UNIT 2 MAHATMA GANDHI AND RABINDRANATH TAGORE

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

No philosophical consideration will be complete without any reference to Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore who lived in the stirring and crucial time of the history of India and contributed a lot to the philosophical, ethical, social, political, religious, and economic systems and theories. The most important objective of this unit is to help the students follow the philosophical stream of thoughts evident in the works and teaching of both Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore.

Rabindranath Tagore is a religious poet. It is right to call him a seer, visionary or mystic. It is from his poetry that we know of his philosophy. He does not present his philosophy in an academic manner. His philosophical thoughts are scattered in his literature. So, one has to
systematically arrange his thoughts in a particular manner so as to make it fit into the mould of an academic philosophy.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi is a comprehensive system. His philosophy is not an abstract system of thought. Credit goes to him for blending philosophy with life, abstract principle with concrete reality of facts, religion with politics, and ethics with a programme for social evolution. His system is a synthetic unity of different sciences.

2.1 GANDHI: LIFE, INFLUENCE AND BASIC PHILOSOPHY

Gandhi was born in a Baniya family in Kathiavar, Porbander, Gujarat in 1869. After his early childhood his family shifted to Rajkot. It is there he painfully and at times, tumultuously, spent the years of youth. After completing his high school studies, he left for England in 1887 where he qualified as a lawyer. Back in India he went to South Africa to deal with a legal matter. In South Africa, he became a leader of the Indian community. After several years at the service of the Indians of South Africa he left for India in 1914. At Ahemadabad, by the side of Sabarmati River, he built his Satyagraha ashram to prepare people for non-violent struggle. Soon he assumed an important role in India’s freedom struggle. After a few limited attempts at utilizing the method of Satyagraha to deal with various injustices, he launched a nationwide agitation in 1919. Then he saw that people were not ready for a non-violent fight and he decided to suspend that struggle. After spending a long time in educating the people, he launched a nationwide action in 1930 (Quit India movement). After his confrontation with Dr.Ambetkar, he turned his attention to social problems such as untouchability and social inequality. In 1934, he left congress and withdrew from active politics. Back to the political scene in 1939, he organized a movement of individual Satyagraha as protest against the war politics of British government. After the war, when India’s independence was drawing near, we find Gandhi deeply concerned with the Hindu-Muslim tensions. At the time of independence, he went to Calcutta to try to avoid bloodshed and violence. Back to Delhi, he was assassinated in 1948.

The main influences on him were from Hindu and Christian teaching. The Jain teaching with its radical demand of non-violence had also an early influence on him. However, in his mature years it is Gita that played the greatest role in his life. Gandhi understood Gita as the gospel of detachment and non-violence. Gita teaches that God is present in everything and that this divine presence leads us to see the basic spirituality of human life.

2.3 GOD AND TRUTH
We can find a basic consistency in his thought. The focal point of this consistency is the concept of truth. The quest to know ‘truth’ is an everunfinished quest and ‘life is a continuous experiment with truth’. In this attempt of reaching truth, one relies on the two pillars of faith and reason. Gandhi seems to have two models to speak of God; a theistic model that is closely related to his old Vaishnava faith and an Advaidic type of absolutism. In the absolute model, God appears as an impersonal force or power or as divine law and as Truth. Gandhi agreed that we could say that God is love; but he felt that the word love is used in many ways and can be ambiguous. So he prefers to say God is truth. Later, Gandhi went further and said that truth is God. Wherever one finds truth, there one finds God also. Gandhi accepts the main features of Hindu tradition with regard to man\woman and the world. As a moral philosopher Gandhi’s ethics is basically that of intuitionists. The still small voice within oneself must always be the final arbiter when there is a conflict of duty. This inner voice is the voice of God or the voice of truth. From the point of view of objective standard in ethics, Gandhi is an ethical naturalist. Man’s\woman’s nature is defined in terms of non-violence. When man\woman acts violently, he\she breaks the basic law of his\her own being.

Gandhi did not accept the principle that ‘end justifies the means’. As the means so the end...there is no wall of separation between the means and the end...realization of the goal is in exact proportion to that of the means. While speaking about the fundamental moral virtues, he says: “Morality includes truth, ahimsa and continence. Every virtue that mankind has ever practiced is referable to and derived from these three fundamental virtues. Non-violence appears as the means and truth the goal. Continence appears to be necessary to reach the self-control which is necessary to dedicate oneself more and more fully to truth and non-violence.”

### 2.4 NATURE OF THE WORLD

It is very difficult to outline precisely Gandhi’s views on the nature of the world as his remarks on the nature of the world are both casual and scattered. But a close journey along with the works and words of Gandhi will tell us that he has a profound philosophy on the world. Gandhi believes that nature is the expression of God and it is the evidence of the all-pervasive reality. Gandhi says, “God manifest himself in innumerable forms in this universe and every such manifestation commands my reverence.” Gandhi also observes a force behind the laws of the universe which maintains the world in harmony, gives an order and saves the world from destruction. For him, this force is nothing but God and the laws are nothing but the ways of the working of that force.

### 2.5 CONCEPT OF HUMAN PERSON

Gandhi feels that man\woman is a complex being. The bodily man\woman is the apparent man\woman; his\her body is natural in so far as it is akin to the other objects of nature. The body grows and decays according to the laws of Nature. But, this aspect of a human represents merely
the physical aspect. Man\woman is not merely a physical being. He\she has many other characteristics which are not just physical. He\she has consciousness, reason, conscience, will, emotion, and similar other qualities. He\she has an aesthetic sense, a feeling-sensibility, and an insight into the nature of good and bad. These are not physical activities, but rather these are all expressions of the real man\woman, of the spirit or soul present in him/her.

He believes that every individual is a mixture of the bodily and the spiritual. According to him, evolution is a change from the physical to the spiritual, aiming at the complete realization of Divinity. The elements of divinity, present in every human being, are expressed in different ways. They can be expressed by way of the presence of reason, conscience, free-will etc. He believes that man\woman can bring heaven on earth if he\she uses these Divine elements in the right manner. He also believes in the essential spirituality and goodness of every man\woman.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) Explain the Gandhian idea that ‘God is truth’?

2) How does Gandhi explain the concept of ‘nature’?

3) Explain the concept of man\woman according to Gandhi.

2.6 SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Gandhi speaks of non-violent society, non-violent state and non-violent Swaraj. “All societies are held together by non-violence, even as the earth is held in position by gravitation.” Gandhi did not give a blueprint of the non-violent society; from his writings we can see two main features of this society. First of all, decentralization of authority and village life: society based on
non-violence can only consist of groups settled in villages in which voluntary cooperation is the condition of dignified and peaceful existence. Centralization as a system is inconsistent with non-violent structure of society. Here we shall have both economic and social equality. Economic equality is the master key to non-violent independence. Working for economic equality means abolishing the eternal conflict between capital and labour; it means leveling down of the few rich in whose hands is concentrated the bulk of the nation's wealth on the one hand, and leveling up of the semi-starved naked millions on the other. This economic equality is to be achieved not by nationalization and compulsory acquisition of the wealth but by making the rich realized that they are not owners of the goods they have but they are only trustees of God.

For Gandhi social equality means a new approach to caste. Gandhi rejects the actual caste system because it contains the idea of inequality. The idea of inequality must go. However, Gandhi believed that we must keep the idea of hereditary transmisions of profession. Man/woman must remain faithful to his/her traditional family duties. But the idea of inferiority and superiority is totally repugnant to this. We must not however forget that the duty prescribed by one's caste does not limit one's action for society. Having performed one's hereditary duty one should free oneself to serve society in all possible ways.

**Non-Violent State**

Though he speaks of democracy, it is not a centralized democracy: “In the true democracy of India the heart is the village. True democracy cannot be worked by twenty individuals sitting at the centre. It has to be worked out from below by the people of every village. The ultimate ideal of his political theory would rather be a state of enlightened anarchy; if national life becomes perfect and becomes self regulated, no representation becomes necessary. There is then a state of enlightened anarchy. In the ideal state, therefore, there is no political power, there is no state. But this ideal is never fully realized in life. Real **Swaraj** is reached when every man/woman has total political freedom. Concretely this is expressed in the following manner: “Real **Swaraj** will come not only by the acquisition of authority by a few, but by the acquisition of the capacity by all to resist authority when it is abused. In other words, **Swaraj** is to be attained by educating the masses to a sense of their capacity to regulate and control authority.”

**Satyagraha**

The non-violent ways or means to attain the goal of **Swaraj** is **satyagraha**. It is the non-resistance of the strong. He says: “Passive resistance has no power to change man’s heart...it is only what the weak offer because they are unable, not unwilling, to offer armed resistance.” **Satyagraha** is based on three basic moral principles: truth, non-violence, and the law of suffering. The reference to truth and non-violence is clear. The law of suffering is the acceptance to suffer rather than make the other suffer. Self-suffering is the test of love. To suffer without any violence outward or inward one needs strength, courage and fearlessness. **Satyagraha** implies a whole interior moral attitude of the **Satyagrahi**: “**Satyagraha** is gentle, it never wounds, it must never be the result of anger or malice. It is never fussy, never impatient, and never vociferous. It
is breach of *Satyagraha* to wish ill to an opponent or to say a harsh word to him\her with the intention of harming him\her.”

**Sarvodaya Society**

The term *Sarvodaya* literally means the rise of all, i.e., a society in which the good of all is achieved. Gandhi writes about the India of his dream where the goal of *Sarvodaya* is achieved: “An India in which there shall be no high class and low class people, an India in which all communities shall live in perfect harmony; there can be no room in such an India for the curse of untouchability or the use of intoxication, drinks and drugs. Women will enjoy the same rights as men.” From the writings of Gandhi five important aspects of *Sarvodaya* society can be identified. They are, *Rama Rajya* (Kingdom of God), *Sarva Dharma Samabava* (secularism), *Swaraj*, *Swedeshi* and *Panjayat raj*.

**Poverty**

The solution Gandhi proposed to the acute problem of poverty was ‘bread labour.’ “If every one of us bodily labours to earn his\her food, we would not see the poverty which we find today in the world.” He held the view that the poverty of the millions cannot be solved by big industries of the modern western type, which is based on industrial capitalism, rationalistic materialism and colonial imperialism. The introduction of machine into the production leads to the exploitation of masses by the small group of rich people through competition and marketing. Because of the demerits of heavy industries Gandhi encouraged small scale industries. About spinning wheel he wrote: “I would make spinning wheel the foundation on which to build a sound village life. I would make the wheel as the centre a round which all other activities will revolve.”

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1) What is the Gandhian concept of non-violent state?

2) What is the concept of *Satyagraha* according to Gandhi?

3) Explain the Gandhian vision of *Sarvodaya*?
2.7 TAGORE’S LIFE AND BASIC THOUGHT

Tagore was born on 7th August 1861, in Kolkata, Bengol. He belonged to an eminent and influential Bengali Brahmin family. He was born and brought up as an aristocrat and a lover of beauty. He became conscious of his higher mission of bringing human beings close to each other and to God. Tagore ranks with the greatest seers, sages and the devotees of India, who valued human being above everything else. Under the influence of the liberal tradition of his family and the philosophy of the Upanishads, he developed a positive view of life and love of humanity. He died on 7th August 1942.

Tagore had been deeply influenced by the thoughts of Upanishads and the Bhagavadgita. The medieval Indian religious and social philosophy also made an impact on his philosophical thinking. Though the metaphysics of Buddhism does not attract the poet much, the humanistic tradition of the Buddha and the Buddhist way of life appealed to him the most. In the spirit of the medieval saints and poets, he talked of the divinity of man/woman. Besides them, humanism of Vaisnavism, the mysticism of medieval saints, the philosophy of human being of the Baul sect of Bengal, humanism of Christianity and Buddhism helped him form his humanistic ideas and ideals. Apart from these, Brahmasamaj, the revival and reform of Bengali literature guided by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and the naturalistic and scientific movement also moulded his thinking.

2.8 SEARCH FOR THE ABSOLUTE AND NATURE OF THE WORLD

From his very early writings till his last poems Tagore’s poems are marked by a quest for the Absolute. From the beginning itself he felt that there is a basic current of unity, a basic force of life and harmony behind the world. In the poems of *Gitanjali*, this basic force takes the form of a ‘Thou.’ This ‘Thou’ is presented as Supreme person who stands beside everyone, whose strength can transform his/her weakness into strength. Although this ‘other’ is the companion of one’s life, he passes often unnoticed. Though man/woman fails to see him, yet he/she lives in a hope of a final encounter with this ‘Other.’ This final encounter will be a moment of ultimate bliss. One might look into the temples of organized religions to find this ‘Thou’. But the God whom he/she longs for or seeks for is not there. It is in this sense Tagore says; “whom does thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut? Open thy eyes and see, thy God is not before thee. He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground...” (*Gitanjali* XI). Already in *Gitanjali* Tagore suggests that the lord is to be discovered in man/woman rather than in the confines of the organized religions. The Absolute which was first discovered as the force present...
in nature, and then the force present in man\woman himself\herself is now declared as the “Supreme Man.” Tagore will now speak of the Humanity of our God or the divinity of man\woman.

**Reality and God**

Though in the metaphysical context the distinction between ‘God’ and ‘reality’ is still maintained, Tagore does not treat ‘reality’ and ‘God’ as two different entities. It is noticed that Tagore rarely uses the word ‘Absolute’ for the Absolute. The expressions that have been mostly used are: ‘The universal Man’, ‘The Supreme Person’, ‘The Supreme Spirit’, ‘The Infinite Personality’ etc. It can be said that his philosophy is peculiar and yet is a religious synthesis of Abstract Monism and a particular type of Theism. Reality, according to him is One. He identifies this reality with personal God. This identification of impersonal reality with personal God gives interesting results. And, therefore, Tagore can rightly be called ‘An Idealist’ or ‘A Spiritualist’; he can again be described both as a ‘Monist’ and a ‘Theist’. That is why many commentators on Tagore say so legitimately that Tagore’s philosophy oscillates between Sankara’s Vedanta and Vaishnavism.

**Nature of the world**

Tagore is of the opinion that the reality of creation has given a definite view on the nature of creation. Though his account of creation has a humanistic significance, it is, more or less, theistic. God, being the supreme reality, is the basis of the universe. Here, the creation is said to be the manifestation or the expression of the Absolute. According to Tagore, God finds Himself by creating. The reason for creation is joy. Using the Indian concept of ‘Lila’ Tagore says that creation is the ‘Lila’ of the creator. He creates in the fullness of joy- just to find Himself in the place of joy. Creation is separate from the Creator, and is yet united with Him.

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**Check Your Progress I**

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answer

1) What are the influences that moulded the philosophy of Tagore?

2) How does Tagore explain his concept of God?
3) What is the nature of the world that Tagore speaks about?

2.9 PHILOSOPHY OF HUMAN PERSON

The philosophy of Tagore itself suggests the ultimate aim of human person, that is, the final destiny. It is the realization of unity, the realization of Divinity; it is comprehension, in an act of supreme love, nature and everything else; it is the realization of the Universal within. Tagore says, “The ultimate destiny is the realization of immortality, of complete freedom. The spiritual progress of human being is from bondage to freedom. The embodied state is a state of bondage. As we go on unfolding the powers and the freedom of the soul by rising above the bodily bondage and by trying to realize our essential affinity with all, we are progressing towards immortality-towards the realization of complete freedom.” While accepting human person as a material, psychological, social and moral being at a time, Tagore lays more stress on the moral and spiritual aspect of human person’s nature.

Nature of Human Person

According to Tagore, human person’s real nature is that which he/she has not yet realized. The real glory of persons is hidden in him/her; it is not extrinsic but intrinsic. All his/her outward activities and achievements do not reveal his/her nature. He/she is never satisfied with his/her present state, with what he/she is, but he/she craves for what he/she ought to be. Tagore does not think human person to be imperfect, but incomplete, which is due to the fact that the real meaning of himself/herself is not yet realized in his/her present state. According to him human nature invites selfishness now and then and commits errors and crimes. This selfishness is human nature, which hinders the real view of our true nature. Tagore says, “Every individual is to be helped, wisely, reverently, towards his/her own natural fulfilment. Every human person shall be himself/herself, shall have every opportunity to come to his/her own intrinsic fullness of being. The final aim is not ‘to know’ but ‘to be’. Sin and evil are nature of person’s superficial self. According to Tagore, though man/woman had not actually revealed the infinity in his/her nature yet, in him/ her infinite is present potentially and therefore, he/she, by nature is not sinful, but good. Like other Vedic and great thinkers, Tagore thinks that with the removal of ignorance or avidya, the human person’s real nature will be revealed. His/her real nature is covered by the external covering of ‘aham’, which makes him/her limited to time and space.

The Self, Individuality and Universality of Human Person
Tagore emphasizes the reality and freedom of self. The self in us is divine. It is a part of God. The selves are the parts of the Divine, and they are, therefore, dependent on God. And therefore realize that ‘self’ which is divine in you. Human person is an individual, being and his/her individuality gives him/her unique identity among all creatures. Every individual is unique; in this plane he has no second to him/her. He strongly believed that no force can destroy this individuality of a person and no other being except God can enter into this world of person which he/she calls ‘mine’. The field of the individuality is the field of his/her freedom.

Human person is not only individual, but also is universal. Human person has an idea of perfection. This idea of perfect being is present in every human being, and here he/she has universality within himself/herself. These ideas and values make human person one with all other persons. Thus this universality of human person raises him/her above other laws of nature. In this level, human being is universal, therefore there is no difference between one human person and other human persons. The differences of social, educational, economical and political conditions cannot differentiate the inherent unity of all human beings. Tagore says, “Human person’s individuality is not the highest truth, there is that in him/her which is universal. If he/she were made to live in a world where his/her own self was the only factor to consider then that would be the worst prison imaginable to them, for a person’s deepest joy is in growing greater and greater by more and more union with all.”

Human Being as a Creator

As human being is free, his/her freedom is expressed in his/her creative act where he/she becomes a partner of the Supreme soul. His/her true nature is not revealed in his/her acts of necessities, but in the acts, which he/she does joyfully. Human being is not contented with the world given to him/her. Therefore, he/she creates his own world of creation. But that is only a pure work of art, which is created from human being’s overflowing joy, and inner urges of creation.

Immortality of Human Being

Human being is great because he/she does not want to live in isolation, but wants to comprehend all. Again human being is great because God is expressed through his/her being. As a human being is God’s expression, he/she cannot be limited by the narrow boundaries of his/her lower self. For Tagore, a human person is made in the image of the Divine artist, God Himself, and the Divine Artist is incomplete and unfulfilled unless He finds expression in the finite and human person imitates the Divine Artist. This is his/her religious response which gives him/her immortality in Divine creator. He/she is immortal in that aspect where he/she is ‘true’ transcending her/his small partial ‘Ego.’ In his/her inner being he/she actualizes the desire of all, gives form to joy of all. But if he/she goes to the opposite direction, he/she falls from the truth of humanity. Therefore, Tagore wants to live in the plane where Human being is immortal, where he/she dwells in the universal. Tagore reminds human beings that they are ‘children of immortality’. Their immortality consists in their greatness. Tagore compares a person’s greatness with the morning sun whose horizon is far away from us. A person’s greatness consists in this that he/she knows that he/she is not yet born and he/she is yet to realize his/her true nature.
2.10 TAGORE’S RELIGIOUS THOUGHTS

The Religion of Rabindranath was the poet’s religion. It was neither an orthodox religion of piety nor a mystic religion of a theologian. The religious consciousness and the poetic talent were so interrelated that he was unable to isolate the divine element from his poetic works. This is very well expressed in the insight meaning of his poetical work ‘Gitanjali’; his religious life has followed the same mysterious line of growth as his poetical life. The spiritual freedom or the liberation of the soul or ‘Mukti’ formed one of the cardinal truths of Religion. Each man/woman is conscious of the transcendental truth in him/her, which is made known to him/her through his/her inner fulfilment. The Religion of Tagore preaches fearlessness of the finite as it has implicit faith in the deathlessness of the real of ‘Whole man’. The philosophy of self-surrender and the integration of the individual being with the cosmic being are as old as the Upanishadic teaching i.e., ‘Tatvam-Asi’. All these are possible when a human being learns the real significance of selfless life and detachment.

2.11 SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Tagore’s ‘Social Philosophy’ cannot be separated from his ‘Humanism’. His social philosophy is an outcome of his humanism. In his social thinking humanistic viewpoint is expressed. His social thinking can be divided mainly into two broad divisions. One is the aspect of knowledge or analysis; another is the aspect of solving the problems or practical side. And he himself takes active part in removing and solving the problems of social injustice. Economic and political problems are also for him parts of our social life. Tagore never believes in the existence of any other world. When every individual of the earth unfolds all his/her potentialities and blooms in his/her fullest and complete form, and when all human beings co-exist in love and companionship with each other, heaven will come down to this earth. His social philosophy aims at progress of life in all its aspects. He was fully aware of all evils of India in those days – ignorance, poverty, social injustice, political subjection, slavery and bondage labour. Therefore in his philosophy, he wisely highlights the equality of human beings in full real freedom as individual human beings.

For Tagore, merely ‘no-war’ is not identical with peace, because according to him ‘no-war’ forms only negative aspect of peace. What matters to him is the positive aspect of peace, i.e. to realize spiritual harmony of human beings. Peace, according to him cannot be mere negative of war, but it should mean mutual understanding and sympathy among the people of the same nation, other nations and the universe at large. Therefore, real peace cannot be achieved by any instrument of policy but through the spirit of love. He has travelled all over the world preaching the ideal of universal peace. He believes that each race should be allowed to develop itself and at the same time a sense of unity should be developed in people, so that keeping their identities, the different races and nations can meet and unite with each other for the national and universal peace.
Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer.

1) What is the nature of a human being according to Tagore?

2) Explain Human being as ‘Individual’, ‘Universal’, ‘Creator’ and ‘Immortal’?

3) What does Tagore speak of religion?

4) Explain the social philosophy of Tagore.

5) How does Tagore look at the concept of peace?

2.12 LET US SUM UP

Gandhi’s system is a synthetic unity of different sciences. Humanism is the dominant principle in Gandhian philosophy. Gandhi speaks of two models to speak of God, namely, a theistic model and an *Advaidic* type of absolutism. He beautifully couples God with truth; he identifies God as truth and truth as God. The universe is considered as the expression of the absolute. Gandhi also finds the spiritual elements in the human being which acts as the basis of his/her dignity. Non-violent state characterized by economical equality can be considered as the essence of his political philosophy. In summary, his system is an exalted one in so far as he gives to mankind a complete set of social, economic, political, ethical and religious principles to govern the individual and humanity.
Tagore has an anthropomorphic conception of God. The infinite has been conceived as the supreme human personality. God is the creator of finite selves and nature. Though theism has the dominant theme in Tagore’s philosophy, the impersonal and indeterminate nature of the absolute also finds place. The creation is considered as the ‘Lila’ of the creator God. In other words God finds himself in creation. While speaking about human person, he places more emphasis on the spiritual and moral aspect of human being. One of the notable factors of Tagore’s philosophy is that he sometimes makes his position confusing. The inconsistency in his thinking is justified by the fact that he is, basically, a mystic and poet.

2.13 KEY WORDS

**Ethical naturalism**, which identifies the rightness or goodness of actions with their tendency to promote happiness, thereby reduces moral facts to natural ones.

**Lila**: A concept in Indian philosophy that explains the universe as a cosmic puppet theatre or playground for the gods. "Lila" literally means "play," but in religious texts it refers to "divine play" - life as a spontaneous game played by light hearted forces beyond our understanding.

2.14 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES


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