UNIT 27 GANDHISM (DHARMA, SWARAJ, SARVODAYA AND SATYAGRAHA)

Structure
27.0 Objectives
27.1 Introduction: Gandhi’s Writings
27.2 Some Influences which Shaped Gandhi’s Political Thought
27.3 Swaraj: Inward Freedom and Outward Freedom
27.4 Independence and Parliamentary Swaraj
  27.4.1 Some Features of Parliamentary Swaraj
27.5 Sarvodaya: Swaraj as Self-Realisation through Social Service
27.6 Satyagraha Versus Passive Resistance
  27.6.1 Principles and Methods of Satyagraha
  27.6.2 Some Evaluative Comments on Satyagraha
27.7 Let Us Sum Up
27.8 Some Useful References
27.9 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

27.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, our aim is to acquire a contextual understanding of the meaning and significance of the moral-political theory of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948), who is rightly revered as a Mahatma. His main political ideas are swaraj, sarvodaya and satyagraha. Regarding these political ideas, let us raise the following questions, to which we shall seek answers from this unit:

What does Gandhian swaraj mean? How is it a richer or better ideal than mere political independence or political freedom? How is it related to parliamentary democracy, self-control, self-realisation, etc.?

What, according to Gandhi, does sarvodaya mean? What, according to him, is the connection between sarvodaya and self-realisation? How is sarvodaya different from the political theory of utilitarianism and communism?

What are the distinctive principles and methods of the satyagraha way of political resistance and social transformation? How does satyagraha differ from passive resistance?

27.1 INTRODUCTION: GANDHI’S WRITINGS

Gandhi’s moral-political ideas can be found in his books as well as in his articles, letters and editorials in the four weekly journals, which he edited or published at different times during his public life in South Africa and India. These weekly journals were: Indian Opinion, Young India, Harijan, and Navajivan. Gandhi’s books, some of which were first serialised in his journals, were: Hind Swaraj, Satyagraha in South Africa, The Story of My Experiments with Truth, Ashram Observances in Action, A Guide to Health, Discourses on the Gita and Constructive Programme. Gandhi also wrote and published paraphrases and/or translations (in Gujarati) of Plato’s Apology, W. Salter’s Ethical Religion, John Ruskin’s Unto this Last, Henry David Thoreau’s Principles of Civil Disobedience and Leo Tolstoy’s Letter to a Hindoo. Almost all of Gandhi’s writings, including his numerous speeches, interviews
Gandhi’s writings were produced, not in any academic setting, but in the midst of actual political struggles by huge masses of people against racial discriminations, colonialism, economic exploitation, untouchability and communalism. Gandhi led those struggles in South Africa (1893-1914) and India (1915-1948). He also campaigned for them during several visits to England, where, incidentally, he had studied for and passed the bar-at-law examination. He did some of his writing on his days of silence and fasting and during several terms of imprisonment in South Africa and India. His famous book, *Hind Swaraj*, was written on board the ship *Kildonan Castle* during a return journey from England to South Africa in November 1909.

27.2 SOME INFLUENCES WHICH SHAPED GANDHI’S POLITICAL THOUGHT

For a historical-contextual understanding of Gandhi’s moral-political theory, it is necessary to bear in mind that during the years from 1905 to 1918, his attitude towards the British imperial system went through a protracted process of change from loyal support to, first, disenchantment and, then, to radical opposition. Some of the events which contributed to this change in Gandhi’s political ideology were: the Partition of Bengal, racial discriminations against Indians in South Africa, the Rowlatt Acts, the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre and the Khilafat issue.

The change in Gandhi’s political thinking during this period was also influenced by the following books, which he read:

i) **Critical Writings on Modern Civilization** (including some books on non-conformist Christianity)

During this period, Gandhi read the works of Tolstoy, Ruskin, Carpenter, Maitland, Salter, R.P.Dutt, Dadabhai Naoroji, etc. Of these, Leo Tolstoy’s *The Kingdom of God is Within You* and *The Gospel in Brief* and John Ruskin’s *Unto This Last* had a very great impact on Gandhi. They and to a lesser extent, the writings of other authors contributed to his becoming disenchanted with modern western civilisation. From these writings, Gandhi also derived some normative ideas of an alternative to the individualistic, utilitarian and authoritarian principles on which the imperial/colonial government rested. Gandhi’s ideas of swaraj and sarvodaya, meaning self-realisation through service to others (see below), were greatly influenced by Tolstoy and Ruskin.

ii) **Hindu Religious Philosophy**

Gandhi also studied the *Bhagavad Gita* and several other holy books of Hinduism, some of which were recommended to him by his Jain mentor, Rajchand Mehta, also called Raychandbhai. These were books on yoga, *advaita vedanta*, Jainism, Buddhism, Samkhya, etc. These books led Gandhi to espouse a set of religiously inspired norms or principles of personal and collective conduct, e.g., the values of *satya*, *ahimsa*, *aparigraha* and *samabhava*. Gandhi saw in them an alternative or corrective to the dominant, modern/western values or principles of individualism, utilitarianism and violence. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, for instance, he found an “infallible guide of conduct.” The hymns of Narsinh Mehta, a saint-poet of the fifteenth century, also instilled in him the value of service to others, especially the poor and the needy.

These readings and the aforementioned events turned Gandhi into a radical opponent of the imperial/colonial government in 1919-20. At a special session of the Indian National Congress held at Calcutta in 1920, Gandhi successfully moved a resolution
on non-co-operation against the government. India’s goal, he said, is nothing less than swaraj.

It was through this process of change in his thinking and actions during this decisive phase in his life that he developed his moral-political theory and practice of satyagraha, swaraj and sarvodaya. Together, these seemed to him to be providing an emancipatory alternative to the political theory of colonial/imperial modernity. He also believed that his conception of swaraj and sarvodaya is an emancipatory alternative to illiberal traditionalism as well.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.
    ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Enumerate some of the important writings/authors who influenced M. K. Gandhi.

..........................................................................................................................................
..........................................................................................................................................
..........................................................................................................................................
..........................................................................................................................................
..........................................................................................................................................
..........................................................................................................................................

2) Briefly trace the influences which shaped Gandhi’s socio-political thought.

..........................................................................................................................................
..........................................................................................................................................
..........................................................................................................................................
..........................................................................................................................................
..........................................................................................................................................
..........................................................................................................................................

27.3 SWARAJ: INWARD FREEDOM AND OUTWARD FREEDOM

By Swaraj, Gandhi meant both outward or political freedom and inward or spiritual freedom. In “outward freedom,” he included national political independence and parliamentary swaraj. They are forms of outward freedom in that they seek to free people from external control or rule by others, be they foreigners or one’s own compatriots.

By “inward freedom,” he meant freedom from such inner impediments as ignorance, illusions, selfishness, greed, intolerance and hatred. These, according to Gandhi, impede or obstruct the individual’s self-realisation or attainment of moksha, i.e. the atman’s realisation of its identity with the Brahman or paramatman. Hence, he writes: “Government over self is the truest Swaraj, it is synonymous with moksha or salvation.”
Gandhi made an original contribution, both in theory and in practice, with regard to both these types of swaraj. He talked of his ideal of swaraj as a square, of which the four inseparable sides are: (i) political independence; (ii) economic independence; (iii) non-violence in social relations and moral obligations toward others; and (iv) Truth as dharma. Gandhi’s description deserves quoting:

Let there be no mistake about my concept of swaraj. It is complete independence of alien control and complete economic independence. So at one end, you have political independence, at the other the economic. It has two other ends. One of them is moral and social, the corresponding end is dharma, i.e. religion in the highest sense of the term. It includes Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, etc., but is superior to them all. You may recognise it by the name of Truth that pervades everything and will survive all destruction and all transformation. Moral and social uplift may be recognised by the term we are used to, i.e. non-violence. Let us call this the square of swaraj, which will be out of shape if any of its angles is untrue. In the language of the Congress, we cannot achieve this political and economic freedom without truth and non-violence, in concrete terms without faith in God and hence, moral and social elevation.

27.4 INDEPENDENCE AND PARLIAMENTARY SWARAJ

The first component of Gandhi’s conception of swaraj as outward freedom is national political independence. He made a greater contribution than any other single individual to the transfer of political power from the imperial government to the Indian national leadership. He is rightly called the ‘Father of the Nation’.

While maintaining that national political independence was an essential meaning of his conception of swaraj, Gandhi argued that it is only a partial or incomplete meaning or component of it. In his view, a fuller or deeper conception of swaraj “is infinitely greater than and includes independence.” That fuller conception of swaraj includes, besides national political independence, the following additional components: a “parliamentary or democratic swaraj” and swaraj as self-realisation through service to others. Of these two additional components of comprehensive swaraj, the former is discussed in this section, leaving the latter to the next section.

In 1931, Gandhi declared that he was “wedded to adult suffrage.” On another occasion, he said: “Swaraj of a people means the sum total of the swaraj (self-rule) of individuals.” He elaborated it in the following words:

By Swaraj I mean the government of India by the consent of the people as ascertained by the largest number of the adult population, male or female, native-born or domiciled.... [R]eal swaraj will come not 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 obtained by educating the masses to a sense of their capacity to regulate and control authority.

What is conveyed in the above passages is a model of what Gandhi called “parliamentary or democratic swaraj,” for the attainment of which, he devoted a considerable part of his political work.

In Hind Swaraj (1909), Gandhi had taken an extremely negative view of the value or role of the institutions of modern civilization, namely, the parliament, law-courts, the police, the military, machinery, hospitals, railways, etc. These institutions of modern
Political Ideologies
civilization, he said, were divorced from morality, whereas, by contrast, “the tendency of Indian civilization is to elevate the moral being.” Accordingly, in place of the institutions of modern western civilization, he put forward an alternative ideal of “real home rule … [namely] self-rule and self-control” by the individuals in accordance with the spiritual values of truth and non-violence.

However, within a year of his active involvement in mobilising the Indian masses into the freedom struggle, Gandhi made a partial revision of his earlier views on the institutions of modern civilization. That revision was due not only to his active involvement in the freedom struggle, but also to the criticisms which many political thinkers and political leaders had made of Gandhi’s booklet. At any rate, within about a year of his final return to India from South Africa in 1915, Gandhi came to adopt a rather positive attitude towards the institutions of modern life, including the parliament, law-courts, machinery, railways and hospitals. Rather than dismissing them outright as he had done in his *Hind Swaraj*, he now reluctantly included them in what he called his “pardonable programme for the attainment of parliamentary swaraj.”

He said that his *Hind Swaraj* was to be taken, not as “an attempt to go back to the so-called ignorant dark ages”, but as an attempt to examine modern civilization “in the scale of ethics.” He declared that in the name of his ideal swaraj, he would not dream, as he had been accused of doing, “of no railways, no machinery, no army, no navy, no laws and no law courts.” He would rather have them re-structured so that they operate “for the benefit of the people,” and “not as now for draining the masses dry.” He now viewed “parliamentary”, i.e., “democratic swaraj” as a very necessary and valuable component of his conception of comprehensive swaraj. “So far as I can see,” he wrote in 1920, “Swaraj will be a Parliament chosen by the people with the fullest power over finance, the police, the military, the navy, the courts and the educational institutions.”

As to the organisational features of “parliamentary swaraj,” Gandhi preferred it to be a village-based, decentralized set-up, in which all but the lowest level of government was to be indirectly elected by the immediately lower level. This decentralised, village-based model of parliamentary/democratic swaraj was not the model that was favoured by the Congress and adopted by the Indian Constitution. The Constitution, however, does incorporate some so-called Gandhian institutions such as the village panchayats. Moreover, the personal and civil liberties as well as the democratic rights component of the liberal-democratic political philosophy of the Constitution are basic to Gandhi’s own moral-political philosophy.

27.4.1 Some Features of Parliamentary Swaraj

In his practical and theoretical work for establishing Parliamentary Swaraj, Gandhi concentrated on endowing it with four features: universal adult franchise, civil liberties, minority rights, and a primary commitment to justice for the poor and the exploited. These, he believed, are the necessary ingredients of parliamentary swaraj.

Gandhi regarded personal and civil liberties to be the “foundation” and “breath” of Parliamentary Swaraj. In a speech before the all India Congress Committee in September 1940, he said, “Freedom of speech and pen is the foundation of Swaraj”. It is the “only means”, he added, for the non-violent way of attaining swaraj.

The famous Karachi Resolution of the Congress on Fundamental Rights (1931) which was drafted by Jawaharlal Nehru, in consultation with Gandhi, was moved for adoption by Gandhi himself who incorporated many suggestions and revisions made by Gandhi. In fact, Gandhi was the mover of the resolution. The resolution included a most impressive list of personal and civil liberties and democratic, political rights.
Concerning the primacy of personal and civil liberties, Gandhi wrote:

Civil liberty consistent with the observance of non-violence is the first step towards Swaraj. It is the foundation of freedom. And there is no room there for dilution or compromise. It is the water of life. I have never heard of water being diluted.

Now, let us turn to the Minority Rights component of the Gandhian conception of Parliamentary Swaraj. Gandhi was acutely aware of the danger of parliamentary democracy lapsing into majoritarian tyranny over, or intolerance of, minority groups or communities. While he held resolutely to the procedural, majority rule principle of democratic government, he was equally committed to its other, twin or inseparable principle, namely the principle of the guarantee or protection of fundamental, cultural or religious rights of minority communities. In 1931, he said:

It has been said that Indian Swaraj will be the rule of the majority community, i.e., the Hindus. There could not be a greater mistake than that. If it were to be true, I for one would refuse to call it swaraj and would fight it with all the strength at my command, for, to me Hind Swaraj is the rule of all the people, is the rule of justice. Whether under that rule the ministers were Hindus or Mussalmans or Sikhs, and whether the legislatures were exclusively filled by the Hindus or Mussalmans or any other community, they would have to do even-handed justice. And … no community in India need have any fear of Swaraj being monopolised by any other…

Gandhi maintained that “matters of first rate importance” to the religious and cultural life of the minority communities should be kept outside the purview of the democratic, procedural principle of majority rule. Very insightfully, he wrote:

Democracy is not a state in which people act like sheep. Under democracy, individual liberty of opinion and action is jealously guarded. I, therefore, believe that the minority has a perfect right to act differently from the majority.

The golden rule of conduct … is mutual toleration, seeing that we will never all think alike and we see Truth in fragment and from different angles of vision. Conscience is not the same thing for all. Whilst, therefore, it is a good guide for individual conduct, imposition of that conduct upon all will be an insufferable interference with everybody’s freedom of conscience.

A very special feature of Gandhi’s conception of parliamentary/democratic swaraj is the justice of its basic institutions, which seeks to promote the welfare of all by giving primacy to the interests of the poor and needy. “A non-violent system of government,” he said, “is clearly an impossibility so long as the wide gulf between the rich and the hungry millions persists.” Let us quote him again:

Economic equality…is the master key to non-violent independence. …It means the levelling down of the few rich in whose hands is concentrated the bulk of the nation’s wealth, on the one hand and a levelling up of the semi-starved naked millions on the other. A non-violent system of government is clearly an impossibility so long as the wide gulf between the rich and the hungry millions persists.

Gandhi often spoke of his ideal of swaraj as “the poor man’s swaraj.” At the time of independence in 1947, he advised his countrymen to adopt a preferential approach to the poor not merely at the public-policy level, but at the personal level as well. He said:
I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen, and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to swaraj for the hungry and spiritually starving millions?

Gandhi’s conception of social/distributive justice, which he often referred to in terms of “economic quality,” is rooted in his trusteeship doctrine of property. He believed that statutory trusteeship is a form of organising economic life, which, without depriving the individuals of their legitimate incentives for greater productivity and without depriving the society of the increases in wealth, brings about a non-violent, equitable distribution of wealth.

In March 1946, Gandhi wrote: “Supposing India becomes a free country tomorrow, all the capitalists will have an opportunity of becoming statutory trustees.” He further stated:

As for the present owners of wealth, they would have to make their choice between class-war and voluntarily converting themselves into trustees of their wealth. They would be allowed to retain the stewardship of their possessions and to use their talent to increase the wealth, not for their own sake but for the sake of the nation and therefore, without exploitation. The state would regulate the rate of commission which they would get commensurate with the service rendered and its value to society. Their children would inherit the stewardship only if they proved their fitness for it (Harijan 31.3.1946).

In an article entitled “Theory of Trusteeship” (Harijan, 16 December 1939), Gandhi wrote:

I am not ashamed to own that many capitalists are friendly towards me and do not fear me. They know that I desire to end capitalism almost, if not quite, as much as the most advanced socialist or even the communist. But our methods differ, our languages differ. My theory of ‘trusteeship’ is no makeshift, certainly no camouflage. I am confident that it will survive all theories. It has the sanction of philosophy and religion behind it.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.
   ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) What were the four basic components of Gandhi’s Swaraj?

........................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................
2) Discuss Gandhi’s critique of modern western civilization.

.....................................................................................................................
.....................................................................................................................
.....................................................................................................................
.....................................................................................................................
.....................................................................................................................
.....................................................................................................................

27.5 SARVODAYA: SWARAJ AS SELF-REALISATION THROUGH SOCIAL SERVICE

Let us begin this section by noting that while swaraj conveys Gandhi’s idea of freedom, sarvodaya (welfare of all) conveys his idea of equality. We may also note that Gandhi’s doctrine of sarvodaya (which is often rendered as non-violent socialism) is a corrective to utilitarianism, communism and the doctrines which justify inequalities and exclusions on the basis of caste, race, colour, gender, etc.

“Sarvodaya” is the title, which Gandhi gave to his paraphrase of John Ruskin’s Unto This Last. In that book, Ruskin gave a moralistic critique of the science of political economy of self-interest. He brought out the role of “social affection” in our lives. Reading Ruskin brought about “an instantaneous and practical transformation” of Gandhi’s life. He learned three lessons from Ruskin’s book, namely: (i) that the good of the individual is contained in the good of all; (ii) that a lawyer’s work has the same value as the barber’s in as much as all have the same right of earning their livelihood from their work; and (iii) that a life of labour, i.e., the life of the tiller of the soil and the handicraftsman is the life worth living.

Of these three principles, the first is the main principle of sarvodaya (welfare of all). It is also the source of the other two principles. Gandhi clarified that he had known the first principle before reading Ruskin’s book, which only served to confirm it and give it a modern articulation. As we shall see below, a good deal of Gandhi’s ideas on sarvodaya were derived, as in the case of swaraj, from the holy books of Hinduism.

There are several steps in Gandhi’s thinking on sarvodaya (welfare of all). They are:

1) Our aim in life is self-realisation or moksha.
2) Self-realisation or moksha means identification of the self or atman with Brahman or God. This requires a discipline or yoga of self-purification.
3) The way of realising our identification with Brahman or, in other words, the way of finding God is to see God in all his creation and be one with it. This can only be done by the service of all.

Conveying these ideas, Gandhi wrote as follows:

• Man’s ultimate aim is the realisation of God, and all his activities, political, social and religious, have to be guided by the ultimate aim of the vision of God... The immediate service of all human beings becomes a necessary part of the endeavour simply because the only way to find God is to see Him in His creation and be one with it. This can only be done by the service of all.
• I am impatient to realise myself, to attain moksha in this very existence. My national service is part of my training for freeing my soul from the bondage of flesh. Thus considered, my service may be regarded as purely selfish. For me, the road to salvation lies through incessant toil in the service of my country and there through, of humanity.

Gandhi derived many of these ideas from the holy books of Hinduism. In them, he found a clear enunciation of the value of “disciplined rule from within,” which he understood to be the “root meaning” of swaraj. He wrote:

The root meaning of swaraj is self-rule. Swaraj may, therefore, be rendered as disciplined rule from within…. ‘Independence’ has no such limitation. Independence may mean license to do as you like. Swaraj is positive. Independence is negative…. The word swaraj is a sacred word, a Vedic word, meaning self-rule and self-restraint, and not freedom from all restraint which ‘independence’ often means.

Gandhi interpreted the Bhagavad Gita as depicting the futility of war and violence. Besides non-violence and truth, the other principles of morality which, according to Gandhi, the Gita teaches are: tapas, dana and yajna. He saw a “gospel of service” in the third chapter of the Bhagavad Gita. It taught him to desire the welfare of others. In his Discourses on the Gita, he pointed out that the Lord or Brahman dwells in all, including “the lame, the crippled and the afflicted.”

On the idea of service to all, Gandhi was also deeply influenced by his parents, the teachings of the Vaishnava saint-poets, especially, Narsinh Mehta, and the writings of Ruskin and the non-conformist Christians, especially Leo Tolstoy.

Gandhi believed that without self-restraint or self-purification, we could not render moksha-oriented service to others. Refuting the charge that these are ideals for the ascetics, he said that they are meant “for acceptance by mankind in general.” He wrote:

No worker who has not overcome lust can hope to render any genuine service to the cause of Harijans, communal unity, Khadi, cow-protection or village reconstruction. Great causes like these cannot be served by intellectual equipment alone, they call for spiritual effort or soul-force.

According to Gandhi, the terrain on which the connection between one’s moksha-realisation and one’s disinterested service of all takes place is the field of politics; namely, the field of “toil in the service of my country and therethrough of humanity.” This connection between moksha-realisation and service-centred politics was a constant theme in Gandhi’s writings and public work. Appropriately, he concluded his Autobiography with the following statement:

To see the universal and all-pervading Spirit of Truth face to face, one must be able to love the meanest of creation as oneself. And a man who aspires after that cannot afford to keep out of any field of life. That is why my devotion to Truth has drawn me into the field of politics; and I can say without the slightest hesitation, and yet in all humility, that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means. Identification with everything that lives is impossible without self-purification; without self-purification, the observance of the law of ahimsa must remain an empty dream.

In a ‘Foreword’ he wrote to Gokhale’s Speeches, Gandhi urged the sadhus, rishis, munis, maulvis and priests to become political sanyasis. He also called upon political workers to become spiritually and morally engaged. In his ‘Last Will and
Gandhi recommended the disbanding of the existing Congress organisation and its flowering into a Lok Sevak Sangh. He wished that its members would, thereby, devote themselves to the remaining tasks of the programme of swaraj and sarvodaya, which he delineated as follows:

India has still to attain social, moral, and economic independence in terms of its seven hundred thousand villages as distinguished from its cities and towns.

Gandhi also stipulated that the loksevaks would abjure untouchability and must believe in “the ideal of inter-communal unity, equal respect and regard for all religions and equality of opportunity and status for all irrespective of race, creed or sex.”

Gandhi’s moral-political conception of sarvodaya is a corrective both to Western utilitarianism and to the inequalities and exclusions of the traditional caste system. His critique of utilitarianism can be found in his Introduction to his Sarvodaya, which was his paraphrase of Ruskins’s book, Unto This Last. Gandhi wrote:

People in the West generally hold that the whole duty of man is to promote the happiness of the majority of mankind, and happiness is supposed to mean only physical happiness and economic prosperity. If the laws of morality are broken in the conquest of this happiness, it does not matter very much. Again, as the object sought to be attained is the happiness of the majority, westerners do not think there is any harm if this is secured by sacrificing a minority. The consequences of this line of thinking are writ large on the face of Europe.

In 1926, Gandhi brought out the difference between utilitarianism and sarvodaya in the following words:

A votary of ahimsa cannot subscribe to the utilitarian formula [of the greatest good of the greatest number]. He will strive for the greatest good of all and die in the attempt to realise the ideal. He will therefore be willing to die, so that the others may live. He will seve himself with the rest, by himself dying. The greatest good of all inevitably includes the good of the greatest number, and therefore, he and the utilitarian will converge in many points in their career, but there does come a time when they must part company, and even work in opposite directions. The utilitarian to be logical will never sacrifice himself. The absolutist [i.e. the universalist or the votary of ahimsa] will even sacrifice himself.

Check Your Progress 3

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) What are the essential elements of Gandhian Sarvodaya?

................................................................................................................................................
................................................................................................................................................
................................................................................................................................................
................................................................................................................................................
................................................................................................................................................
................................................................................................................................................
2) Trace the influence of Bhagvad Gita on the concept of Sarvodya.

.........................................................
.........................................................
.........................................................
.........................................................
.........................................................
.........................................................
.........................................................

27.6 SATYAGRAHA VERSUS PASSIVE RESISTANCE

Satyagraha is the name of the Gandhian, non-violent way of political action to resist and transform untruthful and violent systems of social or political power. During 1906-14, Gandhi successfully used such a way of political action to resist the policy of racial discrimination, which the British colonial government of South Africa had adopted against the Indian immigrants. In India, he led many local satyagraha campaigns, some notable ones being those of Champaran, Ahmedabad, Vaikom, Bardoli and Kheda. He also led a number of all-India satyagraha movements, beginning with the one against the Rowlatt Act in 1919.

Gandhi acknowledged that his theory of satyagraha was influenced to some extent by Henry David Thoreau’s writings. In Thoreau’s essay, “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience”, Gandhi found confirmation of his views on coercive features of state and on the individual’s obligation to his own conscience. “From Thoreau and Ruskin”, Gandhi wrote, “I could find out arguments in favour of our fight.”

Gandhi’s initial struggles against racial discriminations in South Africa were described as ‘Passive Resistance’. But, he soon found the English term to be unsatisfactory, partly because it was not intelligible to ordinary Indians and partly because it did not convey the special characteristic of his method of political struggle. Hence, in 1906, he invited the readers of his weekly, Indian Opinion, to suggest an alternative name. The best of the suggestions received was sadagraha, meaning “firmness in a good cause.” Gandhi changed it to satyagraha as it conveyed his preferred idea of “truth-force.” He explained his choice in the following words:

Truth (satya) implies love, and firmness (agraha) engenders and therefore serves as a synonym for force. I thus began to call the Indian movement “satyagraha” that is to say, the force which is born to Truth and Love or non-violence, and gave up the use of the phrase “passive resistance.”

Gandhi distinguished between body-force = brute-force = the force of arms from soul force = love force = truth force. He referred to the former as the method of violence, which, he said, is celebrated in and by modern civilization. Satyagraha, he said, relies on soul-force or truth-force and is appropriate to swaraj. He wrote:

Satyagraha…. is a method of securing rights by personal suffering; it is the reverse of resistance by arms. When I refuse to do a thing that is repugnant to my conscience, I use soul-force. For instance, the Government of the day has passed a law, which is applicable to me. I do not like it. If by using violence I force the Government to repeal the law, I am employing what may be termed body-force. If I do not obey the law and accept the penalty for its breach, I use soul-force. It involves sacrifice of self.
According to Gandhi, satyagraha was both practically necessary and morally desirable for the Indian Freedom Movement. He said that since the “English are splendidly armed”, it would take many, many years for the Indians to arm themselves in a matching or effective manner. More than this practical difficulty, Gandhi disapproved of the immorality of the method of violence. He pointed out that “to arm India on a large scale is to Europeanise it” or, in other words, to continue to be seduced by the morally flawed modern European civilization.

According to Gandhi, the distinctive features of satyagraha, in comparison with “passive resistance,” are as follows:

i) While the passive resisters harbour hatred toward their adversaries, the satyagrahis view their opponents with love.

ii) The passive resisters, unlike the satyagrahis, may harass and injure their opponents.

iii) Satyagrha, unlike passive resistance, can be offered even to one’s nearest and dearest ones.

iv) Passive resistance is a resistance by the weak and helpless, and it does not exclude the use of violence, whereas satyagraha is a moral-political action by the strong, and it excludes the use of violence. Believing themselves to be weak, the passive resisters would tend to give up the struggle at the earliest opportunity. “On the other hand,” Gandhi wrote, “if we offer satyagraha believing ourselves to be strong, two clear consequences follow. Fostering the idea of strength, we grow stronger and stronger every day. With the increase in our strength, our satyagraha too becomes more effective and we would never be casting about for an opportunity to give it up.”

27.6.1 Principles and Methods of Satyagraha

Satyagraha is based on the principles of satya (truth), ahimsa (non-violence) and tapas (self-suffering). Gandhi clarified this in his oral submission before the Disorders Inquiry Committee, presided over by Lord Hunter at Ahmedabad on 9 January 1920. The relevant questions and answers are reproduced below:

Q) I take it, Mr. Gandhi, that you are the author of the Satyagraha movement.

A) Yes, Sir.

Q) Will you explain it briefly?

A) It is a movement intended to replace methods of violence and a movement based entirely upon Truth. It is, as I have conceived it, an extension of the domestic law on the political field and my experience has led me to the conclusion that the movement and that alone can rid India of the possibility of violence spreading throughout the length and breadth of the land, for the redress of grievances.

Q) People differ as to the justice or injustice of particular laws?

A) That is the main reason why violence is eliminated and a Satyagrahi gives his opponent the same right of independence and feelings of liberty that he reserves to himself and he will fight by inflicting injuries on his person.

Gandhi believed in the dharmasastra tradition according to which dharma, derived from ‘dhr’ (to be firm, to sustain or uphold) refers to the moral law governing the cosmos. Its essence is satya (truth), the root of which is sat (being, reality, right, what is and what will be). Gandhi writes:

The word satya (truth) is derived from sat, which means being. And nothing is or exists in reality except Truth. That is why sat or Truth is perhaps the most
important name of God. In fact, it is more correct to say that Truth is God than to say that God is Truth... it will be realised that sat or satya is the only correct and fully significant name of God.

Since “nothing is or exists in reality except Truth”, the practico-political field too, says Gandhi, must partake of it. For Gandhi, in other words, the dissociation of politics from truth or morality is untenable. He said:

Some friends have told me that truth and non-violence have no place in politics and worldly affairs. I do not agree. I have no use for them as a means of individual salvation. Their introduction and application in every-day life has been my experiment all along.

Gandhi’s satyagraha is an experiment for the introduction of truth and non-violence into political conduct.

According to Gandhi, although Truth is absolute, our knowledge and experience of it is relative and partial. What we take to be truth may be untruth for others. Infact, the satyagrahi assumes that his opponents or oppressors are also truth-seekers, acting on the basis of what they perceive to be the truth. It is for this reason that ahimsa (non-violence) is the means of discovery of truth. “The basic principle on which the practice of non-violence rests”, writes Gandhi, “is that what holds good in respect of oneself equally applies to the whole universe. All mankind in essence is alike. What is therefore possible for one is possible for everybody.” Acting on the basis of relative truths, the satyagrahis seek to resolve basic conflicts and ensure social harmony through the non-violent path of vindicating the validity of rival truth claims. Gandhi writes:

It appears that the impossibility of the full realisation of truth in this mortal body led the ancient seeker after truth to be appreciative of ahimsa. The question, which confronted him, was shall I bear with those who create difficulties for me, or shall I destroy them? The seeker realized that he who went on destroying others did not make headway but simply stayed where he was, while the man who suffered those who created difficulties marched ahead, and at times even took the others with him... The more he took to violence, the more he receded from truth. For, in fighting the imagined enemy without, he neglected the enemy within.

Satyagrahis use truth-force or love-force not to eliminate the opponents or oppressors, but to bring about a restructuring of the total conflictual or oppressive relationship so that both parties to the initial conflict can realize a heightened mutuality or moral interdependence. Through satyagraha, the victims of oppression seek to liberate themselves by aiding in the emancipation of their oppressors from their self-deceptive truth-denying beliefs and actions. Satyagraha, Gandhi wrote in Hind Swaraj, “blesses him who uses it and him against whom it is used.”

By ahimsa, Gandhi did not mean merely non-injury to others. That would be a more negative or passive connotation of ahimsa, which has also a positive or active meaning, namely, love or charity. Gandhi writes:

In its negative form it (ahimsa) means not injuring any living being whether in body or mind. I may not, therefore, hurt the person of any wrong-doer or bear any ill-will to him and so cause him mental suffering. In its positive form, ahimsa means the largest love, the greatest charity. If I am a follower of ahimsa, I must love my enemy or a stranger to me as I would my wrongdoing father or son. This active ahimsa necessarily includes truth and fearlessness.
Gandhis (Dharma, Swaraj, Sarvodaya and Satyagraha)

In the light of what has been said earlier, we may conclude that for Gandhi, action based on the refusal to do harm to others is a negative test of moral or practical truth. Its positive test is action meant to promote the welfare of others.

Our desires and motives may be divided into two classes—selfish and unselfish. All selfish desires are immoral, while the desire to improve ourselves for the sake of doing good to others is truly moral. The highest moral law is that we should unremittingly work for the good of mankind.

We have so far considered two elements of satyagraha, namely, satya (truth) and ahimsa (non-violence). A third element is Tapas (self-suffering). Action based on love toward others, we saw earlier, is a positive test of truth. From this Gandhi goes on to say that tapas or self-suffering is the test of such love. Suffering injury in one’s own person, writes Gandhi, “is… the essence of non-violence and is the chosen substitute for violence to others”. Self-suffering by satyagrahis, it must be understood, is not out of their cowardice or weakness; it is based on a higher form of courage than that of those who resort to violence and it is meant to aid in the moral persuasion of one’s opponents or oppressors.

In the satyagraha mode of conflict resolution, self-suffering plays a complimentary role to that of reasoning. Persuading others through reasoning is indeed the essence of satyagraha. But satyagraha recognizes the limits of reason in resolving fundamental social, religious, political or ideological conflict, in which a rational consensus may not be easily or quickly forthcoming. Instead, Gandhi insisted that the direct action techniques of satyagraha are to be resorted to only after employing the usual processes of reasoning with the opponents or oppressors and only for securing their rational consent or conversion. He writes:

Since satyagraha is one of the most powerful methods of direct action, a satyagrahi exhausts all other means before he resorts to satyagraha. He will, therefore, constantly and continually approach the constituted authority, he will appeal to public opinion, educate public opinion, state his case calmly and coolly before everybody who wants to listen to him; and only after he has exhausted all these avenues will he resort to satyagraha.

In a satyagraha campaign, the satyagrahis seek to validate the truth of contested social “system” or norms through (i) reasoning, i.e., persuading the opponents about the untruth of their position and at the same time remaining open to their counter-arguments; and (2) appealing to the opponents through the self-suffering of the satyagrahis.

The various methods of satyagraha are: (1) purificatory or penitential actions by the satyagrahis, such as pledges, prayers and fasts; (2) acts of non-cooperation, such as boycott, strikes, hartal, fasting and hijrat (i.e. voluntary emigration); (3) acts of civil disobedience, such as picketing, non-payment of taxes and defiance of specific laws; and (4) a constructive programme of social reform and social service, such as the promotion of inter-communal unity, the removal of untouchability, adult education, and the removal of economic and social inequalities.

At each stage of the programme, the satyagrahis, while holding on to truth as they see it, assume their own fallibility and give the opponents every chance to prove that the satyagrahi’s position is erroneous. Satyagraha “excludes the use of violence because man is not capable of knowing the absolute truth and therefore not competent to punish.” The ideal to be kept in mind is that of a self-regulated society of communitarian truth, in which every one “rules himself in such a manner that he is never a hindrance to his neighbour”. “The claim for satyagraha”, writes Joan Bondurant, “is that through the operation of non-violent action, the truth as judged by the fulfillment of human needs will merge in the form of a mutually satisfactory and
agreed-upon solution.” Hence, the important operative principles to be observed by satyagrahis are the admission of truths as relative, non-violence and toleration, and the self-suffering of satyagrahis. Gandhi justified these operative principles in the following passages:

In the application of Satyagraha, I discovered that in the earliest stages that pursuit of truth did not admit of violence being inflicted on one’s opponent, but that he must be weaned from error by patience and sympathy. For what appears to be truth to one may appear false to the other.

People’s conceptions of true interests and just laws differ. This is the main reason why violence is eliminated and a Satyagrahi gives his opponent the same right of independence and feelings of liberty that he reserves to himself and he will fight by inflicting injuries on his person.

Evolution of democracy is not possible if we are not prepared to hear the other side. We shut the doors of reason when we refuse to listen to our opponents, or having listened, make fun of them. If intolerance becomes a habit, we run the risk of missing the truth. Whilst, with the limits that nature has put on our understanding, we must act fearlessly according to the light vouchsafed to us, we must always keep an open mind and be ever ready to find that what we believed to be truth was, after all, the untruth. This openness of mind strengthens the truth in us.

Check Your Progress 4

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.
   ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) How did Gandhi distinguish between passive resistance and satyagraha?

2) Briefly enumerate the methods of Satyagraha.

27.6.2 Some Evaluative Comments on Satyagraha

Concerning Gandhi’s theory and praxis of satyagraha, several critics maintain that non-violence and self-suffering are impractical methods against violent oppression.
The Gandhian way, they way, is “other-worldly” and “anti-humanist”. Gandhi maintained that non-violence and self-suffering were “not for the unworldly, but essentially for the worldly.” He did admit that these principles were very difficult to practice, but insisted that we need to, and can, keep on moving along these lines. “Perfect non-violence whilst you are inhabiting the body, he wrote, “is only a theory like Euclid’s point or straight line, but we have to endeavour every moment of our lives”. Gandhi rightly maintained that it is desirable and possible to bring about a predominantly non-violent society.

It may still be objected that satyagraha demands of the satyagrahis, self-suffering even unto death. It is true that self-suffering is a major element of satyagraha. However, self-sacrifice is also involved in case of violent resistance. Sacrifice even unto death is, thus, the common element in both violent and non-violent resistance against oppression. That is why Gandhi approved of the use of satyagraha only in cases of conflict over fundamental issues and only after all milder methods of non-violence have failed. “I should be deeply distressed,” he wrote in 1921, “if on every conceivable occasion every one of us were to be a law unto oneself and to scrutinise in golden scales every action of our future National Assembly. I would surrender my judgement in most matters to national representatives.” But when a situation of violent oppression persists even after all milder methods of non-violent resistance have been tried, Gandhi maintained that self-suffering even unto death of the non-violent fighter for truth is a better assertion of individual freedom than is the death-in-defeat of the violent resister.

Gandhi has himself given several explanations of the merits of the satyagraha way of political resistance and social transformation, in comparison with the methods of violence. In 1924, reacting to rumours that he was likely to be invited to visit the Soviet Union, Gandhi wrote:

I do not believe in short violent cuts to success. Those Bolshevik friends who are bestowing their attention on me should realize that however much I may sympathise with and admire worthy motives, I am an uncompromising opponent of violent methods even to serve the noblest of causes. There is, therefore, really no meeting ground between the school of violence and myself.

Two years later, Gandhi gave the following explanation of the real difference between violent and non-violent methods:

My non-violent resistance is activised resistance on a different plane. Non-violent resistance to evil does not mean absence of any resistance whatsoever, but it means not to resist evil with evil but with good. Resistance therefore, is transferred to a higher and absolutely effective plane.

As we saw above, Leo Tolstoy’s The Kingdom of God is Within You exerted a tremendous influence on Gandhi’s views on the repressive character of the modern state and his commitment to non-violent resistance. Gandhi acknowledged that reading Tolstoy made him realise the “infinite possibilities of universal love” and made him “firm believer in ahimsa”. Gandhi and Tolstoy corresponded with each other. In his last letter to Gandhi, Tolstoy acknowledged that his satyagraha movement in South Africa was a new and most important mode of emancipatory struggle by the oppressed.

Like Tolstoy, Einstein too has written in deep appreciation of Gandhian satyagraha. In a tribute published in a festschrift for Gandhi’s seventieth birthday, he wrote:

Gandhi is unique in political history. He has invented an entirely new and humane technique for the liberation struggle of an oppressed people and carried it out with the greatest energy and devotion. The moral influence which he has exercised upon thinking people through the civilised world may
be far more durable than would appear likely in our present age with its exaggeration of brute force. For the work of statesmen is permanent only in so far as they arouse and consolidate the moral forces of their peoples through their personal example and educating influence.

Check Your Progress 5

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.
ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Critically assess the concept of Satyagrah.

.....................................................................................................................
.....................................................................................................................
.....................................................................................................................
.....................................................................................................................
.....................................................................................................................
.....................................................................................................................

27.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you have read about the major intellectual components of Gandhism, viz, Dharma, Swaraj, Sarvodya and Satyagraha. The unit has introduced you to some of the prominent thinkers whose ideas and writings shaped Mahatma Gandhi’s social and political thought. The concept of Swaraj, you have learnt, has both an outward and inward dimension. The idea of Parliamentary Swaraj has been separately dealt with in detail. As also Sarvodaya. Last but not the least, the concept of Satyagraha and Passive Resistance has been elucidated as well as the principles and methods of Satyagraha. The unit ends with a critical assessment of Satyagraha. It is hoped that you would be now in a better position to understand the fundamentals of Gandhian thought.

27.8 SOME USEFUL REFERENCES


Check Your Progress Exercise 1
1) See Section 27.1
2) See Section 27.2

Check Your Progress Exercise 2
1) See Section 27.3
2) See Section 27.4

Check Your Progress Exercise 3
1) See Section 27.5
2) See Section 27.5

Check Your Progress Exercise 4
1) See Section 27.6
2) See sub-section 27.6.1

Check Your Progress Exercise 5
1) See sub-section 27.6.2