

Gandhi places importance on truth as an ontological category. In fact, Gandhi's entire set of ideas have ontology as their basis and is reflected in the centrality accorded to the question of human existence (Alam, p.2). In his formulation *Truth is God*, he is making both an ontological as well as epistemological point. Ontologically, truth sustains all existence and being (sat = being), it means that the essence of God consists of truth. Epistemologically, the essence of God can be captured through truth, and that the only way to approach God is through truth (Sayeed, p.99). In fact, 'Truth is God' is similar to the ontological equation *Satya – Brahman* of the Upanishads, although Satya in the Upanishads is much more than an ontological term; it was a philosophical truth. For Gandhi, 'the search for truth is the *dharma* of Hinduism, that Truth is God, and that God is the essence of the Vow' (Rothermund, pp.97-99).

Aims and Objectives

After reading this Unit, you will be able to:

- understand the essence of Gandhi's concept of Truth;
- know the reasons for Gandhi's reformulation of God is Truth to Truth is God;
- understand the features, facets and moral basis of the concept of Truth ;
- appreciate the practice of Truth in thought, speech and action; and
- know about the means of attaining truth – *Ahimsa* and *Satyagraha*.

8.2 'GOD IS TRUTH' TO 'TRUTH IS GOD'

Truth is not independent of our moral values. Likewise, truth is not merely a cognitive notion; it is much more than that. Gandhi had initially stated that God is Truth. Gandhi reversed his statement God is Truth to Truth is God sometime in 1929. Gandhi evolves as a thinker when he moves from God is Truth to Truth is God. He explains that it is a culmination of his relentless search for Truth. He initially approached Truth through love but found soon enough that human love in terms of passion may have a tendency to degrade because it sometimes involves association with flesh. He also felt uneasy with the formulation of God as love because the latter can have varied meanings in different situations but the meaning of Truth did not suffer from such inconsistencies. There is more consensus and clarity on what is truth than what love means. Truth spontaneously resonated with everyone, even the atheists who were passionate seekers of Truth themselves. His exposition of the idea of Truth struck a chord with the followers of every religious sect, and non-followers as well, because it is the basis of one's quest that no one can deny. It is the inclusiveness of the idea Truth is God that enabled Gandhi to make a distinction from his earlier statement God is Truth and he explains that this earlier statement excluded atheists who did not believe in God but were staunch votaries of truth. Truth as an equivalent of God was an unacceptable proposition for atheists because of their conviction, but there was a certain kind of moral earnestness that made them serious seekers of truth in the same manner as those who believed in the existence of God. The moment one expresses Truth as an attribute of God, it is construed to be a dispassionate search for reality, devoid of any religious connotations – dogmatic or otherwise. He refers to an atheist acquaintance and says how he disarmed the latter by referring to him as a 'truth-fearing man, and not a God-fearing man' (Gandhi's address in Lausanne, Switzerland, 31 December 1931, reproduced in Ramana Murti, pp.73-74). Pandit Nehru also

acknowledged himself to be a follower of religion if it meant search for truth though he was impatient with the religious systems when they brought conflicts in their wake (S.K.George, 1949, p.97). The notion Truth is God includes everyone, agreed to by all, and disagreed by none as it reflects Truth's undivided quality.

Secondly, there are a number of difficulties in describing God no matter how we attempt it. But in many religions (Hinduism and Islam) God alone is and nothing else exists. 'Nothing is or exists in reality except Truth. That is why *sat* or *satya* is the right name for God. In fact, it is more correct to say that Truth is God than to say that God is Truth... On deeper thinking, however, it will be realized that *sat* or *satya* is the only correct and fully significant name for God.' Hence, he believes that the definition Truth is God is most satisfying and appropriate without excluding those who may approach God differently (Ramana Murti, 1970).

Thirdly, Truth has most qualities that God exemplifies: fearlessness, conscience, beyond sensory perception. Yet Gandhi believes that God is Truth leads in a way to the rejection of truth itself. In Hinduism, God alone exists and nothing else whereas etymologically the meaning of the term Truth, derived from the word *Sat*, is the one that exists. "The word *satya* comes from *sat*, which means "to be", "to exist". Only God is ever the same through all time. A thousand times honour to him who has succeeded, through love and devotion for *satya*, in opening out his heart permanently to its presence. I have been but striving to serve that truth." (Gandhi, cited in Ramana Murti, p.61). The expression God is Truth eliminates the possibility of the existence of Truth if one were to believe in Hinduism and Islam. Hence, the expression Truth is God is more appropriate as it does not exclude the existence of Truth or does not conflict with our belief in the oneness and exclusive existence of God. In fact, since God alone represents eternal being - the fundamental reality - He is the truth. Here, Gandhi releases his concept of Truth from theological connotations so that it is not sucked into any single religious system.

Fourthly, Sayeed gives a philosophical explanation to the reformulation of the idea of God is Truth by Gandhi. He claims that this reformulation was not a casual or more elegant expression preferred by Gandhi. It was to represent a deeper insight in the sense that the "assertion 'Truth is God' was an attempt to express an insight which sought to state a substance-attribute relation". In God is Truth, Truth becomes an attribute of God, one of the many attributes that God may represent. In this proposition, God is the substance, the fundamental core, and Truth is the attribute, one of the ways in which that substance can be understood. To thus "relegate truth to just one of the attributes of God is to fail to understand the nature of reality in question". When the assertion is reformulated to Truth is God, Truth becomes the primary attribute, the fundamental core. In fact, Truth is the essence of God (Sayeed, pp.97-99).

8.3 ABSOLUTE TRUTH AND RELATIVE TRUTH

Gandhi thought that there is an absolute Truth¹, which he identified with God, devoid of all imperfections and inconsistencies. Absolute Truth is total and all-embracing. But this absolute Truth is indescribable, neither easily cognisable nor easily attainable. In fact, what we ordinarily realise is relative truth and not absolute Truth. But at any given point of

¹ When Gandhi refers to absolute truth or the ultimate reality and equates it with God, he uses Truth with a capital T. In references to relative truth or individual's understanding of truth, it is written with a small t.

time, that (relative truth) becomes the whole truth. If we do not easily understand the absolute truth in our normal course of thought, it does not mean that it does not exist. Since absolute Truth is very difficult to reach, one must constantly and relentlessly strive towards realising it by acting in accordance with the truth as we see it. Since our efforts are imperfect in nature, Gandhi calls them (those efforts) as experiments with truth (Sayeed, p.87).

For Gandhi, truth is not a monolithic concept. It is plural in its essence, many-sided in its facets and is given to varied interpretations. Truth has spiritual, moral and metaphysical dimensions. Since our understanding of truth is relative, incomplete and fragmentary, our vision of truth is partial. Reality can be cognized in many different ways all of which are equally valid (Richards, p.7). Therefore we must respect others' understanding of truth, truth as they see it, which might be different from our own perception of it. Our imperfection in understanding absolute Truth warrants us to be tolerant towards others' perception of truth and their actions based on it. This tolerance towards others having a different point of view later becomes the source of Gandhi's insistence on non-violence as a means of achieving truth. Akeel Bilgrami believes that Gandhi believed in moral judgement but did not wish to extend or advocate his judgement or action as *the* correct method to attain truth in a given situation. He did not believe in formulating it as a principle to be followed by others. However, Gandhi's rigour in following what he held to be the morally correct path often set an example for others and was far more effective in practice.

Many have argued that Gandhi's notion of truth is not merely an epistemic issue or of theoretical concern alone. He transformed absolute truth of the philosophical sat to the relative truth of ethical principle capable of being tested and applied (Joan Bondurant, cited in Erikson, p.413). His idea of truth has moral and spiritual dimension of relevance to both individual and collective action. It is the overarching moral law that rules every other positive or man-made law enacted by the state (see Alam, pp.6, 9). If a man-made law is seen as contradicting the moral law, disobedience to such state law would be perfectly legitimate. The characteristics of Truth are that it is absolute, eternal, objective, beyond our sensory perceptions and difficult to reach the perfection. It is for this reason that Gandhi calls his search for truth as experiments. Absolute Truth is objective in nature, one that does not change with the changing perceptions. On the other hand, actual truth or relative truth is subjective in nature; it is not the same for each one of us and it changes according to our perception. Absolute Truth is central to a faith but it is not unique to any one religion or religious tradition. It is a universal value equated with all religions because it is God. If Truth is a superior value, then it is an objective to be attained, not an expediency to be employed.

Truth is to be attained and achieved in both private and public realm, at the level of the individual and the collective. In fact, as a logical extension of this reading of Gandhi's notion of truth, it is held that politics was the most natural vocation chosen by Gandhi as it lent him space in public domain within which he could experiment with truth. He saw religion (*dharma* here connotes both religion and one's sense of duty towards moral law) and politics as inseparable when he said, 'I do not believe that the spiritual law works in a field of its own. On the contrary, it expresses itself only through the ordinary activities of life. It thus affects the economic, the social and political fields' (Gandhi, *Young India*, cited in Rothermund, p.98) Gandhi saw a natural unity and interconnectedness in spiritual, moral and political dimensions of his experiments with truth. If truth is the highest morality in itself then it is apparent that for Gandhi this was the essence of *dharma*.

8.4 TRUTH IN THOUGHT, SPEECH AND ACTION

Gandhi said that God appears not in person but in action. He advocated truth in thought, truth in speech and truth in action. Truth for him was not merely a philosophical concept; it was the basis of moral life and acted as a link between moral principles and our actions so that moral life can be attained in practice. His quest for truth involved ‘not only bhakti yoga, that is the discipline of prayer and devotion, but also karma yoga that is, the discipline of action’ (Richards, p.13). The primacy of putting moral principles (those that we hold as of paramount importance) into practice is to drive home the fact that truth as the moral law is to be adhered not in thought alone but that it has to be translated into action. Only then can one say that one has tried to live a moral life. There is an inevitable connection between thought, speech and action insofar as truth is concerned. “Truth is taken by Gandhi as the supreme principle of moral life since it is the law that regulates all human actions. All actions are judged as morally good if they are based on truth... Gandhian morality could be called the morality of truth.” (Pradhan, p.37). In our thoughts and intentions, in our words and gestures and in our decisions and actions there is no scope for straying from the path of Truth as we perceive it. However, what we can comprehend as truth is only partial truth. We cannot see beyond it but by following the path of partial truth, gradually, we will be able to experience the complete, absolute truth.

Since truth is the basis of all moral principles and actions, it is the supreme law and higher than any man-made law. Moral law based on truth is the **trump law** that overrides every other law in the same way as, say in a game of cards, the trump card overrules (trumps) every other card. Since truth as moral law is never wrong, ahimsa as a moral principle derived from it can never be wrong or unsuccessful. Truthful action, for Gandhi, was “governed by the readiness to get hurt and yet not hurt – action governed by the principle of *ahimsa*” (Erik Erikson, p.412) to which we will now turn.

8.5 MEANS OF ACHIEVING TRUTH

8.5.1 Non-violence (Ahimsa)

Satyagraha and non-violence are paths to realise truth. These methods may or may not succeed in empirical terms but they are corollary of truth and hence they can never be wrong. For Gandhi, non-violence is not merely a strategy to be employed to seek success in political action; it is rather the only moral method possible to attain relative truth. Non-violence is not only a moral method but is also a moral principle derived from truth. If ahimsa is seen merely as a tactic, it would make us believe that violence is right but cannot be employed as a tactic. Gandhi believed non-violence as the law of the universe, of every species and therefore, it cannot go wrong or be unsuccessful. Gandhi’s contention was that a means based on the natural law of the universe cannot run counter to our idea of truth. Truth is the end (goal) and non-violence is the means. Since ends and means are controvertible, a truthful person, by definition, is a non-violent person and *vice versa*. Non-violence automatically flows from truth. ‘While truth is the bed-rock principle, non-violence follows as a corollary’ (Pradhan, p.38). He believes in non-violence as the supreme duty and understands it in the broadest sense.

The need for ahimsa as a means for realising truth has two bases. Firstly, a seeker of truth must be a humble person and humility forbids the use of force. One cannot impose one’s will on others; or make others alter their perception of truth by sheer verbal or other force. Himsa or violence runs counter to love, compassion and humility which are

the attributes of truth. Ahimsa is an eternal principle because human existence depends on it. Secondly, ahimsa should be adopted not because it is a means to achieve truth but because it is the *only* method in arriving at truth and the most effective one too. It is in conformity with the law of the universe and hence bound to be successful. Non-violence fortifies the principle of existence because of its moral character. "Non-violence is the greatest force man has been endowed with. Truth is the only goal he has. For God is none other than truth. Truth cannot be, never will be, reached except through non-violence" (Iyer, p. 240).

Non-violence here is not to be understood as not killing alone; it means abstinence from any evil thought, hatred, vengeance, and wishing ill to others. Non-violence here is not only a refusal to inflict physical harm on others; it was also 'a determination not to violate another person's essence' (Erikson, p.412). Positively, ahimsa would involve love and goodwill towards others. Non-violence inheres and subsumes mutual love and respect for human life. It makes allowance for human progress. Adopting the path of non-violence will aid the realisation of truth because it respects others' life and instills a sense of love towards all existence. Ahimsa is the moral law that defines human existence in the same manner as violence is the law of the brute. Non-violence is meant to be practised not by the weak and infirm but by the strong for 'only the strong knows the limits of the physical strength'. One needs to know the boundaries of violence to realise non-violence. 'The might of non-violence is far superior to the total strength of violence in the world' (Pradhan, p.44).

Gandhi believed that non-violence required self-discipline of the body and mind since it might entail suffering and stretch one's patience to the limit in its wake. He prescribes that those who make individual search for truth must go through several vows or 'five restraints' to strengthen one's mind and body to be able to realise truth. They are: the vow of truth or satya, the vow of brahmacharya (celibacy), of non-violence, of non-stealing (asteya or poverty), and of non-possession (aparigraha). Although these vows were sacrosanct for a satyagrahi, Gandhi allowed non-observance of some of those vows if he felt that it was done in good faith. There are instances where he allowed his Bengali friends to eat non-vegetarian food when strict vegetarianism over an extended period of time affected their health and efficiency. Non-stealing and non-possession were interpreted as allowing oneself to possess the bare minimum that was needed for survival. Having anything more than what minimum needs warranted would amount to stealing. Gandhi felt that through such rigorous self-control and abstinence, a satyagrahi (the civil resister) must be able to 'compel reverence and love even of the opponent by the purity of his life, the utter selflessness of his mission and the breadth of his outlook' (Cited in Rothermund, p.105). In fact, he says that when someone lied before him he felt more angry with himself rather than with the offender because it made him realise that untruth still existed somewhere deep in him. It also made him aware of his own incompleteness, and inability in perfecting the path of satyagraha, that there was still an element of untruth remaining in him, so as not to be able to compel the offender to speak the truth.

8.5.2 Satyagraha

Satyagraha had a broader meaning than one can see in its literal translation. It was to mean both the insistence on truth and a method of holding on to that truth. Satyagraha for Gandhi meant fighting oppression through voluntary suffering. It was not physical force. One who believes in and lives by satyagraha should harbour no ill-will towards anyone,

should not utter harsh word about anyone, should not inflict harm on an adversary, and not seek destruction of opponents. This would be observance of satyagraha in thought, speech and action. At no time and in no circumstance can the use of arms be permitted in satyagraha; the struggle must be a constant reminder that it is based on truth and highest form of non-violence (Iyer, pp.309, 314-315). In fact, where conditions of satyagraha like non-violence, insistence on truth, selfless suffering were not met, Gandhi termed it as *duragraha* (dur = evil and agraha = insistence). *Duragraha* is defined as the abuse of satyagraha. It involves both the use of force or coercion and ‘the persistence of wrong doing’. “Whatever is done with a selfish motive cannot be called *satyagraha*. That would be like insisting on untruth. ...two things are essential for *satyagraha*. One is that the point on which we insist should be truth and another that our insistence should be necessarily non-violent” (Iyer, p.328.)

Satyagraha is premised on voluntary self-control, discipline and restraints as its prerequisites. Since Gandhi regarded Truth as a moral duty of every person, insistence on truth (satyagraha) at every stage was important. Just as non-violence involves the vow of truth, satyagraha involves non-violence, love, sacrifice and the like. Satyagraha must be followed in private and public domain, in political and non-political sphere, so that there is no sphere or space left where actions based on untruth may occur. One who follows the path of truth does so in every action and at every stage and in all circumstances. Since the path of truth is full of suffering, satyagraha is understood to be suffering, struggle and sacrifice for which a satyagrahi must for ever prepare himself. If need be, he must be ready to lay down his life for truth. When satyagraha is used as a political weapon, it has the inherent ability to succeed but it must never be used to force and coerce the opponent to fall in line. The moment an element of coercion finds its way into satyagraha, it ceases to be a means of achieving truth.

A seeker of truth, one who serves truth with utmost humility, will never suffer defeat because truth always triumphs. Even when it appears that a satyagrahi has failed, it is only an appearance. The result may not be a desired one but it is a victory in itself. Satyagraha is an infallible remedy. Eventually, it is the truth that prevails over untruth. Therefore, even in the face of difficulties, a satyagrahi must never give up his path of truth, for this path is only for the brave and never for a coward. Many, who aspire to follow truth scrupulously, hardly succeed in doing so even in the limited sphere of speech. So vow of truth is no easy matter.

8.6 SUMMARY

Let us briefly recapitulate here the main aspects of Gandhi’s conception of truth. It is now fairly clear from what has been discussed in the preceding pages that truth is central to his entire thought and life. There is a logical interconnectedness in all his ideas which is reflected in his notion of truth as well. It is a moral and religious idea but is devoid of any theological connotations. Truth, for Gandhi, is the basis of all religions and it is not specific to any single or particular religion.

Truth has both ontological and epistemological connotations. Truth is the only means that helps us to be cognisant of God and truth is also the only means that allows us to access Him. However, truth is an important and an irrefutable category even for those who do not believe in God, but are earnest seekers of truth, because it is not merely a way of reaching God but is a moral value that must be pursued and achieved. Gandhi makes a distinction between absolute truth and relative truth. Absolute truth is objective, unchanging,

neutral, and independent. Relative truth is subjective, particular, mutable and person-specific. Gandhi accords importance to both these categories in that absolute truth is not easily attainable and therefore, one must constantly endeavour to reach it through relative truth as we see and understand it.

Gandhi began with the formulation 'God is Truth' and moved to 'Truth is God' later on. He assigns many reasons for this shift such as the need to include atheists who are seekers of truth, God as love being problematic because love is subjective (one that means different thing to different people) besides having a tendency to degrade due to its association with flesh, and that in Hinduism and Islam, God alone is and nothing else exists.

Gandhi identifies non-violence (ahimsa) and satyagraha as the two means of achieving truth. Truth is to be attained in thought, speech and action. Since non-violence is the law of our species, it is always in accordance with nature. What is natural can never be against truth. A non-violent person must be a humble man and must exercise five restraints to discipline his mind and body. Satyagraha as the other means of attaining truth advocates speaking truth at all times and is related to non-violence as a practice. Satyagraha can never fail. It is bound to succeed although in the short run the results may seem to be to the contrary. Satyagraha and non-violence are predicated upon each other. One cannot work without the other.

8.7 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. Highlight the importance of the concept of truth in Gandhian thought.
2. Discuss the various reasons as to why Gandhi believes that Truth is God is a better formulation than God is Truth.
3. What is the difference between absolute truth and relative truth?
4. How do you relate truth in thought, speech and action to the concept of ahimsa?
5. Define satyagraha and underline its importance as a means of achieving truth.

GLOSSARY

Epistemology – It is the theory of knowledge concerned with the nature, sources and limits of knowledge. 'What can we know and how do we know it?' The question about knowledge can be divided into four main groups – concerning its nature, its types, what is known and its origin.

Metaphysics (Ontology) – The question of metaphysics arise out of, but go beyond, factual and scientific questions about the world. A central part of metaphysics is ontology that is used to refer to philosophical investigation of existence, of study of being. Ontology borders on philosophy of religion with questions like: Does anything exist necessarily? Ontology helps us in seeking clarity about the nature of reality.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- Alam, Javeed., 'Introduction', *Social Scientist*, vol. 34, nos. 5-6, 2006, pp.1-16.
- Chatterjee, Margaret., *Gandhi's Religious Thought*, Macmillan, New Delhi. Chapter 4 on 'Experiments with Truth', 1983, pp 58-74.
- Diwakar, R. R., "Gandhi: From 'God is Truth' to 'Truth is God'", *Gandhi Marg*, February, 1983, pp.617-626.
- Ericsson, Eric., *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Non-violence*, W. W. Norton, New York, 1969.
- George, S.K., 'Basic Religion: A Study in Gandhiji's Religion' in Kshitis Roy, ed., *Gandhi Memorial Peace Number*, Shantiniketan: The Visva Bharati Quarterly, 1949.
- Iyer, Raghavan., (ed)., *The Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1993.
- Nehru, Jawaharlal., 'The Pilgrim in Quest of Truth' in B. R. Nanda, ed., *Mahatma Gandhi – 125 Years*, ICCR/ New Age International Publishers, New Delhi, 1995.
- Pradhan, R.C., 'Making Sense of Gandhi's Idea of Truth', *Social Scientist*, vol. 34, nos. 5-6, 2006, pp. 36-49.
- Ramana Murti, V. V., (ed)., *Gandhi – Essential Writings*, Gandhi Peace Foundation, New Delhi, 1970.
- Richards, Glyn, *The Philosophy of Gandhi*, Curzon Press, Richmond, Surrey, 1991.
- Rothermund, Indira N., 'Mahatma Gandhi and Hindu Tradition' in Subrata Mukherjee and Sushila Ramaswamy, ed., *Facets of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 4, Deep and Deep, New Delhi, 1994.
- Sayeed, Syed A., 'Ethics of Truth: Non-Violence and Truth', *Social Scientist*, vol. 34, nos. 5-6, 2006, pp.84-103.