He did not subscribe to the mathematics of the exact allocation of seats and shares in strict proportion to the numbers of the two communities. Instead, he wanted an attitude of generosity to be cultivated. He felt that being in a majority did impose some obligations and the majority community had to inspire the minorities with confidence in their bona fides. They had to

adopt even an attitude of self-sacrifice. He was not tired of eulogising the self-sacrificing martyrdom of Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi in April 1931, at Kanpur, in the cause of settling Hindu-Muslim tensions and riots.

The third point in Gandhi's philosophy of communal harmony is the pursuit of the Constructive Programme by both the communities. Such a common social and economic action was bound to generate in their hearts an enhanced regard for independence. The Constructive Programme was bound to bring together the masses and the classes, and foster unity of hearts based on mutual interest. It was clear that the common pursuit of the Constructive Programme as a method of Hindu-Muslim unity would generate a process of the growth of heart unity. For the promotion of lasting unity what was needed was not a promulgation of a decree by the foreign government but the pursuit of the obligations of a common citizenship as implied in the Constructive Programme.

Gandhi had regarded Hindu-Muslim unity as a matter of pre-eminent national importance. He was never tired of repeating that they were blood brothers born of the same sacred soil of Hindustan and nourished by the same water. Regarding each other as natural enemies was the denial of the central divinity lodged in the heart of all living beings. The advent of British imperialism wedded to the cult of 'divide and rule' and driven the wedge of acrimony and suspicion among them. He believed that during Muslim rule, Hindus and Muslims lived more in peace than under British rule. Their unity could convey the gospel of reconciliation to the world.

15.5 DIGNITY OF WOMANHOOD

Gandhi worked for the restoration of the status of India's womanhood which had deteriorated appallingly in a degenerating society. Gross violations of the dignity of a woman veiled under customs and traditions, violated woman's equal rights with man. Gandhi succeeded in lifting, to some extent, the degrading burden placed unjustly on the Indian woman. Gandhi revolted against the subordination of women: 'By sheer force of vicious custom even the most ignorant and worthless men have been enjoying superiority over women which they do not deserve and ought not to have.'

Illiteracy is no justification for the denial of their 'equal and natural rights' as human beings. He pointed an accusing finger at 'the glaring inequalities to which they are subjected' in being, for instance, incapacitated to inherit anything. 'The root of the evil lies much deeper than most people realise. It lies in man's greed of power and fame, and deeper still in mutual lust . . . 'She should labour under no legal disability not suffered by man' (Young India, 17-10-1929).

15.5.1 Ill-treatment of Women

What came in for real scathing remarks from him was the positive ill treatment of women. 'We know by painful experience of what is daily happening in India, that there are husbands enough who regard their wives as their property like their cattle or household furniture, and therefore think they have the right to beat them as they would their cattle.' 'More often than not the woman's time is taken up, not by the performance of essential domestic duties, but catering for the egoistic pleasures of her lord and master... To me this slavery of woman is a symbol of our barbarism... It is high time that our womankind was freed from this incubus.' 'Excessive subordination of the wife to the husband.... This has resulted in the husband sometimes usurping and exercising authority that reduces him to the level of the beast' (Harijan, 5-6-1940).

15.5.2 Child Marriage

Gandhi lashed mercilessly against some evil customs in Indian society, such as child marriage etc. 'It is irreligion not religion to give religious sanction to a brutal custom' he said of the evils of child marriage. He even defied the Hindu scriptures when they gave sanction to it. The health of the race, the morality of the children involved and so many other reason, he said, would induce us to hold it as 'sinful' to give children in marriage. He spoke against it by drawing on his own experience and also on the appalling statistics he had before him of its consequent evils. He spoke against forced marriages and forced widowhood, especially of teenage widowhood. He was all for 'voluntary widowhood . . . which adds grace and dignity to life, sanctifies the home and uplifts religion itself.' But he could not bear the 'enormity of the wrong done to the Hindu girl widows...Widowhood imposed by the religion or custom is an unbearable yoke, and defiles the home by secret vice and degrades religion', especially when widowhood is so common in child marriages. Besides it makes one 'lose sight of elementary justice'.

15.5.3 Dowry and Purdah System

The system of dowry, for Gandhi, 'was nothing but the sale of girls'. Speaking of the evils of dowry, for instance disposing of young children to old men by needy parents, accused the community of committing 'a double sin'. 'Any young man who makes dowry a condition for marriage discredits his education and his country and dishonours womanhood.'

He waged war also on the system of purdah. Refuting the charge that it was meant to protect the chastity of women, he said: 'Chastity is not a hothouse growth. It cannot be super imposed. It cannot be protected by the surrounding wall of the purdah. It must grow from within, and to be worth anything it must be capable of withstanding every unsought temptation. It must be as defiant as Sita's. It must be a very poor thing that cannot stand the gaze of men. Men, to be men, must be able to trust their womenfolk even as the latter are compelled to trust them'. In 1927 he spoke against the purdah saying: 'It pained and humiliated me deeply. I thought of the wrong done by men to the women of India, by clinging to a barbarous custom which, whatever use it might have had when it was first introduced, had now become totally useless and was doing incalculable harm to the country' (Young India, 3-2-1927).

15.5.4 Other Evils

There are many other fields in which Gandhi tried to uphold the dignity of the woman. Thus for example he continually railed against obscene literature which had reached 'an altogether wrong apotheosis' of women, thus degrading their nature. He did his best to counteract the practice of prostitution which he called 'a life of shame', a life of 'debasing indulgence', against which 'curse' he hoped 'humanity will rise. So too, he pitted himself against the protagonists of contraceptives who asked the Indian woman to violate 'the sacredness of her body'.

Behind all his holy zeal there lay the implicit conviction that women are as much human as, men and hence they must enjoy perfect equality of rights pertaining to human nature as such. He said: 'I am uncompromising in the matter of woman's rights. In my opinion she should labour under no legal disability not suffered by man. He emphasised the point repeatedly 'She has the right to participate in the minutest detail of activity of man, and she has the same right of freedom and liberty as he.'

'Man and woman are equal in status, but are not identical. They are a peerless pair being complementary to one another.....' Of course he admitted the 'point of bifurcation' in them. Thus he said: 'Whilst both are fundamentally one, it is also equally true that in the form there is a vital difference between the two. Hence the vocation of the two must be also different.' The woman by vocation is destined to rear children. And it would be wrong to forsake that work altogether for another. Gandhi felt that 'she is entitled to a supreme place in her own sphere of activity as man is in his' and is unjust in denying her that right.

Gandhi did succeed in bringing back honour to India's womanhood. He asked them to 'forget that they belong to the weaker sex'; he convinced them that 'the economic and moral salvation of India' rested mainly on them. 'The future of India lies on your knees, for you will nurture the future generation.' He drew away thousands of them into his political campaign; scores of hundreds answered his call to the satyagraha and swadeshi drive; they lived up to his definition of woman – 'embodiment of sacrifice and suffering' by giving their all to fight for truth with him. The fearlessness they displayed and their capacity to 'work wonders on behalf of the motherland', rebounded in getting back the honour and dignity that had increasingly been denied to them in modern Indian society.

15.6 SOCIAL EQUALITY

Gandhi was driven by the basic conviction that no man can claim superiority just by his birth. It is the equality of the human rights derived from one common Father whom, we have in God that postulates a social equality among men. And due to his persuasion, he threw himself headlong into the struggle for social justice. This struggle was specially seen in his efforts to reinstate the Indian woman in her rightful position, and to purge the scourge of untouchability from India's soil.

Gandhi was too much of a realist to rule out every difference in social status. He admitted some inequalities in property and opportunities and saw the necessity of a social hierarchy. 'We own no master but Daridranarayana, and if for the time being we own human superiors, we do so voluntarily well knowing that no organisation can be carried on without discipline. Discipline presupposes an organising head. He is only the first among equals. He is there on sufferance. But whilst he is there, he is entitled to the whole hearted allegiance and uncompromising obedience of all the fellow servants' (Harijan, 22-6-1935). Though this was said in connection with some 'humanitarian services' there is no doubt that it well expresses the social aspect of his philosophy.

Coming to the positive meaning of his social equality he says, 'I do not believe that all class distinctions can be obliterated. I believe in the doctrine of equality as taught by Lord Krishna in the Gita. The Gita teaches us that the members of all the four castes should be treated on an equal basis. It does not prescribe the same *dharma* for the brahmin as for the bhangi. But it insists that the latter should be entitled to the same measure of consideration and esteem as the former with all his superior learning.' This equality derives from 'God, who is the creator of all.' 'All are one in the eyes of God', and so He, 'the Father in heaven will deal with us all with even handed justice'. Therefore, 'there cannot be greater ignorance than this; birth and observance of forms cannot determine one's superiority or inferiority. Character is the only determining factor. God did not create men with the badge of superiority or inferiority, and no scripture which labels a human being as inferior or untouchable, because of his or her birth, can command our allegiance. It

is a denial of God and of Truth which is God' (ibid, 31-8-1934). Gandhi held that man's essential dignity, which he has in common with all men, derives neither from his birth nor his occupation but from his very human nature, which thus entitles him to all basic human rights and to an indiscriminating justice.

15.7 PROHIBITION

Gandhi was a tireless campaigner against alcohol and an open advocate of prohibition as a national policy. He considered the consumption of alcohol as a social evil, on par with the reprehensible practice of untouchability, and totally inimical to the pursuit of nonviolence. Gandhi's public opposition to consumption of alcohol dated back to his days in South Africa when it was reported that 'one of the reasons for disfranchisement of Indians in South Africa was because they either supplied liquor to the natives or consumed it in very large quantities themselves'. Writing in the *Vegetarian*, 21 February 1891, Gandhi said: "Alcohol is one of the most greatly-felt evils of the British Rule an enemy of mankind and a curse of civilization. The poor, as everywhere, are the greatest sufferers. It is they who spend what little they earn in buying alcohol instead of buying good food and other necessities. It is that wretched poor man who has to starve his family, who has to break the sacred trust of looking after his children, if any, in order to drink himself into misery and premature death" (Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, 1, pp.29-30).

The use of alcoholic drinks is habit-forming and there is always the possible danger of excess. It is more so among the poor whose power of resistance to a bad habit is the lowest. Also, they can ill-afford to indulge in this expensive habit. They generally waste in drink their earnings, which could be profitably used for raising the standard of living of their families and promoting the welfare of their children. Often the labourer as soon as he gets his wage visits the grog shop before he goes home. The consequence is that the family lives in chronic poverty and indebtedness. Thus the innocent are made to suffer for the guilty. In the case of most people, especially the poor, intoxicating drinks impair their intelligence which distinguishes man from the animal. It also deadens one's moral sensitivity. Gandhi says: "Having identified myself with labour, I know what ruin drink has brought to the homes of labourers given to drink. I know that they will not touch liquor if it was not within their reach. We have contemporaneous evidence that drinkers themselves are in many cases asking for prohibition".

15.8 SUMMARY

As a matter of fact, the social reforms were meant to revolutionise the nation's outlook in all the spheres of social life, social in its most comprehensive sense. His was a comprehensive revolution as it was based upon the revaluation of our basic values. He wanted to train and discipline the nation. Each item of the social reforms is designed to have a worth and value by and in itself apart from its use as training for freedom fight. It strengthened the nation by eliminating from its life some of the drawbacks in its character which, Gandhi held, were largely responsible for the slavery.

15.9 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. Discuss Gandhi's approach to social reforms.
2. "A reformed India would be a free India". Analyse in terms of Gandhian perspective.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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Young India, 1919 to 1931.

UNIT 16 SATYAGRAHA FOR OUR TIMES

Structure

- 16.1 Introduction
 - Aims and Objectives
- 16.2 Satyagraha Reconsidered
- 16.3 Conflict Resolution
- 16.4 Active Citizenship and Good Government
- 16.5 Social Justice
- 16.6 Sustainable Development
- 16.7 Summary
- 16.8 Terminal Questions
 - Suggested Readings

16.1 INTRODUCTION

Mahatma Gandhi has never fitted into the conventional assessments of public significance that are favoured by politicians, administrators, and historians. Nor indeed do his achievements easily correspond with the measures of lasting social success that are relied upon by activists or the general public. Gandhi tends to be remembered as ‘a saintly personality’ (Singh, 2007a, p. 252), in other words as an otherworldly historical figure who is necessarily disengaged from the pressing issues of contemporary life. Likewise Satyagraha (first launched by Gandhi in South Africa during 1906, and applied in India from 1917), which represents ‘the very essence of the Gandhi’s life’ (Singh, 2007a, Foreword), tends to be thought of as an historical event that is distant from today’s most pressing social, political, and ecological concerns. Satyagraha, seemingly, has relevance only in relation to the history of Indian independence, and perhaps also deserves a footnote in the early history of the South African freedom movement. In today’s world even Gandhi’s admirers sometimes concede that his ‘teachings have been largely forgotten or distorted, torn out of context and ridiculed’ (Singh, 2008, pp. 6-7).

In previous Courses and Units, you have studied the conceptual and historical elements of both Gandhi and Satyagraha. In this Unit we will consider their relevance today, in terms of what Satyagraha might still offer the contemporary world. What you will need to consider is the extent to which Satyagraha transcends Gandhi’s own lifetime (1869-1948), and – with more or less explicit acknowledgement of the Mahatma – can continue to have practical application for us today. In doing so, it will become quickly evident to you that, without in any way discounting the importance of Satyagraha in India between 1917 and 1947, its place in the movement for Indian independence from British colonialism represents only a minor part of Gandhi’s achievements as a Satyagrahi. Rather than being limited to non-violent protest against British rule in India, ‘Satyagraha is a law of universal application’ across time and place. As Gandhi declared, ‘Beginning with the family its use can be extended to every other circle’ of human interaction (Gandhi, 1946, p. 64).

In order to test this hypothesis and thus gauge the ongoing relevance of Satyagraha today, it is necessary also to consider whether Satyagraha, as Gandhi first enunciated it in 1906, or described it immediately before his martyrdom in 1948, can be applied unmodified in the 21st century, or whether it should be adjusted to the changed contexts of the present day. Gandhi, for example, spoke forcefully and perhaps rhetorically (on a general level) about the evils of modern civilisation, modern technologies, and modern cities, and (on a personal level) about the desirability of celibacy, teetotalism, vegetarianism, and khadi. Should these strictures be taken as absolutes, regardless of time, place, and culture? Mahadev Desai said of Gandhian thought in his edition of *Hind Swaraj* that ‘the whole process is one of endless evolution’ (Gandhi, 1938, p. 6). If this is so, it would ‘be doing a disservice to [Gandhi] if we force the application of his ideas unchanged on situations, which have altered radically’ [...] We must never forget that all that Gandhi did was to put forward from an astonishingly fertile mind a number of tentative hypotheses to be tested in the crucible of time and to be accepted or rejected, amended or added to’ (Singh, 2008, p. 9). But the task of translating into relevant present-day situations the ‘dream of the Mahatma is [among] the biggest challenge[s] before us in the 21st Century’; it requires us to reassert his vision for ‘empowering the poor, of bringing women into the mainstream, the importance of civil society, the need to take a holistic approach including the allied and spiritual dimensions for moving towards a good and sustainable society’ (Singh, 2007b, p. 4).

At an international conference in Delhi, held by the Indian National Congress in 2007 to commemorate the centenary of Satyagraha, delegates from around the world pledged to perpetuate its legacy, and apply it in such fields as conflict resolution and peace building, poverty eradication, people’s empowerment, and cross-cultural tolerance and understanding. Congress President Sonia Gandhi suggested that the moral force of Satyagraha, which had first been harnessed during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s to free India from colonialism, could be harnessed again across the world in support of freedom, justice, and dignity. She suggested that ‘In a world riven with ethnic and religious conflict, terrorism, and growing emphasis on economic prosperity at the cost of human, social and environmental factors, his philosophy provides tangible answers to many of the dilemmas and problems of modern society’ (Sharma, 2007, p.13). She concluded that ‘It would, I suggest, be a grave error to write off the Gandhian approach as irrelevant to our age... The challenge for us now is to find creative inspiration from the Gandhian way to evolve Satyagraha appropriate to our times’ (Sharma, 2007, p. 25). The Reverend Jesse Jackson, when he delivered the Gandhi Memorial Lecture in 2008, declared that ‘Mahatma Gandhi’s legacy is alive today, even after 60 years of his martyrdom. His dreams for democracy, decolonization, human rights, his quest to end barbaric enmity based upon class, tribe, race and gender, has gained tremendous momentum in the current scenario. Nuclear war, terrorism and corruption remain our threats; non-violence and satyagraha (soul force) remain our therapy, and the only window from which the peace we seek is possible’ (Jackson, 2008, p. 61).

Aims and Objectives

After reading this Unit, you should be able to understand

- The philosophical and historical elements of Satyagraha as it emerged in South Africa and India during the first half of the twentieth century;
- Its application to the contemporary world;

- The implications of Satyagraha for present-day global good citizenship, good government, and ecological sustainability.

16.2 SATYAGRAHA RECONSIDERED

It has been said that Gandhi's 'greatest gift to the world is the gospel of *Satyagraha*' (Singh, 2008, p.8), which rests in turn upon what Gandhi called 'the two cardinal principles' of truth and non-violence' (Gandhi, 1940a, p.303). But what are the implications of this gift for the modern world? When Gandhi first coined the term in 1906 he had sought to encapsulate the concept of 'holding on to Truth', and in doing so he equated Satyagraha with 'Truth-force', 'Love-force', and 'Soul-force' (Gandhi, 1921, p. 3; Gandhi, 1920, p. 6). *Satya* is derived from the Sanskrit for truth (and ultimately God), and *grah* means to grab, cling to, or hold fast to. Gandhi explained that 'The word *Satya* (Truth) is derived from *Sat*, which means 'being'. Nothing is or exists in reality except Truth. That is why *Sat* or Truth is perhaps the most important name of God. In fact it is more correct to say that Truth is God, than to say that God is Truth' (Gandhi, 1932, p.3). Gandhi also regarded Satyagraha as an instrument of, and conceptualised it to accord with, the principle of Ahimsa (love or non-violence). He called Ahimsa and Truth the two sides of the one coin (Gandhi, 1932, p.7).

On one level Satyagraha operated as a 'roadmap' for the day-to-day internal running of Gandhian ashrams (the origins of which can be seen in his 1904 Phoenix Settlement and 1910 Tolstoy Farm in South Africa, and whose elements were further developed in India at Sabarmati near Ahmedabad from 1915, and at Sevagram in Maharashtra from 1936). It is largely in terms of Gandhi's protocols for appropriate ashram living that Satyagraha has been called 'the religion by which he lived and died' (Singh, 2006, p. 5). It was within the confines of the ashram that Gandhi could most freely apply his 'readiness to obey the call of Truth, my God' (Gandhi, 1933, p. 2).

But Gandhi's equation of 'God with Truth and Truth with God' (Sharma, 2008, p. 231) in his practice of Satyagraha transcended the confines of the ashram, and provides a broader roadmap to guide us towards ethical and sustainable living. Gandhi emphasised that the requirements of self-introspection and self-analysis by a Satyagrahi must be balanced by selfless effort on behalf of the disadvantaged and the downtrodden, which in turn 'requires a certain amount of action', in public affairs (Gandhi, 1929, p. 77). This broader-based Satyagraha has two key conceptual elements. The first of these is rigorous pursuit of truth and justice. The second is acknowledgement (based upon humility and broad-mindedness) that truth is relative and incrementally achieved, and thus that even a Satyagrahi's grasp of truth is fallible and must be continuously tested. As Gandhi put it, 'No man can claim that he is absolutely in the right or that a particular thing is wrong because he thinks so' (Gandhi, 1938, p. 69). It therefore follows that 'perfection ... will remain an unattainable ideal as long as we are alive, but towards which we must ceaselessly strive' (Gandhi, 1935, p. 412). Gandhi was renowned for his own 'readiness to acknowledge publicly any mistakes he has made' (Gregg, 1930, p. 310). Conceiving Satyagraha in these terms, it is inevitable that Gandhian 'morality practiced at the personal level becomes the source of inspiration at a wider social scale' (Sharma, 2008, p. 227).

This was expressed in direct social action, from the very beginnings of Satyagraha in 1906. Satyagraha as social action has three important elements. The first is courage. Advocacy of non-violence does not equate to passivity and timidity. As Gandhi explained

in *Hind Swaraj*, 'Passive resistance cannot proceed a step without fearlessness' (Gandhi, 1938, p. 74). Secondly, a corollary of non-violent courage is acceptance of personal suffering. Gandhi did not only mean the likelihood of injury, misrepresentation, imprisonment, impoverishment, and even death. He also had in mind 'the cultivation of endless patience' as a measuring stick of a Satyagrahi's depth of commitment; in this sense personal suffering and self-sacrifice are expressed in the 'path of service' to others (Gandhi, 1932, pp. 6, 32). The third element is by attempting to respect and thus understand one's opponent's point of view, to alter that point of view for the better.

Gandhi's Satyagraha as social action was first expressed in the mass movement of non-violent resistance against British colonialism — in pursuit of justice and freedom — that he launched in South Africa in 1906, and that he began in India in Champaran during 1917. It is this strand of Satyagraha that is best remembered today. It was expressed through non-co-operation, strikes, boycotts, marches, and fasts. This form of Satyagraha also profoundly influenced later freedom movements overseas, as can be seen in the roles played by Nelson Mandela in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa from the 1950s (he was elected President in the country's first multi-racial elections, held in 1994), by the Reverend Martin Luther King in the US civil rights movement for African Americans during the 1960s, and by Lech Walesa in the Polish democratic movement from 1970 to 1989 (when the first democratic government was formed within the Soviet block). Other non-violent mass movements that forced regime change include the People Power Revolution in the Philippines, which toppled military dictator Ferdinand Marcos in 1986; the wave of peaceful revolutions which, triggered by Poland's example, ended communist rule in Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Bulgaria during 1989; the Bloody May demonstrations in Bangkok in 1992 which ended military rule in Thailand; and the Bulldozer Revolution in Serbia which ended Slobodan Milosevic's dictatorship in 2000.

Notwithstanding the importance of these political expressions of Satyagraha, they constitute only one part of the social action programme that Gandhi sought to achieve through Satyagraha. As Gandhi declared in 1928, 'I have long believed that social reform is a tougher business than political reform' (Gandhi, 1928, p. 345). According to Gandhi, civil disobedience was simply 'an aid to constructive effort' in the broader task of building a humane and sustainable society (Gandhi, 1945, p. 3). In addition to mobilising civil disobedience, Gandhi worked tirelessly as an advocate of women's equality and full participation in society, and to root out untouchability, poverty, and communal violence. His goal was 'to evolve a new order of life of universal benefit in the place of the present one where each one lives for himself without regard to what happens to his neighbour' (Gandhi, 1942, p. 14).

Gandhi thus used Satyagraha as an approach by which to realise the principle of universal welfare, or Sarvodaya. He spelled out the necessary steps for doing so in 1941 and again in 1945 in the *Constructive Programme*. This treatise drew attention to the 'various forms of constructive endeavour advocated by Gandhiji, such as working for economic self-sufficiency in villages, education, abolition of drink and untouchability, communal concord, uplift of women, sanitation, hygiene, improved diet, child welfare, and so on. Satyagraha in the political sphere is not, therefore, a plan of action adopted merely for a time, wound up thereafter, and requiring no further effort; it presupposes day to day non-political constructive work aiming at the all-round development of the individual from the cradle to the grave' (Gandhi, 1951, Editor's Note, p. vi). By thus pursuing truth and

non-violence in the name of Sarvodaya, Gandhi urged that ‘Satyagraha can rid society of all evils, political, economic and moral’ (Gandhi, 1947, p. 353).

In the following pages we will consider four major applications of Satyagraha in the modern world: conflict resolution, active citizenship and good government, social justice, and sustainable development.

16.3 CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Aspirations for global peace and well-being during the late 20th century and the early 21st century have been compromised by vicious regional wars, genocide, communal violence and terrorism; they have been menaced by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; they have been traumatised by the nightmare prospect of global nuclear war. Peacemakers plead — seemingly with little effect — for hatred and violence to be replaced by negotiation and reconciliation. Kenneth Kaunda, the first President of independent Zambia in 1964, recently suggested that ‘in a world facing turmoil, a world in which senseless and unjust wars are raging with catastrophic consequences, the relevance of the Gandhian message, embodied in Satyagraha, is even greater and more challenging than in his time’ (Sharma, 2007, p. 51). Is it likely that this suggestion will be heeded?

Jesse Jackson declared during his Gandhi Memorial Lecture that if the Mahatma had been alive today he would have challenged conflicts such as the Iraq War (Jackson, 2008, p. 69). Although this is almost certainly true, the relevance of Satyagraha today does not lie only in announcing its foundation-principle of non-violence (a principle that was formally recognised by the United Nations in 2007 when it declared Gandhi’s birthday on 2 October the International Day of Non-Violence). The relevance of Satyagraha derives equally from actively applying to dispute resolution, reconciliation, and consensus building what Gandhi called ‘Satyagraha [’s] relentless search for truth’ (Gandhi, 1925, p. 195). Satyagraha acknowledges that ‘what appears to be truth to the one may appear to be error to the other’ (Gandhi, 1920, p. 6). This even-handedness is a critical ingredient for achieving non-violent resolution of disputes, building dialogue, respect and tolerance between people and cultures, and maintaining long-lasting peace. Gandhi predicted that ‘Three-fourths of the miseries and misunderstandings in the world will disappear, if we step into the shoes of our adversaries and understand their standpoint’ (Gandhi, 1925, pp. 193-4).

Leading Gandhian expert R.P. Misra contends that ‘Today, Satyagraha stands recognized as the ultimate weapon of peaceful resolution of conflicts. But the world has yet to learn how to use this weapon creatively’ (Misra, 2007, p. 6).

16.4 ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP AND GOOD GOVERNMENT

Government transparency and accountability, together with active citizenship, are essential in order to reduce what Joseph Stiglitz, the 2001 winner of the Nobel Prize for Economics, called ‘the democratic deficit in the way globalization is managed’ (Stiglitz, 2006, p. 276). In 2007, endorsing the continuing relevance of Satyagraha, India’s Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh argued similarly that a healthy democracy was ‘not just about periodic elections’, but required efficient and transparent government that was continuously accountable to rigorous public scrutiny. The Prime Minister declared that

‘The essence of Gandhi’s political philosophy was the empowerment of every individual, irrespective of caste, class, creed or community’ (Sharma, 2007, p. 32).

In an age of increasing state surveillance, complex bureaucratic processes, and party-machine electioneering, Gandhi’s insistence upon government accountability to its constituents is refreshing. In the aftermath of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre at Amritsar in 1919 and the subsequent intensified state repression, Gandhi announced that ‘no State however despotic has the right to enact laws which are repugnant to the whole body of the people’ (Gandhi, 1920, p. 7). Gandhi regarded Satyagraha as a means not only of containing and humanising state power, but also of including and empowering the general community in state decision-making. He therefore advocated gender and caste equality, and expressed satisfaction that ‘*satyagraha* has automatically brought India’s women out from their darkness’ to become ‘equal partners’ in public affairs (Gandhi, 1945, p. 18). He also placed great importance upon the development of broad-based and continuing education programmes, and the dissemination of information, arguing that ‘An awakened and intelligent public opinion is the most potent weapon of a Satyagrahi’ (Gandhi, 1929, p. 77).

Nelson Mandela insists upon the continuing relevance today of ‘Satyagraha as a tool for empowerment of the masses’ (Sharma, 2007, p. 19). It acts as a brake upon the concentration of political power, and upon corruption and inefficiency in government. In India, Constitutional Amendments in 1992 to establish Panchayati Raj Institutions as a grassroots tier of participatory rural government were hailed for ‘seeking to transform Mahatma Gandhi’s dream of Gram Swaraj into reality’ (Nazeer, 2008, p. 4). The hard work by Satyagrahis to ensure that the panchayat system really works is still unfinished business in India, as is the broader concept of grassroots participatory democracy around the world.

16.5 SOCIAL JUSTICE

Gandhi regarded poverty, perhaps even more so than he did social conflict and political oppression, as ‘the worst source of violence’ (Sharma, 2007, p. 166), and Satyagraha has evolved since his death as a tool for social justice throughout the world.

Gandhi’s horror for the poverty he encountered throughout British India made him identify economic equality as ‘the master key to non-violent Independence’ in India. He remarked that ‘The contrast between the palaces of New Delhi and the miserable hovels of the poor labouring class nearby cannot last one day in a free India in which the poor will enjoy the same power as the richest in the land’ (Gandhi, 1945, p. 22). In his ‘India of My Dreams’, Gandhi pledged ‘I shall work for an India in which the poorest shall feel that it is their country, in whose making they have an effective voice, an India in which there shall be no high class and low class of people; an India in which...women will enjoy the same rights as men’ (Gandhi, 2007).

Gandhi’s vision for social justice and social inclusion transcended pre-independence India. When Gandhi attended the Round Table Conference in London in 1931, for example, he refused to stay in a hotel and lived instead at Kingsley Hall, a ‘people’s house’ or community centre in the poor working class district of London’s East End. In Britain today, the Gandhi Foundation still have their office at Kingsley Hall.

Gandhi’s vision also transcends his own lifetime, which is why — on the International Day

of Non-Violence on 2 October 2007 — Gandhi's 'India of My Dreams' was formally re-pledged during celebrations at New Delhi. His determination to eliminate poverty encapsulates the universal and enduring human-centred essence of Satyagraha, and highlights its continuing relevance as a catalyst for social justice today both in India and around the world.

In terms of its social application, there is nothing insular about Satyagraha's regime of individual austerity and ethical self-improvement; it demands to be widely applied in community affairs. Satyagraha represents, firstly, a call to social action wherever social injustice is encountered. As Gandhi explained to Satyagrahis, 'renunciation ... does not mean abandoning the world and retiring into the forest' (Gandhi, 1932, p. 33). And secondly, it demands that reformist energy be characterised by self-sacrifice and disinterest in the cause of collective wellbeing, rather than being conditioned by self-ambition. Gandhi insisted that 'Voluntary service [to] others demands the best of which one is capable, and must take precedence over service of self' (Gandhi, 1932, p. 35). Gandhi suggested to all those who worked for social justice, 'Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen, and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to *him*' (Singh, 2007a, p. 231). Shifting his attention beyond activists in the social reform movement, Gandhi suggested to the social elite that Ahimsa expressed by them through 'the trusteeship of the wealthy' would achieve an equal society (Gandhi, 1940b, p. 19). There is as much need for Gandhi's advice to be heeded in today's society — where, whether in India, or Britain, or the United States, the division between economic and political power on the one hand and disadvantage and powerlessness on the other have intensified — as during Gandhi's lifetime.

Satyagraha for social justice is urgently needed in the contemporary world. In today's India, between 220 million people (Government of India estimate) and 450 million people (according to the World Bank) live below the poverty line. Although there has been a reduction between 1981 and 2005 in the number of people living in extreme poverty (those living on under \$US1 a day) from 296 million to 267 million, during the same period the number of people living in poverty (on under \$US1.25 a day) increased from 421 million to 456 million (Chen and Ravallion, 2008). Increasing food prices are expected to push even more people into absolute poverty. Beyond India, Satyagraha for social justice translates into the United Nations' Millennium Development Goal to halve global poverty by 2015. One quarter of the population of the developing world (some 1.4 billion people in 2005) live below the World Bank's international poverty line of making do on \$US1.25 a day. Governments and international aid agencies have mobilised in an attempt to meet the 2015 target, but success or failure depends also on social mobilisation at the grassroots. Muhammad Yunus, who won the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize for the efforts by his Grameen Bank to achieve the social development and economic empowerment of poor communities by providing microcredit to women, declared that by thus applying the values of Satyagraha, 'We can create a world where poverty exists only in the museums' (Sharma, 2007, p. 41).

Yunus's microcredit support for poor people began in rural Bangladesh, and Gandhi's earlier concern with poverty likewise focused upon village society. With some 70 percent of India's population still living in rural communities, poverty reduction programmes must continue to target rural disadvantage. This was the intention of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act of 2005, which established the National Rural Employment

Guarantee Scheme throughout India in a pioneering effort to reduce rural poverty. However some 30 percent of India's population now live in urban areas, and it is generally agreed by poverty reduction campaigners around the world that Millennium Development Goal programmes to halve poverty will be won or lost in the cities.

Gandhi disliked cities, but he was not blind to social disadvantage within them. After visiting poor neighbourhoods in Old Delhi in 1933, he declared that 'unless you see with your own eyes you cannot even imagine that there could be such places inhabited by human beings. One does not feel like eating or drinking after seeing this *basti*. Its mere look is nauseating. It is so dirty that I do not have words to describe it' (Mehra, 1991, p. 11). Satyagraha for social justice aims to eliminate such urban social inequality. However Gandhian Satyagraha differs in one crucial respect from the urban poverty reduction programmes that are currently endorsed by the Government of India and by the United Nations. Gandhi never used the word 'slum' to characterise urban poverty, whereas social reformers and researchers today do. 'Slum' is a negative stereotype that misrepresents poor communities as dysfunctional and disorganised. In Indian social policy since the 1950s 'slum' stereotypes have been responsible for, at best, marginalising poor people from decision making about how to devise effective programmes that maximise their own well being; at worst, they have legitimised heavy-handed 'slum' clearance schemes which have torn down poor communities and frustrated the self-help efforts of their inhabitants. In 2004, for example, the demolition of the Yamuna Pushta community in Delhi caused the eviction of almost 40,000 families. One inhabitant queried, 'Why let us build our homes and dreams, if you are going to bulldoze them to the ground after twenty or thirty years?' (Bharucha, 2006, p.43). Gandhian Satyagraha offers a bottom-up rather than a top-down strategy for achieving poverty reduction. It emphasises inclusion and empowerment; it heeds the voices of the poor and respects their aspirations. Unlike today's policy makers, 'Gandhiji did not work "for" but "with" the people who were sufferers themselves. He involved the distressed and suffering people in the activities intended for their welfare in the best tradition of social work of helping the people to help themselves' (Dayal, 1996, p. 161).

16.6 SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

At the time of Gandhi's death in 1948 Satyagraha and its application through the *Constructive Programme* provided a practical way forward for the Government of India to build a new India. Gandhi had focused upon rural community development in order to create a decentralised nation of 'largely self-contained' village communities (Gandhi, 1945, p. 12). In tandem with this, he emphasised technologies appropriate to village self-sufficiency, and on an individual level, 'the deliberate and voluntary reduction of wants' (Gandhi, 1932, p. 16).

In the early 21st century, these elements and the overarching concept of sustainable development resonate as never before. The challenge is no longer one of developing sustainable practices for village society in India alone, but for human habitats across the entire globe. Ecological crisis, fuelled by spiralling CO₂ levels and expressed in accelerating climate change and rising sea levels, highlights the need for humanity to reduce its ecological footprint by living in more modest and sustainable ways. Although Gandhi's criticisms of humanity for being 'intoxicated by modern civilization' (Gandhi, 1938, p. 30), and his endorsement of rural over urban living, both now appear dated to many people today, his underlying message remains clear and incontrovertible that headlong growth

without human development must halt. Better applications of technology, appropriate to the contexts of their use, together with renewable sources of energy to power them, patterns of human settlement that are designed to meet basic needs, and complementary human behaviour on an individual and collective level, are the essential ingredients of a sustainable society. Present-day Gandhians argue that 'A world exhausted by over consumption is in need of an alternative, a well thought out framework of ideas' (Singh, 2008, p. 7), and that Satyagraha provides the framework both of ideas and approaches for their realisation.

16.7 SUMMARY

At the end of this Unit, the question needing your answer is whether Satyagraha as it was practised by Gandhi between 1906 and 1948, and as it has been interpreted and applied by others after Gandhi's death, has relevance in the modern world. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh commented in 2007 that 'I believe Gandhiji always viewed Satyagraha as a means to a dialogue, as an instrument of change and progress. Satyagraha was, therefore, not an end in itself. It was a means to an end. That end being the liberation of all people, their peaceful coexistence and, above all, their well-being and progress' (Sharma, 2007, pp. 32-33). As Martin Luther King said of Satyagraha, 'it can be preached anywhere and can prevail everywhere' (Sharma, 2007, p. 171). Can it prevail in today's world?

16.8 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. Does Satyagraha have practical relevance in the contemporary world?
2. Are the principles and applications of Satyagraha absolute and unchangeable, or are they relative to the contexts of their use?
3. What would be the key public concerns of a Satyagrahi today?

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