
UNIT 6 GANDHI'S VIEWS ON TRUTH

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6.1 INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

(Harijan, February, 22, 1942).

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

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

Aims and Objectives

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

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

6.2 MEANING OF TRUTH, TRUTH IS GOD

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

6.3 THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUTH IN HUMAN LIFE

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

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

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

6.4 ABSOLUTE AND RELATIVE TRUTH

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

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

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

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

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

6.5 TRUTH AND GOD

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

6.5.1 Realisation of the Self

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

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

6.5.2 Liberation

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

6.6 GANDHI AND THE ADVAITA PERSPECTIVE

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

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

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

6.7 SUMMARY

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

6.8 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

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

SUGGESTED READINGS

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