



Gandhi's Ideology on Non-Violence

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Abstract: *“My life is my message” said Gandhi; and hence, any attempt to study Gandhian philosophy has to be extracted from his life and action. This characteristic Gandhi shared with many seers of ancient India and some of the greatest Indians of later periods. They did not generally work out a systematic epistemology or ontology; but they did evolve a view of life and reality which often transcended the purely logical categories. We have to remember that life is not always logical in the narrow sense; but it still has a logic of its own. A world view does not usually have that kind of rigidity and certainty which a strictly philosophical standpoint demands; but through intuition and insight, seers and sages often discover truths which deductive or inductive logic cannot reach. In Gandhi, as in many such mystics and seers, there is an underlying unity of thought; but it has to be discovered by special effort and must be isolated from the many extraneous elements which get mixed up with it. Gandhi's life can be described as a combination of two great struggles, the struggle for achieving the political liberty of India and the struggle for securing the social emancipation of the weaker sections of the Indian people. With his faith in the innate goodness of man, he achieved without violence and with the cooperation of the British people. When we try to understand his thought, we must remember that his emphasis on fundamentals deals with basic principles and not with particular actions or even particular programmes. His demand was for the transformation of the individual by insisting on his capacity to share in the character of the divine.*

Key Words : *Epistemology, Ontology, Transformation, Deductive, Inductive*

Introduction

The difficulty in interpreting Gandhian thought arises out of the fact that he never attempted work out a systematic philosophy for himself. He had certainly a world view; but he was too engrossed in action to work out all the implications of what he believed. We must also remember that it is difficult for men of our generation to judge Gandhi dispassionately. Many of ours cannot imagine the atmosphere which obtained in the country at the time of his political

entry. There was strong political consciousness among a section of the educated minority; but the vast majority of the people were politically quiescent even though they suffered from ignorance, disease and poverty. When Gandhi appeared on the Indian scene, the atmosphere suddenly changed. The younger generations were swept off their feet and even the older men and women exhibited a degree of political enthusiasm that had perhaps never before been seen in India. He charged the Indian masses



with a new life and passion. Since most of our younger days were passed in that atmosphere, it is extremely difficult for us to take a detached view of Gandhi, his life and thought. It is perhaps easier for you of the new generation to differentiate between the emotional and the intellectual appeal of Gandhi's life and teachings. For us, it was a total appeal in which thought, feeling and even prejudices could not be distinguished and led to a mass upheaval which for almost thirty years swept the Indian people irresistibly forward.

We have to make a distinction between the fundamental principles of Gandhi's thought and some of his practices and professions. We can notice that the fundamental principles of Gandhi's thought have a validity which transcends the limitations of space and time. They will hold good for men and women of all countries in all ages. The same thing cannot however be said about some of his practices and programmes. This may sound heretical, especially in view of our tendency to confuse between principles and practices and give equal reverence to both. There are some followers of Gandhi who imitate his mannerisms, thinking that this would somehow enable them to enter into the spirit of Gandhi's thought. Gandhi himself never claimed to be a Gandhian and he was always ready to modify his views to meet the demands of a new situation. It is fair to say that some of his practices and programmes have not been tested sufficiently; some others have been tested and found wanting. If he had lived, I have no doubt in my mind that he would have changed many such practices; but so far as his fundamental principles are concerned, they have stood and I believe will stand the test of time.

Objectives of the Study

The period between 1920 and 1947 has been an important unit in the history of Indian National Movement. The year 1920 witnessed the emergence of Gandhi as the towering leader of the struggle for freedom and starting of the non-cooperation experiment. Further in the history of national movement 1920 marks a turning point. It was from this year that the nationalist intelligentsia became bold and started attacking the colonial government without fear or inhibition through their works. They viewed the emergence of Gandhi as the birth of a new force and hope. This led the emergence of Gandhian era in the country. Hence the *Ideology of Gandhi* is taken for this study.

Methodology of the Study

In the present study we have followed the historical method which essentially includes the interpretation of evidence from primary and secondary sources, related to Gandhian ideology. The manuscripts of freedom fighters and research works and lectures on Gandhi ideology across the world would help us to make a comprehensive study. We have taken pamphlets, booklets, newspapers and periodicals, souvenirs as primary and secondary sources.

Results of the Study

Gandhi – The Path Maker

The first thing I would like to say about Gandhi's thought is that he was always striving for simplicity. He was essentially a practical man and took a pragmatic view of most human problems. At the same time, there was an element of mysticism in his mental make-up. Many people, some of them his admirers, have pointed out inconsistencies in



Gandhi's thought and action. The answer is simple. He never hesitated to deviate from something he had said before, if he felt that the situation demanded it. This arose out of the essentially pragmatic character of his approach to life. It is interesting to remember that he called his autobiography My Experiments with Truth. In other words, he allowed the real world to make its impact on him and he reacted to its demands with the whole of his personality. Gandhi was always striving for simplicity; but at the same time, he was himself a very complex personality. His attempt was to achieve simplicity in thought, action, attitude and approach to life; but because he tried to see life as a totality, there was a certain complicatedness in his responses which many people could not follow. The confusion also arose because of a failure to distinguish between principles and practices. Gandhi believed in simplicity as an ideal in life; but sometimes he tended to confuse simplicity with poverty. His followers have carried the confusion further, so that at times they attempt to extol poverty as such. I must confess that I cannot see any special value in poverty and am convinced that it has many evil consequences for society and the individual. In his own life, he sued food and clothing which were simple but certainly they were not poor in quality. I would therefore say that while we must accept the ideal of simplicity, I for one would reject any identification of simplicity with poverty.

It was this quest for simplicity which explains in part his attitude to the great religions of the world. He sought to convert every religious practice to the simplest terms. Once he had done this, he found a basic unity in all religions. He held that differences arise because of the

complex nature of religious practices. The unity becomes apparent when the complexity is discarded and the basic yearning of the human mind for identification with the real revealed in its purity. Simplicity was thus a governing passion with him – simplicity in thought, action and attitude, and simplicity in religious belief.

Gandhi – Noble Tasks with Simple Living

Gandhi often described himself as a simple ordinary man. In one sense, this was true; for he did not have the exceptional gifts that we associate with an artistic or scientific genius. He was not born great or wealthy. He was not physically very impressive, nor did he have the resplendent genius of a man like Shakespeare. In fact, there was hardly any promise of his future greatness in the early days of his life. It was only after he went to Africa that his moral qualities marked him as an unusual man. He was thus in a sense an ordinary man but with an extraordinary yearning for excellence and an extraordinary capacity for taking pains to achieve it. He was thus an ordinary man in an extraordinary way. He built himself up through effort and endeavour and so perfected his character that in course of time he became a symbol of purity, goodness and excellence for millions. It is necessary to emphasise this aspect of Gandhi's personality; for in India we have a tendency to exaggerate the faults and virtues of our leaders. We often turn our leaders into demigods. Then, when they disappoint us, we go to the other extreme and condemn them out of court. Successful working of democracy depends on the recognition that every human being is a combination of qualities and faults. Some of you may remember the old English verse that



There is so much good in the
worst of us

And so much bad in the best of us

That it hardly behooves us

To speak ill of the rest of us.

Gandhi was certainly one of the finest men the world has known; but we have to remember that he was also a human being and committed many mistakes. In his own words, he had committed Himalayan blunders and yet history will judge that in spite of his many blunders, he was a man truly noble and great. Gandhi considered himself an ordinary man and held that anybody could, if only he wished, act like him. That is the major reason why he demanded that others should behave as he behaved. He once said, "I have never asked anybody to do anything which I cannot do myself." This is what gives a special value to the discussion of his life and thought. Here was a man who, through his own effort and endeavour, through his devotion and yearning for truth, through constant attempt to live up to character, built himself up, a man who would not compromise on ends and means, a man who sought to transform the quality of his life and in the process changed the life of everyone who came into touch with him.

Gandhi believed that every individual has in him the capacity of responding to noble impulses. Every man can respond to the call of a higher duty provided he allows his conscience the freedom to receive such impulses. He therefore expected the highest standards of conduct from everyone who came into contact with him. It is also true that because he made this demand of his companions, they became better men. He

placed before people high ideals and believed sincerely that they would work for his ideals. Trust begets trust; and Gandhi was able to raise the moral quality of his companions by his implicit faith in them. Just as he had overcome one weakness after another through effort, through endeavour, through discipline, he believed everyone else could do the same.

Gandhi – The Scientific Reformer

Gandhi's attitude to social change was influenced by his own experience. This had convinced him that a man can fashion his life through discipline, effort and endeavour. If we do study his autobiography, we will find that he has not concealed any of his weaknesses but frankly admitted them. This was due to his faith in truth as a great cleanser; for he held that when man strives for truth, he shares in an attribute of God. The source of his strength was the conviction that since every man has in him an element of divine nature; he can rise to great heights if only he will make the necessary effort. From this, Gandhi came to the conclusion that if we want to change society, we must first change the individual. We have to remember one of Gandhi's most significant contributions to Indian life and thought. When he was born, the general climate of thought in the western world – and this influenced thought in every other continent – was full of optimism and hope. It was believed that scientific and technological advance would solve the physical problems of man, and education and social reforms would take care of his other problems. The eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries were an era of great hope for humanity. The enormous expansion in knowledge, wealth and comfort, the increasing control over disease and



famine, the gradual conquest of physical and natural obstacles gave man the faith that education, science and technology would in course of time change the face of the world. There was an accompanying faith in the power of social forces and legislation to change human nature. Karl Marx was a great protagonist of this point of view. He proclaimed that changes in the methods of production led to changes in the social structure. They in their turn led to changes in the attitude and character of the individual. In fact, most of the social reformers of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries believed that social changes will bring about the necessary changes in the individual himself.

Gandhi was influenced quite early in life by the writings of Tolstoy and Thoreau who stressed the importance of the individual and his responsibility for changing society. The influence of the Bible and the Gita also led Gandhi to believe in the importance of the individual. There is therefore in all his teachings an emphasis on individuality. Gandhi held that it was only when the individual changes that society also can be changed. He was a great fighter for social reform; but he believed that social reforms would become effective only when the individual reformed himself. Gandhi's greatest gift to Indians of his generation was his emphasis on fearlessness. He demanded that we must shed fear in every form. His whole life was a training in shedding of fear and he gradually led the Indian people towards this ideal. He held that an integrated personality is fearless. We are uncertain and therefore afraid when there are inner contradictions in our nature. Once we harmonise the different aspects of life, we are sure of ourselves and therefore no

longer afraid. This has also an immediate consequence on social relations with others. A man who is afraid provokes fear or anger in others. One who is fearless is accepted by his fellows without question. We know that even in our relations with animals, our feelings affect their attitude towards us. If we are afraid, an animal perceives it and becomes aggressive. In shedding fear, we therefore shed also aggressiveness.

Conclusion

His urge for simplicity was an urge to reach down to fundamentals. When we try to understand his thought, we must remember that his emphasis on fundamentals deals with basic principles and not with particular actions or even particular programmes. His demand was for the transformation of the individual by insisting on his capacity to share in the character of the divine. This leads to the development of a harmonious personality in which different aspects of character would have free play. The individual would shed fear and, along with fear, aggressiveness. With such individuals, it would be possible to think of a community based on love and cooperation rather than competition and conflict. Gandhi held that since non-violence is an expression of human nature, it can be practiced only by the strong. It involves an awareness of different alternatives and selections of a particular course of action based on conviction. Where this is not the case, it is not non-violence but acquiescence. Since non-violence is the positive action of rational beings, and derived from their rationality, there is no question of victory or defeat in non-violent action. This is so because reason is the same for all.



Gandhi's greatest contribution was to indicate a way for humanizing society, where inequalities would be eliminated without violence. He saw the necessity of substituting rationality and persuasion in place of compulsion as the motive force of social change. He pointed out that the individual can educate himself to be a civilized member of a civilized community. Gandhi held that we must start with ourselves. Once every man adopts this principle, society will automatically change. That is why he again and again appealed to the common man and asked him to begin with changes in the little things of life. Respect the common man and he will cease of themselves. When this peaceful revolution has taken place within the individual, society itself will have been transformed.

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