
UNIT 5 GANDHI'S VIEWS ON HUMAN NATURE

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5.1 INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

Aims and Objectives

After reading this Unit, you would be able to understand

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

5.2 GANDHIAN APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING HUMAN NATURE

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

5.2.1 Gandhi and Advaita School of Shankara

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

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

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

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

5.2.2 Spirit and Matter: A Critique of Marxian Approach

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

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

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

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

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

5.2.3 Human Nature: A Historic Perspective

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

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

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

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

5.3 GANDHI’S CONCEPT OF MAN

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

5.3.1 Innate Goodness of Man

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

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

5.3.2 Obedience to the Call of Conscience

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

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

5.4 MAN: BRUTISHNESS TO DIVINITY

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

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

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

Nobility of Man

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

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

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

5.5 STEPS FOR UPWARD MOVEMENT: SOURCES OF INSPIRATION

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

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

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

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

Vows of Sabarmati Ashram: An Experiment in Human Nature

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.6 HUMAN PERFECTIBILITY

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

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

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

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

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

5.7 CONCLUSION

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

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

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

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

5.8 SUMMARY

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

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

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

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

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

5.9 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

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

SUGGESTED READINGS

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