

**GANDHI ON TRADITION AND REFORMATION:  
A CRITICAL APPRAISAL**

**Thesis submitted to the University of Hyderabad in fulfillment  
of the requirement for the award of the Degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy in Philosophy**

**By**

**G. LAKSHMI PRASAD**



**Department of Philosophy  
School of Humanities  
University of Hyderabad  
Hyderabad – 500 046  
February – 2010**

**Department of Philosophy  
School of Humanities  
University of Hyderabad  
Hyderabad – 500 046**



***CERTIFICATE***

**This is to certify that the research work embodied in the present thesis entitled *GANDHI ON TRADITION AND REFORMATION: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL*, carried out by Mr. G. Lakshmi Prasad and submitted to the University of Hyderabad in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of *Doctor of Philosophy* in Philosophy, is an original research work and completed under our supervision and guidance. To the best of my knowledge, the thesis has not been submitted to any other University or Institution for the award of any degree.**

**Dr. K. S. Prasad  
Supervisor**

**Prof. Amitabha DasGupta  
Co - Supervisor**

**Prof. A. Raghuramaraju  
Head of the Department**

**Dean  
School of Humanities**

**Department of Philosophy  
School of Humanities  
University of Hyderabad  
Hyderabad - 500 046**



### ***DECLARATION***

I hereby declare that the present thesis entitled ***Gandhi on Tradition and Reformation: A Critical Appraisal***, submitted to the University of Hyderabad in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy is an original research work done by me under the supervision and guidance of Dr. K. S. Prasad and Prof. Amitabha DasGupta. The thesis has not been submitted to any other University or Institution for the award of any degree.

**Date:**

Signature of the Candidate

**Place:**

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# **Introduction**

## Introduction

**M**ohandas Karamchand Gandhi is widely recognized as one of the most original and influential political thinkers and activists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Of all the great figures of the twentieth century, he perhaps stood the test of time. In the aftermath of a century of unprecedented mass violence, many see Gandhian Philosophy of non-violence is the only possible future for mankind, a future without hatred, greed and lust for power. Interest in his thought and an action, far from diminishing, is on the rise and his message to the world appears uniquely relevant.

Gandhi never wrote a comprehensive and systematic political or philosophical work in the mode of Thomas Hobbes or Hegel, and the pamphlets and books he did write are extremely diverse in topic: they include criticisms of modern civilisation, the place of religion in human life, the meaning of non-violence, social and economic programmes and even health issues. These works are constructed upon a series of concepts (*satyagraha*, *swaraj*, *sarvodaya*) which Gandhi elaborates into thematic strands. Gandhi combined political activity with social reform. As early as *Hind Swaraj*, he insisted that merely getting independence from the British is not enough. He stressed the need for social reform. Without the latter, the former, he argued is not enough. Social reform includes eradication of poverty, and untouchables by highlighting values such as truth, non-violence etc. All these according to Gandhi must be undertaken simultaneously. He also celebrated manual labour, traditionally despised by the upper castes. This was to lead to the rehabilitation of village level cottage industries, which alone would remove seasonal unemployment and reduce rural poverty. These socio-economic priorities together with the abolition of untouchability are the priorities Gandhi envisaged. More than claiming whether he is for the modern or for the tradition, he was more interested in ending the exploitation of the masses. Further, rather than envisaging an unrealistic Utopia, he insisted on social reform that proceeds gradually. He displayed unhesitating courage in opposing authority of the tradition, wherever they are not consistent with his core beliefs. At the same time he did admit his limitations and even defects. He continuously experimented and changed wherever he was convinced. Gandhi is usually branded as a forceful critic of modernity which made many to see him as proposing a return to past. But he was not a religious fundamentalist or a cultural revivalist like many

critics of modernity. The reformist element, the idea of a tradition, at times explicit and at other times implicit in Gandhi is the debate in this thesis.

Gandhi was neither an uncritical traditionalist nor a dogmatic opponent of all aspects of modernity. The way he drew upon tradition in formulating his worldview was creative and owed much to his exposure to western values and institutions. He consistently claimed to be a *sanatan* Hindu, but rejected the authority of even the scriptures on particular issues if tradition offended reason or morality. He wrote in 1921, "I do not believe in the exclusive divinity of the Vedas. I decline to be bound by any interpretation, however learned it may be, if it is repugnant to reason or moral sense".<sup>1</sup>

This thesis, since it is a study on Gandhi's concept of tradition and reform, we need to spell out what constitutes his conception of tradition. The first chapter is on Gandhi on Tradition and Modernity which seeks to show that his conception of tradition includes reforms. For Gandhi, the two cannot be isolated because tradition is not a static concept and thus the idea of reform is built into the very conception of reform.

Approaching it from this perspective, we find that the corpus of Gandhian tradition consists of the following components. They are:

1. Truth, Non-violence and *Satyagraha*
2. The problem of untouchability
3. Empowerment of women

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<sup>1</sup> Gandhi, M.K., Collected Works, New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Gov. of India, 1958. Vol. XXI. p.246.

#### 4. *Sarvodaya*

We will present a brief resume of the above topics in order to have an idea of the corpus of Gandhian tradition.

First *Satyagraha* is the basic governing principle which as Gandhi insists a tradition must accept in order to attain its goal like human freedom and social welfare. *Satyagraha*, for Gandhi is essentially a means in pursuit of truth - a pursuit which is carried out without resorting to violence, hatred or animosity. *Satyagraha* should not be viewed as implying passivity, weakness or helplessness. It is not even be mistaken a strategy. It is, on the other hand, an attitude of mind and a way of life based on just causes. A way of life means a form of practice which is directed towards the constant search for truth and to fight against untruth. But this fight must be nonviolent. The search for truth cannot be guided by violent method. *Satyagraha* thus essentially has a moral and spiritual meaning. It is in this sense that Gandhiji considers Indian freedom struggle a *Satyagraha*. It is a moral or spiritual struggle against political and economic domination which implies denial of truth. The reason is the colonial power in order to rule India takes the means of falsehood and manipulation. The struggle for freedom thus does not mean only to attain political and economic freedom but more importantly it is an upliftment of human conscience that lends to the nonviolent battle for the victory of truth. *Satyagraha*, in this sense is an universal ideology – a world-view which that takes into account of all aspects of human existence and thus seeks to solve political, social, economic as well as religious problems of the society.

It is with this view the second chapter of this thesis seeks to explore Gandhi's idea of tradition and reform in the light of his philosophy of *Satyagraha*. It is truth and a nonviolent search for truth that must characterize a tradition. As said earlier, tradition is not a static concept – a body of unalterable truths. Hence the idea of reform is built into the very corpus of tradition. Reform is to be understood as search for truth in nonviolent terms. A tradition needs reform when it is found that there are certain existing practices in a society which lead to evil and falsehood. One has to fight against these practices in order to adhere to truth. But this fight, as Gandhi insists in no uncertain terms must be nonviolent because it is only through nonviolent means that truth can be attained. It is in the light of *Satyagraha* that Gandhi takes the issue of untouchability and the role of women in our society. The next two chapters of the thesis are devoted to the discussion of these two issues within the programme of *Satyagraha*. *Satyagraha* is not just an abstract moral or spiritual thinking. It is also a programme – a scheme for actions towards attaining truth.

Gandhi's critique of untouchability unmistakably points out his deep concern for bringing changes in tradition to make it more humane and rational. For Gandhi, untouchability is a crime against God and man. Gandhi makes upper caste Hindus responsible for the suffering of the untouchables. The issue of untouchability as Gandhi argues is not separate from the ideal of Swaraj. As Gandhi boldly proclaims Hindus have no right to claim Swaraj unless exploited classes get freedom from social bondage perpetuated by our inhuman caste system.

Gandhi believed that *varnashrama* and the caste system in ancient India had a constructive role to play. It helped to integrate the different ethnic groups under Hindu society. Further, it gave rise to a practicable system of social division of labour. But subsequently the caste system became oppressive and exploitative. This is where Gandhi brings his modern ideas of truth, justice, equality dignity of the individual etc., to the very corpus of traditional values. In view of this he urges people to see or to realize the inhuman and irrational nature of caste system. Gandhi is convinced that unless people realize this, untouchability cannot be removed by force or law. This forms the content of the third chapter.

The other area that exhibits Gandhi's deep concern and involvement with changing of tradition is the role of women in our society. The fourth chapter is on empowerment of women which forms the major part of his interpretation of *Swaraj*. Gandhi's idea of society is one which is based on justice, peace and equality. In order to achieve these three cardinal principles it is necessary to give equal status to both men and women since they function as two pillars of the society. Gender equality thus forms the basis of peace and development of society. In order to put women on the same footing as men, Gandhi advocated various measures. In economic terms, Gandhi says that there should be complete equality between men and women with respect to inheritance and property. As he argues, depriving women from family property is the main cause leading to male domination. At social and cultural level, Gandhi was against *purdah* system. He denounced it as a barbarous custom. He, like other social reformers was against child marriage and was vocal about widow marriage. Gandhi branded dowry system as social

evil – a hateful practice. All this according to Gandhi is primarily due to lack a education among women. As a remedy he strongly advocated compulsory education for women.

Gandhi at one level retains the traditional role of women and at another level he attacks some of the customs tradition ascribes to women. These customs degrade women's existence as human beings. Gandhi says that prostitution is one of such practices which for him is a social disease. Gandhi, while commenting on Devadasi tradition, says "it is good to swim in the waters of tradition but to sink in them is suicide". Here we find how Gandhi in a very significant way unites tradition with modern ideas in order to save tradition collapsing into degeneration.

Finally, the fifth chapter is on Gandhi's idea of *Sarvodaya*. It is a concept which stands for a holistic development of man and society. In the context of our present study, his philosophy of *Sarvodaya* has a special significance. It is a concept which successfully unites Gandhi's idea of tradition and reform. The term '*Sarvodaya*' articulates his vision of Indian society and the way the transformation can be brought in the light of this vision. It is a spiritual and moral approach to the problems of mankind. As Gandhi claims, it is not a new approach that he is offering; it is on the other hand rooted in the ancient Indian thinking. It is not only stand for the welfare of all but visualizes a world order based on equality. The merger of one in all is based on self-sacrifice and selfless service.

Gandhi's idea of *Sarvodaya* makes it absolutely clear that *Swaraj* cannot be identified only with political power and economic prosperity. As Gandhi thinks even if India gets free and achieves economic prosperity it would still not a real *Swaraj*. Real *Swaraj*, for Gandhi, means not only political power and economic prosperity but more importantly it means a certain moral development among people. A man who is having a moral life can alone have this attitude. He is the man, as he puts it, "does not cheat anyone, does not forsake truth and does his duty." In Gandhi's world-view tradition and reform must go hand in hand because any reform must be based on moral and spiritual values that tradition offers. Without these values, a reform will be directionless – it will lose its meaning. Tradition in this sense is indispensable to reform.

**Chapter 1**  
**Gandhi on Tradition and Modernity**

## **Chapter 1**

### **Gandhi on Tradition and Modernity**

A harmony between tradition and modernity must be preserved for civilization to make progress. Both are complementary to progress. The one without the other will make the progress one sided and misdirected. Social change must be then guided by both tradition and modernity. In his own way, Gandhi tried to harmonize tradition and modernity. Gandhi, though deeply rooted into Indian tradition, never rejected modernity. Tradition was never a static concept for Gandhi. Tradition in order to be alive, thriving and creative must allow modernity to enter into its corpus. Gandhi saw some of the dead and destructive elements in Indian tradition. It is thus necessary that those elements must be purged out from our tradition to attain progress. The idea reform is thus built into

Gandhi's concept of tradition. We cannot isolate the two. Reform for Gandhi, is to be admitted and initiated for a tradition to continue. Gandhi's view of tradition must be thus seen within the perspective of social and political thought with a view to find out the distinctiveness that it carries. The distinctiveness of Gandhi's approach to tradition is thus by taking tradition and modernity together he seeks to develop a new approach to man and society. It is not a materialistic approach. It is an approach which is based on ethical and spiritual values. The change or transformation that he is talking about can be brought only through human agency. The role of agent who is moral agent is thus placed at the centre of Gandhi's idea of reform.

Keeping these considerations in mind, this chapter will discuss the following issues. First, it will discuss the idea of tradition as conceived in the social and political tradition of thought. Second, in the light of our general understanding of tradition, we will then discuss Gandhi's idea of tradition and its distinctiveness

### **Tradition: Some Perspectives**

The word 'Tradition' has several meanings. It is very often used in contrast with concepts like 'modernity', 'industrialization', 'westernization', 'development' and 'progress'. Though many people have talked about tradition, there has not been much discussion on it as a distinct concept. It is often discussed in relation to authority, convention, custom, habit, prejudice, norms etc. It is very difficult to conceptualize

‘tradition’ because the word conveys different meanings. In the following, some of the meanings of ‘tradition’ are discussed.

The word ‘tradition’ is derived from ‘tradere’ that means to transmit. According to the Oxford English Dictionary ‘tradition’ means the action of handing something to another. It also means delivery or transfer. It is especially oral delivery of information or instruction. Tradition is commonly defined as the act of transmitting or handing down, or being handed down from one person to another or from one generation to another. Transmission may be of statements, beliefs, rules, customs or the like especially through word of mouth, or by practice without writing. It further says that tradition is a long established and generally accepted custom or method or procedure, having almost the force of law.

Reacting to the American and French Revolutions, Edmund Burke, the English political thinker, a conservative maintained that tradition is the wisdom of ages, and that the life of the individual has to be rooted in the past. But tradition, in Burke’s view is more than just institutions and customs; it is the ‘spirit’ of the people defined in the course of a long history. He strongly argued that tradition has to be preserved and sustained. Institutions must be reformed, in accordance with their original principles, and purposes. Burke’s reforming impulses were directed towards restoring the legacy of the past and freeing it of corruption. According to him, “To follow nature is ‘wisdom without reflection’ because we naturally respect tradition, which contains wisdom of the ages.

This wisdom is embodied in custom, which should therefore be regarded with deference, and even in the ‘popular notions’, which are not always laughed at”.<sup>1</sup>

Burke gave more importance to feelings than to reason or knowledge. Being inclined to preserve tradition, he argues that the French revolution was against the nature of things, a rebellion against God, a rupture with the universal order. Burke’s empiricism leads through traditionalism to a kind of epistemological populism and an apparent learning towards irrationalism. For example, he thinks, “when our feelings contradict our theories, the feelings are true and the theory is false”.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Burke prefers tradition to reason because he believes that it embodies more reliable knowledge. His traditionalism is assuredly against enlightenment’s belief in progress. In that sense he thinks that tradition is to be respected because it represents the ‘progressive experience’ of mankind. He also thinks that tradition represents the wisdom of God, working through human experience in the course of human history.<sup>3</sup>

Michael Oakeshott, a well-known political scientist in the conservative tradition, argues along the same lines. He says, “Tradition is not a fixed and inflexible manner of doing things, it is a flow of sympathy”<sup>4</sup>. It may be temporarily disrupted by the ‘incursion of foreign influences’, or it may “reveal so deep-seated an inherence that (even without foreign assistance) a crisis appears”. But howsoever caused, he goes on to argue

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<sup>1</sup> Freeman, M., *Edmund Burke and the Critique of Political Radicalism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980. p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p.30.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p.29.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

“political crises always appear within a tradition of political activity”<sup>5</sup>. Oakshott suggests that even revolutionary crisis invariably appears within a tradition. And in order to meet and resolve the crises a society has nowhere to turn except to the tradition itself. Oakeshott insists therefore that even in a crisis, however serious it may be, men in a society

have no resources outside the fragments, the vestiges, the relics of its own tradition of behavior which the crisis has left untouched, and ‘salvation’ comes from the unimpaired resources of the tradition itself. And he adds, “this is what no one is without and all, in fact rely upon.”<sup>6</sup>

In addition to politics, in literature too there are supporters of tradition. T.S.Eliot, early twentieth century poet and literary critic, attacked romanticism and humanism, and paved the way for new-classicism in the twentieth century. By ‘tradition’ he means all those habitual actions, habits, and customs, from the most significant religions rites to our conventional way of greeting a stranger. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, his most famous essay, he suggests that following a tradition is not merely “blind or timid adherence” to the past, but involves “the historical sense.... A sense of the timeless and of the temporal together.”<sup>7</sup> That is, the poet sees himself as part of a large historical structure of texts and ideas, and judges his own work by the standards of the past. “What happens”, Eliot writes, “is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the movement of something more valuable”.<sup>8</sup> This process of being absorbed by a

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Randhir Singh., *Reason, Revolution and Political Theory*, New Delhi: Peoples Publishing House, 1976. pp.110-120.

<sup>7</sup> Eliot, T. S., “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, Abrams, M.H. (Ed), *Norton Anthology of English Literature* Vol. II, New York: W.W.Norton, 1993. p.294.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p296.

tradition Eliot calls 'de-personalization'. Neo-classicism, as Eliot set it up, is more than mere slavish imitation, a mere repetition of what has already been achieved, since "novelty is better than repetition", tradition in the sense of passive is in fact repetition which is to be discouraged. Tradition represents the accumulated wisdom and experience of ages, and its knowledge is essential for really great and noble achievements. For Eliot, tradition is a matter of very great significance. At the same time, it is not something immovable, but rather something constantly growing and becoming different from what it previously was. Tradition carries within it both the essential and the non-essential, both the good and the bad. Tradition must therefore be used intelligently, and changes in the conditions of life must be taken into consideration, so that only the best is preserved and fostered. Eliot believes that the past directs the present and is itself modified and altered by the present. The task of the poet is to make sure that the past is examined critically, and only what is significant in it is acquired. Tradition in the real sense for him meant, a consciousness 'of the main current', which does not always flow invariably through the most distinguished reputations.

If Eliot confidently claims the poetic right to 'modify' tradition, the German philosopher Hans George Gadamer addressed the problem of how we can read and use traditions. Gadamer, who studies the problem from the hermeneutic point of view, claims that the historicity of humanity is manifested through tradition. For him, tradition accounts for both humanity's finitude and its openness to possible future. Tradition is not simply a cultural repository for the present; nor is it an autonomous historical realm that has a life apart from concrete human activity. Tradition requires active appropriation,

perpetuation and transformation by human subjects. For Gadamer, tradition is ontological, which means that an individual comes to grips with tradition through living within it, and experiencing it.

Truth for Gadamer is, understanding that occurs as a ‘fusion of horizons’ much like what occurs in genuine conversation. To recognize the horizontal nature of understanding is to recognize differences because there is always something beyond one’s own horizon. Perspective, or what Gadamer calls ‘prejudice’ (*vorurteil*) is not a bad thing to overcome metaphysically. It is the preconditioned nature of understanding.

In his paper ‘Tradition and some other form of order’, he holds that a beliefs or practice becomes a tradition when, a) It persists over several generations, b) If it changes at all, it changes only slightly and gradually, and c) It is not questioned by its adherents nor thought by them to need justification. Thus it may be said that traditions are chronic, continuous and authoritative.

The famous historian Eric Hobsbawm speaks of ‘invented’ traditions, which are taken to mean ‘a set of practices normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and norms of behavior by repetition which automatically implies continuity with past’.<sup>9</sup>

Edward Shills, an American sociologist worked extensively on the concept of tradition in the later decades of the twentieth century. He suggests that a tradition in its

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<sup>9</sup> Hobsbawm, E., “Introduction: Inventing Traditions in Hobsbawm”, and Ranger, T (Ed), *Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: The University Press, 1984. p.1.

elementary sense is ‘anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present. It makes no statement about what is handed down or in what particular combination, or whether it is a physical object or a cultural constitution, it says nothing about how long it has been handed down or in what manner, or ally or in writer form. The degree of rational deliberation that has entered into its creation, presentation and reception likewise has nothing to do with it in a tradition.<sup>10</sup> The concept of tradition, as we understand it, is silent about whether there is acceptable evidence for the truth of the tradition. The anonymity of its authors or creators or its attribution to be named and identified persons likewise makes no difference as to whether or not it is a tradition. The decisive creation is that, having been created through human actions and imagination; it is handed down from generation to the next generation. Edward Shills maintains that tradition is what is handed down and includes material objects, beliefs about all sorts of things, images of persons and events, practices and institutions. It includes buildings, monuments, landscapes, sculptures, paintings, books, tools, machines, practices and institutions made up by human actions.

Thus traditions are beliefs, standards and rules of varying but never exhaustive explicitness, which have been received from the preceding generation, through a process of continuous transmission from generation to generation. They recommend themselves by their appropriateness for the present situation. It is conformed to by recipients and especially because of a certain measure of authoritativeness that possess by virtue of their provenness from the past. The authority of traditions is engendered by the sheer fact of their previous observance by predecessors. Shills further say that the traditional rule

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<sup>10</sup> Shills, E., *Tradition*, London: Feber and Feber, 1981, p.12.

possesses authority because its acceptance establishes an attachment to the past of a family, town, country or corporate body to which an inherent value is attributed. Membership in a primordial and a civil body carries with it not merely attachment to the symbol of the body as it stands at a particular moment in time but to symbols which expose a sense of creation of a state of communion with past powers. It is of the same order as any act of communion with one's contemporary society. The affirmation of tradition, tacit or explicit, is an act that binds the recipients to the past. The performance of an action which is carried on from the past by authority but which is performed only because no other alternative mode of action exists can imagine as tradition. Shill notes that traditions are slightly modified by both endogenous and exogenous factors.

According to Indian sociologist Sachidananda, tradition is transmitted value and behavior pattern of a community.<sup>11</sup> Traditions are tested, recalled and esteemed. Their age long succession is an assurance of value, which has already occurred in the process of their instrumental functioning as a constituent of social cohesion or social solidarity. Many writers have noted that traditions are not static. Old traditions die and new ones are continually being built up. Leaving aside external influence, there are also, endogenous factors of change in tradition

V.P. Varma is of the opinion that: Tradition is an inclusive concept it connotes the initiative character of a certain dominant religious, theoretical, metaphysical and ethical values and beliefs. It also stands for the crystallization of deference and reverence for

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<sup>11</sup> Satchidananda., "Tradition, Modernity and Modernization in India" in Srivastva (Ed), *Tradition and Modernization*, Alhabad: Indian International Publications, 1976. p.41.

certain symbols. Tradition also includes folkways, and semi-institutionalized patterns of action in a society. At a more extended level, tradition may be identified with the totality of the historical heritage of a nation or a community.<sup>12</sup> Tradition is a generic term and to a large extent identical with historical continuity in the field of social, cultural and interpersonal existence.

Being a critic from within the tradition, J.N. Mohanty says that:

There are two ways in which one may critically look at a tradition: from within or from the outside... I intend to do it the first way. Raising the sort of questions that I will be asking already implies a certain estrangement from that tradition, but at the same time I do so not in order to find the faults or limitations which may characterize it, but with a view to continuing and creatively advancing the traditional modes of thinking. Living outside the country where that tradition developed and still has deep roots, and exposed to a powerful and temporally and culturally more relevant mode of thinking, one runs the risk of being an over-hasty, shallow, and even arrogant critic of long and hallowed tradition. One gathers the illusion of being free, free from all tradition, and thus justified in critiquing one's own. But if that sense of freedom is illusory, this critique is superficial. If the critic claims to be free from all traditions, he will be forgetting what Gadamer has so poignantly reminded us: that he will be thinking from within a new tradition of (modern) rationalism.<sup>13</sup>

J. Duncan M. Perret in his paper, 'Tradition and Law in India' maintains that 'tradition is that element in the present which represents (and re-presents) the past, whether or not they accept it...'<sup>14</sup> For him an institution is tradition if the present society conforms to it. An outlook is traditional if the present general approaches the same matter

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<sup>12</sup> Varma, V. P., "Conceptual Frame Work for the Study of Tradition and Modernization" In Srivastava (Ed), *Tradition and Modernization*, Alhabad: Indian International Publications, 1976. p.35

<sup>13</sup> Mohanty J.N., "A Fragment of the Indian Philosophical tradition", *Philosophy East & West* Vol. XXXVIII, 1988. pp 251-260.

<sup>14</sup> Duncon, J and Derret, M., "Tradition and Law in India", In Moore, R. J (Ed) *Tradition and Politics in South Asia*, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd, 1979. p.32.

in the same way. He further adds that there are two kinds of traditions as there are two ways of self-consciously employing it. One form of tradition is 'fossilization' as when a ceremony is retained even when its function has ceased. Another is the opposite of fossilization wherein the old is continued functionally in the current, and thus grows and moves in keeping with the need and general growth of society.

After considering different ideas of tradition, we may use a typology to arrive at an overview of the many meanings of tradition. We will use the typology suggested by S.L. Sharma.<sup>15</sup> He says that it is possible to distinguish at least three meanings of tradition in sociological literature, i.e. existential, ideal –typical and analytical. As an existential category tradition refers to the heritage of a particular community. The emphasis in this usage is on the historical particularities or the concrete elements of the tradition of a community. Anthropologists frequently use the term in this sense in their field studies of tribes and pre-literate societies.

Another meaning of tradition is ideal-typical which signifies a set of values common to a community or society. In this sense, tradition is short hand for such values as sacredness, ascription, and slow change. Such a conception of tradition offers a criterion for determining what a traditional society is like. The last one, which is analytical-referential, is a more acceptable meaning of tradition. Analytically tradition refers to routine acceptance of a body of beliefs and action patterns from the past out of sheer reverence. An excellent exposition of analytical notion of tradition can be seen in

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<sup>15</sup>.Sharma, S. L., "Concepts of Modernization" in Pandey, R (Ed), *Modernization and Social Change*, New Delhi: Criterion Publications, 1988. p.17.

Edward Shills.<sup>16</sup> Thus defined, the constituents of tradition are: givenness, a past, recurrence, befitting and uncritical acceptance. More important than anything else to a traditional society is its proclivity to accept the heritage from the past without critical scrutiny. It is in this sense, that tradition is a mode of uncritical acceptance of the past. And according to the functional approach, all traditional cultures are sustained by a consistent corpus of norms and values.

A.K. Saran, one of the very important thinkers in his well- acclaimed paper ‘On Tradition’ states:

Tradition *qua* tradition is timeless, but has multiple expressions, even if itself remaining Formless. Tradition cannot be understood by the method of difference nor by any kind of ostensive definition. It is sheer positivity and paradoxically the deepest and highest abstraction. Tradition as a concept or reality can be paired with no other word, concept or idea; nor can it be compared to any other kinds of reality. It is the bearer of the Non-Manifest, of the Invisible, of the Incomprehensible, of the Inexpressible, of the Inexhaustible, that is, if such a tremendous burden can be borne at all by a single idea or concept. Without tradition, we will not *be*. Traditional thought, at another level, duplicates tradition. Thought is a trace, a first reification of thinking. Like tradition, thought too is man himself, the absolute, the divine, the void.<sup>17</sup>

In Saran’s understanding, tradition is formless, transcendental and supra-personal. Hence, it is beyond any exact definition in terms of human speech or thought. At the same time, it must be made clear that tradition is by no means a humanistic-or sociological category. It is at once a human and a trans-human category: a sort of anthropo-metaphysical idea and reality. That is to say, the meaning of human life and the

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<sup>16</sup> Shills, E., *Tradition*, London and Boston: Feber and Feber, 1981. p.12.

<sup>17</sup> A.K.Saran., “On Tradition” in Boruah, B. H Misra, R.S, (Ed.) *Social Reality and Tradition*, Hyderabad: Rawat Publications, 2006. p.188.

meaning of tradition go together. However, in the sense in which man is dependent on tradition, tradition is not dependent on man; it is not man who gives meaning to tradition. It is from tradition that man's life and history derive their meaning and purpose. However, the context of tradition is man. Elucidation of the concept of tradition is immediately related to the question of human nature and of human essence.

The essentials of traditional thought and civilization have been laid down by Marco Pallis in profound passages that are a marvel of beauty and truth:

... [B]y tradition more is meant than just custom long established, even if current usage has tended to restrict it in this way. Here the word will always be given its transcendent, which is also its normal, connotation without any attempt being made, however, to pin it down, to a particular set of concepts, if only because tradition, being formless and suprapersonal in its essence escapes exact definition in terms of human speech or thought. All that can usefully be said of it at the moment is that wherever a complete tradition exists this will entail the presence of four things, namely: a source of inspiration or, to use a more concrete term, of Revelation; a current of influence or Grace issuing forth from that source and transmitted without interruption through a variety of channels; a way of "verification" which, when faithfully followed, will lead the human subject to successive positions where he is able to "actualize" the truths that Revelation communicates; finally there is the formal embodiment of tradition in the doctrines, arts, sciences and other elements that together go to determine the character of a normal civilization.<sup>18</sup>

He goes on to add, "A traditional civilization has its roots set in a doctrine of the purely metaphysical order, from which all the other constituents of the tradition, whether ethical, social or artistic down to the pettiest activities of daily life derive their sanction.

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<sup>18</sup> Pallis, Marco., *The way and the Mountain*, New Delhi. 1974. pp. 9-10.

Metaphysical ideas are the cement that binds every part together. The whole body of thought and action must be viewed as a hierarchy, with pure metaphysics at the head."<sup>19</sup>

Talking about the passage of tradition, he opines:

One essential means whereby the truth is made to circulate among men is the tradition from Master to pupil, which stretches back into the past and reaches forward to the future. By the doctrine so handed down, all parts are related to one another; they derive from it both stability and elasticity, No set of boundaries can be recognized by Tradition as such; it can only be taken as the mobile vehicle of graces in fact unchanging.<sup>20</sup>

Today one scarcely needs to go into the rather complex, if not complicated, relationship between tradition and custom. Tradition is not just custom long established. The situation of tradition in contemporary times is the problem of relating or understanding the relation between custom and tradition in one way or another. Indeed, it has been so for close to a century, we thought that custom is something that we have now superseded; that we can and do live now by rationality - except in the situation where rationality grows into a custom yet retaining its rationality; and that modernity has achieved this combination of rationality and custom for its continuance. But it has not been the case; tradition many a times appears threateningly relevant in the social, cultural and political lives of many contemporary societies.

### **Gandhi's Idea of Tradition**

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p.207,

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

It is argued by some thinkers that there is a dichotomous opposition between tradition and modernity. Modernity is considered to be the anti-thesis to tradition. But many scholars for different reasons contested the view that there is any dichotomy between tradition and modernity. Also some nationalist thinkers questioned the dichotomy between the tradition and modernity. They attempted to construct the idea of modernity differently. They challenged the hitherto dominant perspectives on modernity. Nationalist thinkers argued that modernity, which is equated with industrialization, scientific and technological advancement was limited to Western countries. The so-called modernity suited colonial interests at the expense of the colonized. Keeping this view in mind, the rationale of modernity, which was put forward by the Western colonial countries, was questioned. Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* in a fundamental sense, contested the above view. We can see in the thought of Gandhi a blend of tradition and modernity. He tried to integrate new patterns of thought and action on traditional culture. He attempted a merger of the three levels of Indian social system, viz., social stratification, culture, and polity into a pattern so that the break down of Indian tradition could be averted. Gandhi's critique of Western civilization was critique of modernity and his central argument is that no enduring alternative can be pursued unless that alternative negotiated to the skills, capacities and wisdom of people.

The uniqueness of Gandhian theory lies in his ingenious approach to the understanding of tradition a blending of permanence and change. Unlike many other social revolutionaries and reformers, he did not commit himself to a fixed theory that might ossify into orthodoxy. However, the flexibility in Gandhi does not lead to

tentativeness. Let us take note of A.L. Basham's observation in this regard: "Gandhi's willingness to compromise on matters which he considered inessential and his admitted inconsistencies hardly invalidate his sincerity."<sup>21</sup> In his openness to ideas Gandhi is eclectic. This eclecticism is neither arbitrary nor opportunistic. It conforms to the *dharma* which is eternal. Regarding permanence and change Gandhi in a letter to Ranchhodlal Patwari clarifies that, "The true *dharma* is unchanging while tradition may change with time to time".<sup>22</sup> *Satya* and *ahimsa* constitute true *dharma* for Gandhi. These are further classified by Gandhi, "By instinct I have been truthful, but not non-violent.... For, as (a Jain muni) put it, I was capable of sacrificing non-violence for the sake of truth. In fact, it was in the course of my pursuit of truth that I discovered non-violence".<sup>23</sup> Thus graded, *satya* for Gandhi remains the source of permanence. "I have simply tried in my own way to apply the eternal truths to our daily life and problems. There is, therefore, no question of my leaving any code like the code of Manu. The opinions I have formed and the conclusions I have arrived at are not final. I may change them tomorrow. I have nothing new to teach the world. Truth and non-violence are all as old as the hills".<sup>24</sup>

Gandhi finds many defectives in traditional practices; he believes a reformed tradition will be an ally of autonomy when it provides people with coherent, stable moral principles in a world that is unavoidably crowded with standards that speak to our comfort, wealth, security and status. For him, the task of tradition is put our biological

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<sup>21</sup> Basham, A. L., "Traditional Influence on the Thought of Mahatma Gandhi", Ravinder Kumar (Ed) In *Essays on Gandhian politics of Rowlett Satyagraha*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971. p.27.

<sup>22</sup> Gandhi. M.K., *The collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, New Delhi: Publications Division, 1958. p.96.

<sup>23</sup> Gandhi, M.K, *Hindu Dharma*. Ahmadabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1950. p.3.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

concerns in moral perspective, something he takes to be important today because of the threat to autonomy he sees posed by modernity.

Gandhi's was convinced that the Hindu society needed moral regeneration, a 'new system of ethics', a new *yugadharma*. It is the notion that every *yuga* or age had its own distinctive problems and needed to come to terms with them in its own way. He was certain that the new *yugadharma* could not be developed out of the available resources of the Hindu tradition alone. Some of its fundamental values were sound and represented its great contribution to mankind. However, they had been traditionally defined in negative, passive and asocial terms and required reinterpretation and reform. Hinduism could therefore greatly benefit from the moral insights and truths discovered by other religious traditions including Buddhism, Jainism Judaism, Islam and, especially, Christianity, and by such writers as Tolstoy, Ruskin and Thoreau.

Gandhi could not reform the Hindu tradition and open it up to the influences of others without radically redefining that is, deconstructing and reconstructing the orthodox conception of tradition in general and of the Hindu tradition in particular. He had to define the latter that it allowed the kind of cross-cultural borrowing he had in mind, and so to define other traditions that he was not accused of violating their integrity by selecting their specific aspects. He also needed to show that different traditions were commensurable, concerned to answer similar questions, and that they had something to offer to each other. He also demonstrated that traditions were not monolithic wholes but internally differentiated loose structures of beliefs and practices not all of which were

equally important, so that it was logically possible to abstract and combine their central values and insights. Though Gandhi executed this task with considerable originality and skill, his success did not match his ingenuity.

For Gandhi, every community had to deal with the perennial problems of human existence as reflected in its specific and changing circumstances. It had no other way to find answers to them except by the method of trial and error, of conscious and unconscious experiments conducted over a long period of time. It tried out different ideas, practices and institutions, reflected on their consequences, and developed valuable insights into the nature of man and society, moral values, causes and best ways of reconciling human differences and conflicts, and the kinds of activity men found most fulfilling. These insights, which collectively constituted its traditional wisdom and cultural capital with centuries of lived experience behind them, formed the basis on which it met the challenges of the changing times and set up structures of contingent beliefs and practices. A tradition thus was not blind, a mere collection of precedents, but a form of inquiry, a scientific adventure, an unplanned but rigorous communal science constantly tested and revised against the harsh reality of life. Far from being antithetical, tradition and science were cousins. Tradition was unplanned science, and science was a tradition of planned inquiry.

According to Gandhi, the basic values and insights of a tradition were valid and binding, not because of their age or certification by an individual, but because they had survived the rigorous test of lived experience and the scrutiny of their critics. Every

society was articulated at two levels. Its basic values and insights, its central organizing principles, had an enduring significance whereas its beliefs and practices were subject to constant revision. The former and not the latter constituted its essence. To belong to a society, to claim allegiance to its tradition, was to commit oneself to its central values not to its contingent beliefs and practices. Indeed, loyalty to it required that one should constantly evaluate and even reject the prevailing practices if they appeared to betray or obstruct the fullest realization of its central values.

Gandhi argued that though this was true of all traditions, it was especially true of the Hinduism. Unlike many of them, it was based not on divine self-revelation placed in the charge of an accredited organization, but on unconscious collective experimentation regularly fertilized and enriched by the moral and spiritual experiments of its great sages.

On the basis of his analysis of the nature of tradition, Gandhi argued that every tradition contained an internal principle of self-criticism in the form of its central or constitutive values. The beliefs and practices that did not conform to them required revision or even rejection. Even the values were not incorrigible. Though they had stood the test of experience and been repeatedly validated and thus carried a measure of moral authority, subsequent experiences or spiritual investigations, by great moral. Scientists might show up their inadequacies. Furthermore, a dialogue between different traditions was both possible and necessary. Since every society dealt with the fundamental problems of human existence, its insights had relevance for others. Since it dealt with them in the context of its unique circumstances, their relevance was limited. A free, equal

and open-minded dialogue between traditions involving an exchange of insights was a necessary condition of their progress. It enabled each to look at itself from the standpoint of others and to gain critical self-understanding. It encouraged them to learn from and borrow from each others' insights. And it contributed to mankind's growing pool of moral knowledge. Both their self-interest and obligations to humanity required that every society should encourage and help others bring their best to the global conversation. That was why Gandhi thought that the European attempt to shape the entire mankind in its own image damaged both. It distorted the development of non-European societies and denied Europe new moral insights and critical self-knowledge.

For Gandhi, then, every tradition was a resource, a source of valuable insights into the human condition, and part of a common human heritage. Every man was born into and shaped by a specific cultural tradition which, as it were, constituted his original family. He also enjoyed varying degrees of membership of other cultural families to whose achievements he had an unrestricted right of access. Gandhi said that as a Hindu he was heir to its rich and ancient heritage. As an Indian, he was the privileged inheritor of its diverse religious and cultural traditions. As a human being, the great achievements of mankind constituted his heritage to which he had as much right as their native claimants. While remaining firmly rooted in his own tradition, he is free to draw upon the cultural capital of others. To express the two central ideas of rootedness and openness, he often used the metaphor of living in a house with its windows wide open. His house was protected by walls, but its windows were open to allow winds from all directions to blow through it and to enable him to breathe fresh air at his own pace and in his own way. *Ano*

*Bhadra ritavo yantu vishvatah* (May noble thoughts from all over the world come to us) was one of his favourite *Rigvedic* maxims.

Gandhi was not utterly dismissive of modernity: he acknowledged as its three great achievements the spirit of scientific inquiry and rational criticism, the understanding and control of the natural world, and the cultivation of civic and organizational virtues. Gandhi condemned modern civilisation not because it was Western or scientific but because it was materialistic and exploitative. On several occasions Gandhi clarified that he was not opposed to science or machinery as such. Far from opposing the progress of science, he admired the modern scientific spirit of the West and maintained that the world needs 'the marvellous advances in science and organisation that the Western nations have made. One of the basic errors of the western post-enlightenment modernity, according to Gandhi, was the exploitation of the weaker races of the earth and the destruction of the lower orders of creation in the name of science and humanism. Modern civilisation, Gandhi said, is based on a faulty concept or model of man as a materialistic or body-centred, limitless consumer of utilities. Such a view of man, places sensual or materialistic wants over spiritual or moral values. It regards the individuals as wholly independent self-centred atoms with no moral or spiritual bonds or obligation. However Gandhi did not engage in either a one-sided, root-and-branch condemnation of modernity or a wistful nostalgia for an imaginary past.

In the light of our discussion it is obvious that though Gandhi valued tradition, he was not a traditionalist. He reduced tradition to a resource, located its essence in its

general moral values which commanded respect but left room for critical evaluation, and gave every individual the freedom to draw upon the insights of other traditions. Similarly, though he stressed the role of reason, he was not a rationalist. He respected cultivated reason, one ripened by a deep acquaintance with the wisdom embodied in tradition especially, but not exclusively one's own. And though an individual remained free to revise traditional values, he was to do so only after making thorough study of them and giving them the benefit of the doubt.

Gandhi saw no hostility between reason and tradition. Reason was not a transcendental or natural faculty, but a socially acquired capacity presupposing and constantly shaped and nurtured by tradition. Tradition was not a mechanical accumulation of precedents but a product of countless conscious and semi-conscious experiments by rational men over several generations. Reason thus lay at the heart of tradition, fully manifest in its abiding values and organizing principles and not entirely absent even in its apparently weird practices. As products of human choices, such practices were responses to genuine human needs and perplexities. The perplexities and needs might have been ill-defined or they might have long ceased to exist, but they were once real and gave meaning to the practices. The reformer's task was both to elucidate the historical rationale of unacceptable practices and to expose their irrationality. He required both sympathetic understanding and critical spirit, both patience and indignation. This was how Gandhi went about reforming the Hindu ways of thought and life.

Gandhi had an extremely difficult task at hand. He had to protect the Hindu tradition from the distortions of the colonial rule and uphold its authority. At the same time he was acutely aware that it had accumulated a lot of dead weight and that the uncritical and mindless traditionalism of the orthodox was both unwise and impractical. Furthermore, he had to defend the integrity of the tradition against supercilious British criticism; yet he knew that its integrity had been gravely damaged and could not be restored in its earlier form. Indeed, the tradition had to be pieced together and patiently reconstructed in a manner that took account of the rationalist challenge. Again, Gandhi had to nurture the self-confidence and pride of his humiliated and nervous countrymen. But he also had to coax and at times, coerce them into taking a critical look at them.

### **Influences on Gandhi**

To arrive at an understanding about the various factors that had deep influence in shaping the views of Gandhi especially in the context of the ideas of 'Tradition' and 'Modernity', we need to look at the diverse influences on Gandhi and his social imagining. Gandhi's historical role brings out the paradox of a very singular, even frankly eccentric individual who was capable of representing the deepest aspirations of hundreds of millions of men and women with whom he had actually very little in common. The encounter between the man and his people, at a very special moment in the history of both, is what constitutes the enigma of Gandhi. But first let us try to situate Gandhi in the more general context of Indian intellectual history.

Two very different readings of Gandhi's position in the field of intellectual history have been put forward. The first, which takes into account Gandhi's intellectual formation, the authors he read, and the influences he acknowledged, places him squarely within the anti-modernist trend of thought which developed in Europe from the middle of the nineteenth century, around John Ruskin, Edward Carpenter and Leo Tolstoi. The second lays more emphasis on his links to a specifically Indian reformist trend inaugurated by Rammohun Roy and continued by Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo. These two readings are not mutually exclusive. Gandhi himself recognized the intellectual debt he owed to the West and to men like Ruskin and Tolstoi, but he also stressed the indigenous sources of his thought. He viewed the existence of strata of anglicized intellectuals as one of the most tragic consequences of the colonization of India and wanted to differentiate himself clearly from that group. The real question is not however whether Gandhi was anglicized one, and not; he was a Victorian intellectual rather than an anglicized one he himself did not realize to what extent, intellectually, he was product of the Victorian era.

There is nothing surprising in the fact that Gandhi was deeply influenced by the intellectual ambience of the late Victorian period. His intellect took shape in the colonial South Africa, rather different from that of India because it directly subject to the influence of the metropolis. Gandhi's view of the world was influenced by the radical critique of industrial modernity from the ethical and aesthetic points of view which had been put forward in England in the second half of the nineteenth century in London. Gandhi came under the spell of these ideas, and their impact led him to become a

vegetarian; the rationalization and refining of his vegetarianism remained a major intellectual preoccupation throughout his life. In South Africa, through his reading and frequenting of European intellectual circles directly influenced by dominant trends in Britain, he deepened his knowledge of European anti-modernist thought.

The most important idea Gandhi borrowed from Ruskin was that economics could not be separated from ethics. Beyond this, nature of Ruskin's influence over Gandhi remains a matter of controversy. Gandhi was more directly influenced by 'New Age' thinkers such as Edward Carpenter, the eccentric who preached a subversion of traditional morals through the practice of sublimated homosexuality, as well as vegetarianism, naturopathy, and opposition to vaccination. Upholders of 'New Age' views refused the conformism and uniformity of modern life and advocated regression to a more 'natural' lifestyle. The critique of modern civilization contained in *Hind Swaraj* is largely rooted in these ideas, and Gandhi did not go back on these.

Gandhi often talked of the science of *satyagraha*. According to him, *satyagraha* was governed by objective laws, independent of the participants: if the *satyagrahi* was not pure of heart, he would fail, whatever his efforts; conversely, if his actions were inspired feelings he would succeed and overcome all obstacles. In Gandhian thought there is this complex mix of objectivism and subjectivism.

The widely held view of Gandhi as an enemy of science comes from the confusion between science and technology. Gandhi was critic of the ways in which

scientific discoveries were applied in the medical and industrial fields, but his critique did not extend to science itself. On the contrary he viewed science as providing a norm because it was based on experimentation. He wanted to introduce experimental method into his private and political life. He conceives of truth that was not based on experimentation. On even question if Gandhi's God was transcendent, since he believes strongly in truth only through experimentation. It is easy to be dismissive of his notion of science, which happily mixed Victorian ideas with notions inherited from traditional Indian systems of thought but it would be a grave error to see him as an anti-rationalist. In fact, a close look at the enormous corpus of his writings on subject of dietetics, and a consideration of his quest for the most rational diet lead to the inescapable conclusion that he was rationalist.

Another crucial influence on Gandhi was Tolstoi, and his anarchist brand of Christian socialism. While in South Africa, Gandhi exchanged voluminous correspondence with the Russian writer Tolstoi. Tolstoi's ideas about religion helped him bridge the gap between Christianity and the Hindu tradition—which he discovered late. Two texts, the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Ramayana* (Tulsidas's version), became essential references for him. From these he borrowed in particular the idea of the sovereignty of the mind over passions, which came to be at the heart of his political philosophy.

To delineate the broad outlines of Gandhi's often complex and contradictory thought, there is no choice but to start with *Hind Swaraj* the only theoretical text he ever wrote, even if it was merely a stage in the development of his thought. In this book

Gandhi is led to broaden his scope to encompass a global critique of the terrorist ideology. He sees it as based in essence on blind faith in technical progress and brutal force, an ideology dominant in the West which was in the process of invading India with potentially devastating consequences. Gandhi was drawn into conducting a global critical survey of modern civilization, a central part of the text, and this critique is the main reason why Gandhi is considered an enemy of modernity. It would be misleading to analyse the manifesto against Western modernity, without keeping in mind very specific context in which it was written. Gandhi's target was modern civilization and its consequences for both England and India, which for him were not fundamentally different: for England, as much as India, was a victim of it. He wanted to work for the kind of *swaraj* which would bring true moral and political liberation to India and Britain. This implied a total reversal of value it meant emphasizing the role of dharma, i.e. the antitheses greed that characterized modern industrial civilization.

Unlike other Indian nationalist thinkers, in particular those operated within the framework of Hindu neo-traditionalist thought Gandhi did not believe in the intrinsic superiority of Indian over Western civilization. He did not essentialize the West even while he was critical of its blind faith in material progress and of its cultural offence. He believed that some values lost in the West had been preserved in India and that India offered the West a chance of regeneration provided India itself did not succumb to the blandishments of modern industrial civilization, as desired by its young revolutionaries. In saving India from the devastating consequences of modern industrialization Gandhi hoped to save the West from its own demons and give mankind a chance to rediscover

true values. It was mostly the spiritual emptiness of modern civilization which frightened Gandhi.

Gandhi gives central place to the notion of truth, rather than to that of conformity to religious norms, even those of the Hindu tradition. Gandhi used the latter in a partly strategic way; he saw it as a precious resource for the critique of Western modernity but he did not make it the measure of all things. Gandhi's quest for truth led him to take positions which appear eccentric to posterity—such as his opposition to vaccination and his preference for naturopathy, which led him to reject not only Western medicine but also Indian traditional medicine, both *ayurvedic* and *unani*. His anti-conformism sometimes also resulted in very enlightened views, as when he questioned the authority of the *Shastras* when it appeared to him that they went against universal moral principles. He used this argument, in particular, against those who claimed *shastric* authority to justify untouchability. For him, religion had meaning only if it was consistent with morality. The laws of the physical and mental universe had the same character, he did not see morals as subject to cultural relativism, but rather as the same in all cultures. For him Hinduism, as a true religion, could not include prescriptions that did not conform to universal morality: those were the result of accretions and interpolations.

We now end here the general discussion of Gandhi's views on tradition and modernity and what follows in the subsequent chapters is the specific treatment of issues like that of – Gandhi's idea of civilization, truth, non-violence, and *Satyagraha* understanding of the caste system; his views on women and the concept of *Sarvodaya*.

**Chapter 2**  
**Truth, Non-Violence and Satyagraha**

## **Chapter 2**

### **Truth, Non-Violence and Satyagraha**

This chapter discusses Gandhi's critique of modern western civilization. In this context lays bare the unique nature of his ideas of Truth, Non-violence and Satyagraha. These ideals will be compared and contrasted with the traditional understanding of these ideals.

For Gandhi, the only proper and realistic course of action open to India was to take a careful and critical look at itself. For the past few centuries, India had become static, asleep and inert. In a way, the contact with the West, the spirit of scientific inquiry, gave India an opportunity to gauge its own situation. It must now turn inward, identify

and critically reinterpret the central principles of its civilization in the light of modern needs and use them as the basis of its carefully planned programme of self-purification. A dialogue with another civilization should follow appreciation and assimilation of our own. Once they felt convinced that some of its values and institutions were good for them and could be integrated into their ways of life and thought, Indians should courageously adopt them without feeling in the least guilty or nervous about doing so. This was not imitation or copying which was widely condemned as a sign of the 'de-nationalized' Indian's sense of inferiority, widely criticized by the modernists for its lack of courage, but creative adaptation to the needs of the age. Such an adaptation or assimilation was an act of free choice and did not compromise India's moral autonomy; it was undertaken in full knowledge of what it needed and could easily absorb.

Gandhi attacked the traditionalists for failing to appreciate the depth of Indian degradation and the gravity of the moral crisis facing it. He was also critical of the modernists. He shared their view that the crisis confronting India was grave and unprecedented and required a radical response, but disagreed with their diagnosis of its causes and manner of dealing with it. For him, the crisis was moral in nature, one of national character and values, and called for a moral revolution. The modernists were wrong to regard it as essentially economic and political in nature, a crisis of institutions and practices that could be resolved by borrowing relevant European institutions. Institutions were formal structures only as good as the men who ran them. A nation's character was improved not by importing foreign expertise but by an inspiring moral leadership capable of speaking in its native idioms, activating its hidden moral nerves and

creatively reinterpreting and mobilizing its traditional resources. Unfamiliar institutions produced parrots who repeated what they were taught and did not generate inner changes. The only way to transform a community was to revise and reform its established institutions and to link up the old with the new. This was not a matter of patriotism but common sense.

Gandhi was sympathetic to the idea of creative synthesis advocated by the critical modernists but not to the way they understood and implemented it. Insofar as it implied a willingness to learn from other societies, he was all for it. Civilizations were more or less coherent wholes and could not be promiscuously combined. Besides, in any such combination, the more confident and aggressive partner invariably exercise a dominant influence, especially if it also happened to be in a position of power. Gandhi thought that the project of cultural synthesis had become a vehicle of backdoor Europeanization. He was also highly critical of its underlying assumptions that the two civilizations were on par and that Indians were at liberty to choose bits and pieces of each.

Gandhi was far more sympathetic to the critical traditionalists. In his view, they had rightly identified the Indian crisis as essentially moral in nature. They were also right to insist that a civilization was an organic whole, that it had its own distinct nature and that it could only be reformed in harmony with its innermost impulses. However, he was convinced that they were neither critical nor traditionalist enough. In their own way, they were dazzled by modern civilization and unwittingly defined their own in terms of it. They had also not dug deep enough into their civilization to see if it had the resources to

cope with the crisis and how it had dealt with similar ones in the past. Critical traditionalists borrowed European institutions rather than explore alternatives more suited to India. The alien institutions were bound in due course to subvert the very civilization they claimed to love and wished to preserve.

Gandhi was of the opinion that India should evolve its own appropriate alternatives to modern institutions which his countrymen were anxious to adopt and of whose limited value he was himself convinced. India had its own civilization, rich in insights, ideas, and institutions, skills of survival, resourcefulness and a long historical experience or adapting to change. It should explore ways of revitalizing it by critically teasing out and adopting the central insights of modernity while rejecting its alien and ill-suited European forms.

### **Gandhi's definition of Civilization**

Coming to his reactions against the Western civilization, Gandhi in his *Hind Swaraj* remarked,

“If India copies England, it is my firm conviction that she will be ruined. – It is not due to any peculiar fault of the English people, but the condition is due to modern civilization. It is a civilization only in name. Under it the nations of Europe are becoming degraded and ruined day by day.”<sup>1</sup>

Gandhi opposes industrial revolution, which brought into existence the modern western civilization. Prior to industrial revolution as Gandhi remarks,

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<sup>1</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, New Delhi: Publication Division, 1958. Vol. X. p.18.

“Men worked in open air....now thousands of workmen meet together and for the sake of maintenance work in factories and mines. Their condition is worse than that of beasts. They are obliged to work-for the sake of millionaires.”<sup>2</sup>

It is quite clear that Gandhi disliked India turning into a capitalistic country. As he remarked “It would be folly to assume that an Indian Rockefeller would be better than an American Rockefeller.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, culture from Gandhian perspective is based on spiritual, moral and non-mechanical.

Gandhi thinks that western civilization has invaded our cities. Therefore, in order to have a glimpse of Indian civilization we have to look into the Indian villages. In our villages we managed, according to Gandhi,

“With the same kind of plough as existed thousands of years ago. We have retained the same kind of cottages that we had in former times and our indigenous education remains the same as before.... Each followed his own occupation of trade and charged a regulation fee.”<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, Gandhi thought for a new civilization, a different destiny for man.

In *Hind Swaraj* Gandhi gives his opinion against modern civilization. As he says:

...in answer to the Indian school of violence and its prototype in South Africa. I came in contact with every known Indian anarchist in London. Their breviary impressed me, but I felt that their zeal was misguided. I feel that violence was no remedy for India's ills, and that her

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<sup>2</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Gov. of India, 1958 Vol. X. p.20.

<sup>3</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 1958. Vol.X. p.38.

<sup>4</sup> Gandhi, M.K. “The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi”, (Ed). Shriman Narayan, Ahmadabad: Navajivan Publishing House, Vol. IV. p.95.

civilization required the use of a different and higher weapon for self-protection.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, Gandhi finds violence rooted in modern civilization. As long as man will be the slave of modern civilization, violence must be there. Gandhi came across a cartoon, 'March of Civilization', published in English journal called "The New Age". Gandhi describes this as follows,

It shows an army on the march. Behind there is a grotesque figure, that of a general. On the body of its terrible form hanging a gun, emitting smoke in every direction, and swords dripping with blood and its hang cannon. There is the drawing of skull on the badge hanging on one side. The arm, moreover, there is a cross (this emblem of batch which looks after the wounded). In the mouth, held in the teeth, here is a danger dripping with blood. On the shoulder is seen a belt studded with life cartridges.

Expressing his own view on the cartoon he says,

No one who reads this cartoon can help becoming grave. On reflection, we cannot help feeling that Western civilization is a cruel, perhaps more cruel than the terrible expression on the face of the man in the cartoon. This sight which fills one with the utmost indignation is that of the cross in the midst of weapons dripping with blood. Here the hypocrisy of the new civilization reaches its climax. In former times, too, there used to be bloody, but they were free from the hypocrisy of modern civilization.... Look at the picture of civilization drawn above; a civilization grows as terrible as a wolf through its hunger for wealth and its greedy pursuit of worldly pleasure.<sup>6</sup>

From this it is clear that modern civilization is obsessed with 'hunger of wealth and greedy pursuit of worldly pleasure. Here, human being devotes his whole energy to increase wealth in order to get pleasure and bodily comfort for his live and living. But

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Gandhi, M.K. *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Gov. of India, 1958. Vol. X. p.202.

this sort of life brings cruelty, the oppression, exploitation, and indignity etc. And that we can call the hypocrisy of modern civilization. “Civilization is like mouse gnawing while it is soothing us.”<sup>7</sup> However soothing modern civilization may be, it is the Upas tree<sup>8</sup> for Gandhi. Therefore in the quest for material comfort modern civilization “takes note neither of morality nor of religion”.<sup>9</sup> And human being’s entire effort is vested in acquiring wealth and material pleasure to satisfy his materialistic life in this materialistic world. According to him modern civilization based on violence and “does not respect all life and, in its progress onward, it has not hesitated to resort to wholesale destruction of even human life.”<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the quest for material pleasure leads man to ceaseless activity in order to satisfy his unlimited material comfort. So the industrialization took its birth and it becomes the means of satisfying the individual's hunger for more and more worldly goods. But Gandhi condemns the industrial mode of production. Because industrialization helps pamper the human body through a proliferation of wants and it reinforces the structures of inequity, exploitation and domination. The industrial mode of production brings two types of tendencies towards physical and social mobility. As Ramashary Roy says;

"The rapid modes of transportation have removed most constraints on physical and social mobility. The more constraints that are overcome, the more does a moment, across space and time, get intensified. In

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<sup>7</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. X. p.129.

<sup>8</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. IV. p.146.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p.121.

<sup>10</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol.XXIII. pp.243-244.

addition, rapid transportation has also made it possible for one country to expand outwards and colonies distant lands and pole. "<sup>11</sup>

As Gandhi says,

"detest this mad desire to destroy distance and time, to increase animal appetites and go to the ends of the earth in search of their satisfaction."<sup>12</sup>

Gandhi rejects this sort of industrialization. According to him discontent, unrest and conflict become endemic in modern civilization. As he wrote to a friend in 1919;

Economic distress, political repression and an awakening amongst the masses in particular in all countries have all played an important part in bringing about the present world conditions where, enquiring of every country, you find them affected without exception by unrest of a deep seated character. In America, it is class warfare; in England it is labour unrest; in Russia, Bolshevism, and in India it is an all round unrest due to repression, famine and other causes. This situation which now faces the Western nations was inevitable; for Western civilization, based on the basic principle of brute force as a guiding motive, could have ultimately led only mutual destruction.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, the 'multiplication of wants and machinery contrived to supply them' reduce man to a mere cog in the machine. Thus, for Gandhi, modern civilization stands for the emasculation of man, promoting exploitation and dominance and unleashing violence and killing morality. As he says,

"If modern civilization stands for all this, and I have understood it to do so, I call it satanic and with it the present system of government its best exponent." <sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ramashary Roy, "Self and Society: A Study in Gandhian Thought", in Ramashary Roy (Ed) "*What is Beyond the Satanic Civilization*", New Delhi: Sage Publication, 1985. p.42.

<sup>12</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 1958. Vol. XXXIII, Appendix. 1. p.486.

<sup>13</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 1958. Vol. XV. p.381.

<sup>14</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 1958. Vol XXXIII, Appendix. I.p.486.

There are factors like, machine including railways, professions like those of lawyers and doctors and the institution of modern education, that reinforce the tendency of modern civilization to prefer the pursuit of self-interest against morality and religion. For Gandhi "Machinery is the chief symbol of modern civilization, it represents a great sin."<sup>15</sup> And railways symbolizes man's attempt to annihilate space and time and thus transgress natural limits. It has several adverse consequences. Mainly it violates the natural rhythm of human body. He says,

"...man is so made by nature as to require him to restrict his movements as far his hands and feet will take him....God set a limit to man's locomotive ambition in the construction of his body." <sup>16</sup>

Thus, by rushing about from place to place by means of railways and 'such other maddening conveniences,' man transgresses natural limits. Secondly it has been instrumental in the rapid spread of disease. Thirdly railways, by joining distance place have made it possible to transport goods in a short time from cheaper markets to dearer markets creating conditions of scarcity at some places that ultimately lead to famine.

Gandhi denounces the professions of lawyers and doctors. As he observes, "My firm opinion is that the lawyers have enslaved India, have accentuated Hindu-Mahomedan dissensions and have confirmed English authorities."<sup>17</sup> Apart from the fact those lawyers have a vested interest in advancing quarrels, which for them is 'one of the avenues of becoming wealthy'. They have also helped in consolidating and tightening the

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<sup>15</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Hind- Swaraj, Complete Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. X. p. 135.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p.142.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* p.189.

grip of English rule in India by accepting and giving legitimacy to English law for regulating Indian affairs. As far the doctors, they receive Gandhi's wrath not only because they practice vivisection and use animal fat or spirituous liquors in the preparation of medicines, but also because they encourage indulgence and therefore weaken control over mind. As he says,

"I have indulged in vice, I contract a disease, a doctor cures me, the odds are that I shall repeat at the vice. Had the doctor not intervened, nature would have done its work, and I would have acquired mastery over myself, would have been freed from vice and would have become happy."<sup>18</sup>

Gandhi also is very critical of modern education as well. Gandhi argues that knowledge of reading, writing and arithmetic or of geography, astronomy, algebra, geometry, etc., may help in performing the responsibilities of an occupation but it does not help in character building on which depends the performance of one's main role in life. "It does not make men of us. It does not enable us to do our duty."<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, according to Gandhi true education is something different. Man is made of three constituents, the body, mind and spirit. Spirit is the one permanent element in man. The body and mind function on account of it. Hence, we can call that education which reveals the qualities of spirit. As Gandhi says,

"Education can also be understood in another sense: that is whatever leads to all a full or maximum development of all three, the body, mind and spirit may also called education. The knowledge that is

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.147-158.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p.183.

being imparted today may possibly develop the mind a little, but certainly it does not develop the body or spirit. I have doubt about the development of the mind too, because it does not mean that the mind and developed if we have filled it with a lot of information."<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, according to Gandhi, education is not only a means of learning or acquiring knowledge, but it also helps in character building. Thus there is no much difference between education and religion. As he says,

Education, character and religion should be regarded as convertible terms. There is no true education which does not tend to produce character, and there is no true religion which does not determine character. Education should contemplate the whole life. Mere memorizing and book learning is not education. I have no faith in the so-called system of education which produces men of learning without the backbone of character.<sup>21</sup>

Having looked at Gandhi's views on education and training, we now turn to his observations on modernity and his critique of materialism and his alternative ideas.

## **On Modernity**

Gandhi has been a staunch critique of the modern civilization based on the modern science and technology. In his *Hind Swaraj* he has outlined the moral bankruptcy of this civilization because of its excessive reliance on the brute force and the materialist values. Gandhi is of the view of that science and technology of the West which have shaken the spiritual foundations of human civilization are pursuing an amoral goal. He rejects the ideal of science and technology which consists in securing human progress

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<sup>20</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. XXX, pp.58-59.

<sup>21</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. XXXVII.p.362.

and happiness through introduction of machines and other mechanical devices. Science and technology have in fact contributed to the human misery, according to Gandhi, by their relentless pursuit of material progress at the cost of spiritual progress and happiness.

According to Gandhi, introduction of machines and industrialization have resulted in more poverty and misery because man has been displaced from his natural habitat and work. This has made man dependent on the heavy machines and the other gadgets which have replaced human labour. For Gandhi, the industrialized civilization of the West has caused the moral and spiritual sickness in man leading to a total collapse of the moral values. Thus modernity has failed to bring progress to mankind. Modernity has been associated with the material progress and the consequent loss of human values. Hence Gandhi calls for a total rejection of the soulless civilization of the modern West. Gandhi's calls for a return to the simple and ideal village life and the life of the less material; needs and more spiritual aspiration is predicated upon his belief that human spirit is higher than the human body and that the moral and spiritual values are higher than the material values.

Gandhi's critique of modernity is based on his ideal of spiritual progress of humanity which is based on the pursuit of truth and nonviolence. A spiritually enlightened human society will be far more nonviolent and wedded to truth than any other civilization. The foundation of this new society will lie in our total dedication to truth and nonviolence.

“Modernity is based on the cognitive idea of truth as the foundation of a scientific world-view.”<sup>22</sup>

As Bilgrami writes,

“This conception which set in sometimes in the 17th century itself owes much to be a mere abstract element in our thinking, which is that truth is a cognitive notion, not a moral one. Only if truth is so conceived can science become the paradigmatic pursuit of our culture, without it the scientific outlook lacks its deepest theoretical source. It is a mark of his intellectual ambition that by making it exclusively and exhaustively moral and experiential notion instead, Gandhi was attempting to repudiate the paradigm at the deepest possible conceptual level”<sup>23</sup>.

Gandhi strives to drive home the point that the cognitive ideal of truth is the source of the technological exploitation of man and nature and therefore he pleads for a total replacement of this ideal by the ideal of truth as a moral and spiritual ideal. With truth as cognitive being replaced by truth as moral and spiritual, Gandhi has turned the modern civilization on its head. He envisages the new world-order based on the spiritual grasp of truth through non-violent actions and thus on the actions based on spiritual understanding of life of man and nature. This is predisposed to bring about a moral and spiritual transformation of man thus entailing a transformation in the metaphysics of man and nature.

### **Gandhi’s notion of Truth**

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<sup>22</sup> .Akeel Bilgrami, “Gandhi, The Philosopher” (private circulation).

<sup>23</sup> Akeel Bilgrami, “Gandhi, The Philosopher” (private circulation).

While *ahimsa* by definition denotes activity and action, it is the way Gandhi develops his philosophy of temporal action, namely through an examination of truth, which makes his philosophical contribution decisive. As a result, our discussion becomes an exploration of Gandhi's truth and its role in both the spiritual and temporal world. Studying Gandhi's emphasis on worldly existence is significant insofar as his philosophy is one that engages action. It is through the practice of *ahimsa* – the practice of Truth - that one realizes Truth.

Gandhi most often places truth and non-violence on the same level and claims that truth and non-violence are the two sides of the same coin. He is of the opinion that a truthful man is bound to be non-violent and vice versa. That is why it is supposed that truth and non-violence cannot be kept apart. However, one can see the difference between the two principles in morality. While truth is the bed-rock principle, non-violence follows as a corollary. All forms of non-violent behaviour follow from the one adhering to truth as a deep moral commitment. A *satyagrahi* is necessarily nonviolent because he contradicts himself if he is not so. This necessary relation between truth and non-violence need not commit Gandhi to the identity of the two. A non-violent person is in better position to realize truth as the supreme value.

Truth qualifies to be a moral law in view of the fact that it shows how moral values are possible at all. The presupposition of truth as the fundamental moral principle makes it into a moral law in the sense that truth prevails as the principle of good life in the world. Truth has the character of the Kantian categorical imperative because it

demands absolute obligation from the truth-seeker. Truth acts as the moral law which is absolutely imposed on the truth-seeker by moral reason or the "inner voice".

### **Truth is God**

Gandhi equates truth with God keeping in view the primacy of truth as an ontological category. He says: truth is God, rather than God is truth. This formulation speaks of the fundamental change that has occurred in Gandhi's concept of God. That also speaks of his approach to religion and metaphysics. The ideas of truth-based religion and truth-based metaphysics dominate Gandhi's philosophy. The following implications are entailed by the formulation "Truth is God":

1. Truth has a spiritual dimension in addition to the moral dimension.
2. Truth is a metaphysical category as it characterizes the fundamental nature of reality.
3. Truth is the Absolute Reality which is the source of all existence.

Thus Gandhi makes it clear that truth has a transcendental significance in his metaphysical system in view of the all-comprehensive character of this concept. Truth does not have a partial presence because; if partial it amounts to a distortion of itself. Truth cannot be domain-specific, nor can it be confined to any particular discourse.

Those who argue for the discourse dependence<sup>24</sup> of truth do not understand the deeply absolute character of truth. Thus Gandhi emphasizes this point by showing that truth is God or the Absolute Reality. Gandhi writes:

“The word *satya* is derived from *sat*, which means that which is *satya* means a state of being. 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”.<sup>25</sup>

The concept God signifies the Absolute Reality that cannot be subsumed under any other Reality. This leads to the idea that God is the ultimate ground of all existence<sup>26</sup>. Gandhi makes his concept of God theology-free in order to get rid of the attempt to absorb it to any particular theological tradition. Gandhi's God is free from the theological frameworks which relativise God to their particular conceptions. Gandhi writes: “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”.<sup>27</sup> Thus Gandhi gives absolute status to truth keeping in mind his predilection towards equating truth with God. This makes truth a metaphysical reality more than the moral law.

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<sup>24</sup> Richard Rorty., *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. pp.21-33.

<sup>25</sup> Gandhi, M.K., “The Moral and Political Writings”, Vol.II (Ed),Raghavan Iyer, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986. Vol. II. p.162.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* pp.150-154.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* p.157.

Gandhi uses the term truth in two ways, namely truth as Absolute Truth, and truth as relative truth. While the significance of Gandhi's use of the term Truth reflects the importance of the term in many Indian philosophical and religious traditions, the distinction between Absolute Truth and relative truths is most succinctly described through the Buddhist paradigm of truth.

The Buddhist understanding of truth broadly differentiates between the Absolute Truth that is the transcendent truth, and the conditional truth that relies on the Absolute Truth.<sup>28</sup> Both these forms of truth include factual and scientific truths. However, Gandhi understands and application of truth in formulating his philosophy is primarily concerned with morality and social relations.

### **Absolute Truth**

Absolute Truth is characterised by its fixed and unalterable nature. For Gandhi, Absolute Truth (hereafter Truth) is the only fundamental truth. He uses the term interchangeably with God and maintains "beyond truths there is one absolute Truth which is total and all embracing. But it is indescribable because it is God. Or say, rather, God is Truth".<sup>29</sup> He later updated this idea, arguing "... it is more correct to say that Truth is God than to say that God is Truth".<sup>30</sup> 'Truth' understood as 'God' is in some ways a pragmatic word choice for Gandhi. This pragmatism comes from the need to effectively communicate in a language that is understood by the many. His faith and devotion to his religion, together with the religions he studied, informed his interpretation of Truth to an

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<sup>28</sup> Zimmer, H., *Myth and Symbol in Indian Art and Civilization*, New York::1962. p.250.

<sup>29</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *The Essential writings*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2008. p.35.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*,p.53.

overwhelming degree. Gandhi went so far to insist “I can live only by having faith in God. My definition of God must always be kept in mind. For me there is no other God than Truth; Truth is God”.<sup>31</sup> As a term, then, God becomes an embodiment of the idea of Truth. If God is accepted as an external force or agent, with an omniscient role in the entire cosmos, the use of the title is effective. If, however, God is understood in a physical form or even as the divine creator of destinies, the descriptor does not capture that which Gandhi is attempting to illustrate.

Yet God is not the only characteristic Gandhi assigns to Truth. He also equates Love to Truth. That is to say, in describing Love, Gandhi combines the working definitions of love with the negative and positive elements of *ahimsa* insofar as integration of the responsibility of self and communal realisation is necessary for the realisation of Truth. Love for the self is as significant as love for the other and for the community as a whole. Indeed the realisation of Truth demands the realisation of all three entities.

Gandhi’s choice of the term “love” is interesting because of its intensity. Rather than discussing, care or responsibility, which are open to interpretation of scope and passion, love denotes a very particular, albeit indefinite, depth and zeal that incorporates near extreme elements of care and responsibility. Nonetheless, its definition is not limited to these elements. As Kierkegaard describes from the Christian tradition, in his *Works of Love*:

“There is no word in human language, not one single one, not the most sacred one, about which we are able to say: If a person uses this word, it is unconditionally demonstrated that there is love in that person. On the contrary, it is even true that a word from one person can convince us that there is love in him (sic), and the opposite word from another can convince

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* p.156.

us that there is love in him also. It is true that one and the same word can convince us that love abides in the one who said it and does not in the other, who nevertheless said the same word.<sup>32</sup>

Kierkegaard insists that the emotion of love is best expressed through action, yet he does so without ever providing a steadfast definition of love. Combine the indescribable yet value-laden emotion love with Gandhi's ideas of God and Truth, and the use of the term love to describe Truth in action becomes apparent. Truth as Love underscores the all-embracing nature of Absolute Truth. Hence, Gandhi does not define Truth. The terms God and Love are too broad to be seen as "defining" terms. In part Gandhi uses these terms to ensure there are no boundaries to Truth. That is he does not consign limits to Truth, and therefore he does not claim to have discovered a universal absolute.

As a result, Gandhi further argues that Truth can never be realised. After all, if we do not know what it looks like how can we say we have achieved it? At the same time, Gandhi has provided us with the qualities of Truth and, therefore, a path for its achievement. Given Gandhi's belief in the Indian conception of *moksha*, the spiritual release as the supreme end of life, and in the relationship of Truth to God, the realisation of Truth is a significant piece of Gandhi's puzzle. He supports the claim that Truth is unattainable partially through his religious beliefs. Because Gandhi insists that there cannot be a complete transcendence of desires and pleasures as long as we are in our physical form, it becomes impossible to understand Truth completely. The limitations of the physical form denote the importance of *moksha*. Gandhi insists that a person comes closer to Truth as s/he controls her/his passions. Yet the limitations of the physical form

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<sup>32</sup> Kierkegaard, S. *Works of Love*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995. p.13.

deny a person complete transcendence from violence. While confined to our physical form and living in the elements of existence it is impossible for us to know Truth fully. The implication of the unattainability of Truth is that *ahimsa* also becomes impossible to practice in its entirety, as complete transcendence of desires and pleasures is impossible.

Hence, Gandhi establishes Truth as a guiding principle in our existence as it provides principles to spiritual, emotional and active elements of “this-worldly” life. Truth’s all- embracing nature is best articulated through an understanding of the use of Truth in Indian languages. “The word *satya* (truth) comes from *sat* which means “to be” or “to exist.”<sup>33</sup> To live through Truth is “to be” or “to exist” in wholeness.

### **Relative Truth**

The unattainability of Truth does not diminish its importance. Instead, Gandhi stresses the need for the use of relative truths to strive for Truth. Relative truths are those definitive ideas that provide guidance to our thoughts and actions, yet are not static. They change and morph to provide guidance in versatile situations. These truths maintain as their guiding principle the idea of Absolute Truth and, therefore, *ahimsa*.

Relative truths are describable and definable. It is the relationship of relative truth to Absolute Truth that is at the core of Gandhi’s argument. Relative truth becomes the

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<sup>33</sup> Gandhi, M.K., Mahatma Gandhi, *Selected Political Writings*, (Ed) Dalton, D. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publication Co, 1996. p.36.

form of truth that is attainable in the human condition<sup>34</sup> or the temporal world. Truth characterised by God, Love, and *ahimsa* must be manifested through action in order to attain *moksha*. “He... who understands truth follows nothing but truth in thought, speech, and action, comes to know God and gains the seers vision of the past, present, and future.”<sup>35</sup> Gandhi insists that there is no part of our lives that Truth cannot guide. The discussion of Absolute Truth and relative truth can also be seen as a discussion of means and ends insofar as relative truth is the means and Absolute Truth is the end.

This logic however, confronts yet another form of dichotomy whereby a mean cannot be an end in itself. Gandhi insists that this is not the case. The relationship of means and ends in Gandhi’s thought is most apparent through his insistence on characterising Absolute Truth rather than defining it. His characterisation is a means to the achievement of the end and an end in itself. Kotturan explains this phenomenon accurately when he writes:

“Truth cannot be realised without non-violence. Means and ends being convertible terms, Truth and non-violence become part of the spiritual make up of Gandhian *ahimsa*.”<sup>36</sup>

Hence, to make reference to means and ends as two distinct entities is somewhat incorrect. Truth understood solely as a means or as an end leaves the breadth of Gandhi’s *ahimsa* at the surface. The benefit of acting through *ahimsa* is retained for oneself. The existence of a better society and the realisation of *moksha* are not engaged. That is to say, one’s social responsibility is denied if Truth is treated as a means only. Truth understood

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<sup>34</sup> Khanna, S., *Gandhi and the good life*, New Delhi: Gandhi Peace Foundation, 1985. p.41.

<sup>35</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Mahatma Gandhi: Selected Political Writings*, 1996. p.35.

<sup>36</sup> Kotturan, G., *Ahimsa: Gautama to Gandhi*, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1973. p.189.

as a means and an end implies that Truth is the means to defining relative truths and is also the ultimate end. Using the end as a guide for the means without diminishing its role as the ultimate end is the truest expression of *ahimsa*. As a means and an end, Truth engages the individual and the community insofar as it defines the individual and the community as a whole: it is that which allows one to see her/his community as an extension of her/himself.

Gandhi's uses the term truth both as means and ends conterminously. *Ahimsa* is the means and Truth is the end. *Ahimsa* and Truth are so intertwined that is practically impossible to disentangle them. Means and ends work together in Gandhi's paradigm for the realisation of Truth.

Gandhi's ideas on Truth allow people to interpret moral principles in a way that preserves the individual and embodies an understanding of the individual as a member of the community. Accepting this as Gandhi's understanding of the individual, Gandhi's Truth allows the individual to find the "best reasons" for acting in moral situations. As a result of Gandhi's understanding of the individual as embedded in community, autonomy is value-laden whereby both individuals and the community have the goal of realizing Truth. It is not merely individual autonomy. The concept of autonomy must incorporate idea of communal autonomy as it relates to individual autonomy when making moral judgments. This nuanced version of autonomy, which includes a characteristic of social responsibility, is not the only way in which Gandhi incorporates autonomy as a way of making moral judgments. As outlined above, Gandhi also ensures that individuals have

the right to interpret, and act upon moral principles as they see fit. Truth without definition leaves itself without boundaries, open to inquiry, and encourages personal assessment. Even though Gandhi puts forth a notion of Truth that is to guide moral judgments, he does not confine the notion to how we must make judgments. Instead his notion of Truth seeks to provide a method for allowing his conception of the individual in a community, rather than an individual that stands alone, for determining his moral judgments. Gandhi's method of philosophical inquiry, namely praxis, inadvertently incorporates moral judgments. In fact, for Gandhi it is through actions in the public sphere that moral judgments manifest themselves. The deduction of moral judgments rests with an individual who is defined through her or his membership in the community, and underscores the social responsibility Gandhi's praxis demands.

Glyn Richards in *The Philosophy of Gandhi* correctly emphasizes Gandhi's metaphysical concept of Truth as key to understanding the theoretical and practical dimensions of his philosophy. Gandhi may appear to be an unsystematic thinker, but his underlying concept of truth (*satya*) provides a rationale and coherence to his political theory and practice. Gandhi frequently expressed his view of reality and of political truth in terms of the formulation "Truth is God" in his reflections on Truth; Gandhi expressed a personal preference for the Hindu impersonal formulations of the nondualistic Advaita Vedanta with its view of the all-encompassing, spiritual Self as *Atman* and its identification of *Atman* with the impersonal absolute *Brahman*. Gandhi was also extremely flexible in his formulations of Truth, frequently referring to God, Rama, and

many other personal and impersonal terms. He acknowledges that God is a personal God to those who need His personal presence.

### **Non-Violence**

For traditionalists, *ahimsa* meant non-injury and non-destruction of life, for Gandhi it meant positive love and doing all in one's power to promote human well-being. His concept of *satyagraha*, was based on love, relied on the power of uncomplaining suffering and sought to mobilise the opponent's moral energies. *Satya* and *Ahimsa* are the two concepts, which are fundamental to philosophy of Gandhi. He is well known for his practice of *ahimsa* and the concept of Truth is more fundamental *ahimsa*. As he says:

“As a Jain muni once rightly said, I was not so much a votary of *ahimsa* as I was of Truth, and I put the latter in the first place and the former in second. For, as he put it I was capable of sacrificing non-violence for the sake of Truth. In fact, it was in the course of my pursuit of Truth that I discovered nonviolence.”<sup>37</sup>

Gandhi took *ahimsa* as merely a means and Truth as the goal. And he has identified *Satya* with the basic reality. According to him this Truth holds us together and sustains the entire universe. From this it seems that he was influenced by the traditional Hindu concept of *Sat*, *Dharma* or *Rta*. He has identified *Satya* with God. And he has tried to analyze the concept of *satya* with all the metaphysical and moral implications of such terms of Hindu tradition as *Rta*, *Dharma*, and *Sat* etc. He has taken *satya* as the greatest moral virtue and as a great moral vow. And for observation of this moral virtue, complete

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<sup>37</sup> Gandhi, M.K. *Harijan*, March 1926.

fearlessness and non-possession are required according to Gandhi. Without being fearless one cannot speak the naked truth.

The virtue of fearlessness, non-possession etc. are required according to Gandhi not only for the observance of the moral virtue of truth but also for realization of truth in its metaphysical sense in which it is identical with God. Gandhi says,

The pursuit of Truth is true bhakti (devotion). It is the path that leads to God, and therefore, there is no place in it for cowardice, no place for defeat. It is the talisman by which death itself becomes the portal to life eternal.<sup>38</sup>

Similarly about the need of non-violence Gandhi says,

Possession implies provision for the future. A seeker after Truth .... cannot hold anything against morrow. God never stores for the morrow....Perfect fulfillment of the ideal of Non-possession requires that man should, like the birds, have no roof over his head, no clothing and no stock of good for the morrow. He will indeed need his daily bread, but it will be God's business, and not his, to provide for it.<sup>39</sup>

As he further says,

From the standpoint of pure Truth, the body too is possession. It has been truly said that desire for enjoyment creates bodies for soul. When this desire vanishes, there remains no further need for the body...<sup>40</sup>

Therefore, according to Gandhi, perfect realization of Truth is not possible so long as we are with the ephemeral body. As he says,

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<sup>38</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Yeravada Mandir*, New Delhi: Gandhi Peace Foundation, 2006. p.5.

<sup>39</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Yeravada Mandir*. p.34.

<sup>40</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Yeravada Mandir*, p.37.

But is it impossible for us to realize perfect Truth so long as we are imprisoned in this mortal frame. We can only realize it in our imagination. We cannot, through the instrumentality of this ephemeral body, see face-to-face Truth which is eternal. That is why in the last resort one must depend on faith.<sup>41</sup>

According to him, although we could not realize the Absolute Truth, we could have partial glimpse of it in what might be called relative truths. Everybody realized Truth partially in his own way. As Gandhi says,

The relative truth must, meanwhile, be my beacon, my shield and buckler.... Even my Himalayan blunders have seemed trifling to me because I have kept strictly to this path.... I have gone forward according to my light. Often in my progress I had a faint glimpse of the Absolute Truth, God, and daily the conviction is going on me that He alone is real and all else is unreal.<sup>42</sup>

Then the question may be raised what is truth? Gandhi replied: “what the voice within tell you”. From this it is clear that, Gandhi believed in the authenticity and efficacy of the voice of conscience, because he believed that every individual had a divine element in him in the form of his soul. Thus, according to Gandhi the inner voice, as conscience is the sole and source or judge for knowing or judging what is truth. Here it may be asked is it only the inner voice alone can give knowledge of truth. To this Gandhi said that before one claimed to know truth on the strength of his inner voice, he must have fully disciplined himself by cultivating the virtues of truthfulness, humanity, purity and above all non-violence and embrace the twin ideals of poverty and non-possession. In the words of Gandhi, one must have reduced himself to zero, before he begins claiming the realization of truth through his voice of conscience. As he says, “If you would swim

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<sup>41</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *yeravada Mandir*, p.7.

<sup>42</sup> Gandhi, M.K. *Truth is God*, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Press, 1955. p.32.

on the bosom of the ocean of Truth, you must reduce yourself to zero.”<sup>43</sup> To attain truth or to have a glimpse of it is not a very easy task. It is *tapasya*. As Gandhi says,

....the quest of Truth involves tapas-self-suffering, sometimes even unto death. Again, the path of Truth is as narrow as it is straight.... It is like balancing oneself on the edge of a sword....<sup>44</sup>

Thus, the surest means to Truth, according to Gandhi, is *ahimsa*. He regarded Truth as somewhat superior to *ahimsa* because he took the former as the end and latter as merely a means. He believed that good end could be achieved only through a good means and an end, however good it might be, could not be described unless it was attained through good means. For Gandhi, it was the means, and not the end, which was to be taken more care of. That is, if the means was good the end was bound to be good, but not conversely. As Gandhi says,

I would say, ‘means are after all everything.’ As the means so the end. There is no wall of separation between means and end....Realization of the goal is in exact proportion to that of the means.<sup>45</sup>

So the truth and *ahimsa* are very intimately related and it is difficult to separate them. As Gandhi remarks,

Ahimsa and truth are so intertwined that it is practically impossible to disentangle them. They are like the two sides of a coin, or rather a smooth unstamped metallic disc. Who can say which is the obverse, and which the reverse?<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> .Gandhi, M.K., *All Men are Brothers*, Krishna Kripalani,(Ed), *UNESCO,Pairs*,1958. p.71.

<sup>44</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Yeravada Mandir*, p.7.

<sup>45</sup> Gandhi, M.K. *All Men are Brothers*, Krishna Kripalani, (Ed), *UNESCO,Pairs*,1958.p.81.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* p.81

The practice of *ahimsa* according to Gandhi would be to realize Truth and to realize Truth would be to practice *ahimsa*. As Gandhi says,

Ahimsa is my God, and Truth is my God. When I look for Ahimsa, Truth says, 'Find it through me'.<sup>47</sup> When I look for Truth, Ahimsa says, 'Find it through me.'<sup>48</sup>

Therefore according to Gandhi *Ahimsa* and Truth are to be realized through each other. *Satya* and *Ahimsa* have been traditionally identified with *Dharma*.

The relationship between *Satya* and *ahimsa* follows from Gandhi's beliefs regarding the nature of God and man. According to Gandhi, there was an essential unity between God and human self and also between oneself and another. That is, he believes in the essential unity of all beings, because God or Truth was present in all of them. As he said, "I believed in *Advaita*, I believed in the essential unity of man and for that matter, of all that lives".<sup>49</sup> From this it is followed that, if there is no essential difference between oneself and another, then violence or injury to any other becomes injury to one's own self or to God Himself, who is Truth. Thus, the non-dualist position of Gandhi implies the intimate relationship between Truth and *ahimsa*.

In Hindu scriptures *ahimsa* was meant for the saint or for monks. But Gandhi refused this. He was a practical idealist and believed that all the higher moral and spiritual virtues could be practiced by ordinary people also. According to him *ahimsa* was

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<sup>47</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Truth is God*, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1955. p.4.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, p.135.

<sup>49</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Truth is God*, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1955. P.4.

the law of human species. Therefore non-violence is not only meant for saints and monks but also for the common people as well. As Gandhi says,

I am not a visionary. I claim to be a practical idealist. The religion of non-violence is not meant merely for *rishis* and saints. It is meant for the common people. Non-violence is the law of our species as the violence is the law of the brute.<sup>50</sup>

The word *ahimsa* literally means non-injury, non-killing. Or in other words, it means abstaining from harming anyone in any form. It implies completely renunciation of one's will or intention to hurt or harm any living being. First of all *ahimsa* means not only injury but also positive love and charity and this charity and love for everyone including to our enemy. The real *ahimsa*, according to Gandhi is that, one should not possess ill will even towards one's enemy. True observance of *ahimsa* requires self-suffering rather than inflicting suffering upon the wrongdoer. Thus, it is clear that, to be follower of *ahimsa* in the Gandhian sense is not a very easy task. As according to Gandhi the follower of *ahimsa* must always be ready to die without any desire ever to hurt or kill anyone.

Gandhi distinguishes three kinds of *himsa* and took abstention from all of them as true *ahimsa*. The first one is *Krita himsa*, (violence done by one's own self). Then there is *Karita himsa* (violence instigated and got done by somebody else). Lastly, there is *anumodiata himsa* (watching passively some violence done by someone else). According to Gandhi, the follower must abstain from all of these. Here *ahimsa* includes all moral virtues, like humility, forgiveness, love, charity, selflessness, fearlessness, innocence,

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<sup>50</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Young India*, August 1920.

nonattachment, etc. *Ahimsa* is such a moral virtue without which we could cease to be a human. *Ahimsa* is our fundamental law.

According to Gandhi, *ahimsa* is the soul force and without that we cannot become nonviolent. Therefore nonviolence is possible by the strength of the soul. *Ahimsa* is the weapon of the strong, not the weak. As Gandhi says, “Nonviolence presupposes ability to strike. It is a conscious, deliberate restraint put upon one’s desire for vengeance.”<sup>51</sup> So true nonviolence resides in our mind and it is an inner disposition. As Gandhi says,

Nonviolence to be potent force must begin with the mind. Nonviolence of the mere body without the cooperation of the mind is nonviolence of the weak and cowardly, and has therefore no potency.<sup>52</sup>

Many great thinkers attempted to understand the nature of man. So also the various religions have described human nature in various ways. Hinduism has taken the soul within man, which is really his essence, as the divine spark within him. And the same divine soul is present in every human being. But Gandhi’s concept of man has taken the path of religion. For him man was a mixture of both animal and spiritual force. Gandhi says, “Everyone of us is a mixture of good and evil.”<sup>53</sup> Man through the process of evolution passes the brute stage; therefore, brutal traits and dispositions have also been present in him. But real nature of man is the spirit in him, which is a divine spark within him. As Gandhi says; “We are born with brute strength, but we were born in order to realize God who dwells us. That indeed is privilege of man and it distinguishes him from

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<sup>51</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Young India*, June 1931.

<sup>52</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Young India*, April 1931.

<sup>53</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Harijan*, March.1926.

the lower animal.”<sup>54</sup> Gandhi’s concept of man is based on Advaitic faith. According to him all man are basically one, because in their soul all share same divine, the same *Brahman*. Or in other words, the same *Brahman* resides in all of them. “If one man gains spirituality, the whole world gains with him and if one man falls, the whole world falls to that extent.”<sup>55</sup> Similarly what is possible for one man to achieve is possible for every one to achieve. Because in all of us the same divine spark is present and all are present with the same potentialities. What required is nothing but the equal effort to achieve the goal. “The soul is one in all. Its possibilities are therefore the same for everyone.”<sup>56</sup> If that true nature of the self of all of us then, it is not desirable to possess ill will towards anyone or to speak ill of anyone. Because, as we have discussed it is the same divine which is residing in everyone. Therefore, the service of society of the service of the whole humanity becomes the duty of man.

We must think about everyone who shows love, sympathy and kindness to all because we are all one. Gandhi believed that no man was ever inherently bad. Man sometimes may perform bad acts, that does not mean man is bad. So we must make a clear distinction between man and his deeds. There could be bad acts but there is no bad man. As Gandhi says, “Man and his deed are distinct things. Where a good deed should call forth approbation and a wicked deed disapprobation, the deed, whether good or wicked, always deserves respect of pity as the case maybe.”<sup>57</sup> From the above discussion it is clear that Gandhi had great sympathy for man. Man was essentially divine

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<sup>54</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Harijan*, April.1938.

<sup>55</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Young India*, December 1924.

<sup>56</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Harijan*, May 1940.

<sup>57</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *The Story of My Experiment with truth*, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1956.p.276.

and good. Gandhi opposed that the nature of man to be downward. He declared, “I refuse to believe that the tendency of human nature is always downward.”<sup>58</sup> Of course man according to him had an animal side but that was not his essential nature. The moment he is aware of his true spirit his animal side subdued. As Gandhi said, “man’s nature is not essentially evil; brute nature has been known to yield to the influence of love. You must never despair of human nature.”<sup>59</sup> Gandhi was optimistic about human nature and he believed that even the so-called worst man could be reformed and brought to the right track. As he says,

No human being is so bad as to be beyond redemption; no human being is so perfect as to warrant his destroying him whom he wrongly considers to be wholly evil. We must believe that every man can think for himself. The rationality of human nature is the presupposition of human perfectivity.<sup>60</sup>

He is so confident about man’s nature that he thinks man was basically nonviolent. As he said, “Man as animal is violent but as spirit (he) is non-violent. The moment he awakens to the spirit within he cannot remain violent.”<sup>61</sup> For Gandhi man was always going higher and higher both materially and spiritually. According to Gandhi, the gradual progress of civilization from the state of cannibalism to the civilized life of agriculture etc., was sign of progress towards *ahimsa* and love. Human being as a whole was acting towards the realization of the inner, spiritual unit of mankind. As Gandhi viewed the human beings are working consciously or unconsciously towards the realization of that (spiritual) identity.

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<sup>58</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Young India*, December 1926.

<sup>59</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Harijan*, November 1938.

<sup>60</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Young India*, March 1931.

<sup>61</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Harijan*, August.1940.

According to Gandhi love is the true nature of man. And through this law of love man climbs higher and higher stages. As Gandhi says, “I believe that the sum total of the energy of mankind is not to bring us down but to lift us up, and that is the result of the definite, if unconscious, working of the law of love.”<sup>62</sup> What was valuable for Gandhi was not the actual attainment of the ideal of perfection, but the efforts made for it by us. As he says, “Let us be sure of our ideal. We shall ever fail to realize it, but shall never cease to strive for it.”<sup>63</sup>

Gandhi has always exhorted man to cultivate such moral virtue as *satya*, *ahimsa*, non-position etc and above all the service of humanity. He also firmly believed in the law of *Karma*. Law of *Karma* and freedom of will are not antithetical. The doctrine of *Karma* is properly understood by all in order to attain a perfect life in this modern age.

No-violence is not a negative virtue, but the positive one of love and compassion. On non-violence Gandhi writes: *ahimsa* is one of the world's great principles which no power on earth can wipe out. Thousands like myself may die in trying to vindicate the ideal but *ahimsa* will never die. And the gospel of *ahimsa* can be spread only through believers dying for the cause.<sup>64</sup> What Gandhi means by this is that non-violence is an eternal principle underlying human civilization because human existence depends on this

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<sup>62</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Young India*, November 1931.

<sup>63</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Speeches and Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed, Madras: GA Natesan and Company, 1933. P.301.

<sup>64</sup> Raghavan Iyer., (Ed) *M.K.Gandhi, the Moral and Political Writings*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986.Vol. II. p.256.

principle. Man has been learning to practice this principle in life through centuries, though complete non-violence has not been possible yet.

Gandhi considers non-violence as the foundation of human civilization because it is this principle that prevents destruction of the human race along with the rest of the creation. It is this principle that has made man realize that human progress lies in the mutual love and respect for one another's life. Man has come to realize this truth about ahimsa after centuries of experiments. History of man is testimony to the triumph of non-violence because violence has never brought any good to mankind.

Gandhi considers non-violence as a means to truth because he believes that only a non-violent person can attain truth. Truth which is the supreme principle of existence is attainable only by a person loving all existence. Non-violence is the love for all beings. Thus truth is fortified by and ushered in by love, according to Gandhi. Truth and non-violence thus are the two fundamental principles of existence, one standing for the ontological principle that sustains all existence, the other for the moral law that ensures and fortifies the former. Truth is the law of existence while non violence is the law of love. Both are moral laws in a sense but the law of truth is more fundamental because the law of love presupposes it.

Gandhi writes: I am not a visionary. I claim to be a practical idealist. The religion of non-violence is not meant for the rishis and saints. It is meant for the common people as well. Non-violence is the law of our species as violence is the law of the brute. The

spirit lies dormant in the brute and he knows no law but that of physical might. The dignity of man requires obedience to a higher law—to the strength of the spirit.<sup>65</sup> Here Gandhi holds that the law of non-violence is the law of the spirit and is therefore superior to the law of the physical might. The law is the foundation of human life and culture. In this sense it is the law of the spiritual progress of mankind in general. Gandhi writes: The rishis, who discovered the law of non-violence in the midst of violence, were greater than Newton. They were themselves greater warriors than Wellington. Having themselves known the use of arms, they realized their uselessness and taught a weary world that its salvation lay not through violence but through nonviolence.<sup>66</sup> Non-violence is not the weapon of the weak but of the strong in the sense that only the strong man knows the limits of the physical strength. Nonviolence lies outside the boundary of violence because only when the limits of the latter are known or realized that we come face to face with non violence. The might of non-violence is far superior to the total strength of violence in the world.

In comparison between truth and non-violence, truth stands at a very fundamental level from the ontological point of view, whereas nonviolence is pivotal to the moral point of view in which truth itself is discovered. Non-violence forges the way for the discovery of and the ultimate encounter with truth. Therefore non-violence is the moral way to truth and leads us to the ultimate victory of truth over untruth. Gandhi admits: My study and experience of non-violence have proved to me that it is the greatest force in the world. It is the surest method of discovering truth and it is the quickest because there is

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* pp.299-300.

no other. It works silently, but almost imperceptibly, but none the less surely. It is the one constructive process of Nature in the midst of incessant destruction going on about us.<sup>67</sup>

Thus non-violence pervades the entire space of human activities and makes man morally responsible and responsive to truth. Truth as the law of existence remains undiscovered in the absence of non-violence. While nonviolence is the law of our species, truth is the law of all existence. In this sense truth is to be treated as the ontological principle, while nonviolence is to be treated as the moral principle. He writes: 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 nonviolence.<sup>68</sup> Thus non-violence is the surest moral way to the truth and cannot be dispensed with if mankind has to be awakened to truth.

### **Satyagraha**

According to Gandhi, while Truth and non-violence are very intimately connected, *Satyagraha* is the expression of this intimate relation. For him, Truth was the end and *ahimsa* the means. *Satyagraha* is the relentless search after Truth and it is through means of *ahimsa*. The concept *Satyagraha*, therefore, represents a real synthesis between the twin concepts of Satya and *ahimsa*. The word Satyagraha or truth means ‘that which is’ can never be destroyed. As Gandhi says, “*Satyagraha* is a relentless search

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* p.306.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* p..312.

for Truth and determination to search truth.”<sup>69</sup> It is “an attribute of the spirit within.”<sup>70</sup> In fact *Satyagraha* was practiced in India as well as abroad even before the name was given.

The essential elements of *Satyagraha* are non-violence, love, self-suffering and persuasion. Non-violence is the corner stone of *Satyagraha*. According to Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, “is to violate... what light is to darkness.”<sup>71</sup> Here one has to conquer “evil by good, anger by love, untruth by truth, *himsa* by *ahimsa*. Therefore, *Satyagraha* must be a true disciple of Lord Buddha and Jesus Christ.

*Satyagraha* is the way, the truth and the life. It is a force that may be used by individuals as well as communities. As Gandhi says, “For me, the law of *Satyagraha*, the law of love is an eternal principle. I co-operate with all that is good. I desire to non-co-operate with all that is evil, whether it is associated with my wife, son or myself.”<sup>72</sup>

He observes,

“suffering is the mark of human tribe. It is eternal law. The mother suffers so that her children may live. Life comes out of death. No country has ever risen without being purified through the fire of suffering... It is impossible to do away with the law of suffering which is the one indispensable condition of our being. Progress is to be measured by the amount of suffering undergone... the purer the suffering the greater the progress.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol.XXVI. p.273.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* p.273.

<sup>71</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Young India*, June 1925.

<sup>72</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol.II, p.1054.

<sup>73</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Young India*, June 1930.

According to Gandhi *Satyagraha* is the inherent birth right of a person. As he says,

“I wish I could persuade everybody that ‘civil disobedience’ is the inherent right of a citizen. He dare not give it up without ceasing to be a man... It is a birth right that cannot be surrendered with the surrender of one’s self-respect. Civil disobedience therefore becomes a sacred duty when the state has become lawless or which is the same thing as corrupt. And a citizen that barter with such a state shares its corruption or lawlessness.”<sup>74</sup>

Gandhi’s conception of *Satyagraha* is based on Truth and non-violence. *Satyagraha* is the way of life and a tool for social change. Therefore a *Satyagrahi* should have infinite trust in human nature and inherent goodness. He should have firm faith on Supreme God. He should be mentally prepared for any type and level of suffering. Depicting the quality of a *Satyagrahi*, Gandhi writes,

“He should have the capacity to stand guard at a single spot day and night; he must not fall ill even if he has to bear cold and heat and rain; he must have the strength to go to the places of peril, to rush to senses of fire, and the courage to wander about alone in desolate jungles and hunts of death; he will bear without a grumble, sever beatings, starvation and worse and will keep to his post of duty without flinching; he will have the resources fullness and capacity to plunge into a seemingly impenetrable sense of rioting; he will have the longing and capacity to run with the name of God on his lips to the rescue of men living on the top of storeys of buildings enveloped in the flames; he will have the fearlessness to plunge into a flood in order to rescue people being carried off by it or jump down a well to save a drawing person.”<sup>75</sup>

The following statements from Gandhi express the various qualities to be possessed by a true *Satyagrahi*:

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<sup>74</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Young India* .November 1922.

<sup>75</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Harijan* .October 1940.

- (a) A *Satyagrahi* turns the searchlight inward relentless to weed out all defects that may be lying hidden there still;<sup>76</sup>
- (b) A *Satyagrahi* has infinite patience, abundant faith in others, and ample hope;<sup>77</sup>
- (c) A *Satyagrahi* cannot go to law for a personal wrong;<sup>78</sup>
- (d) A *Satyagrahi* loves his so-called enemy even as he loves his friend. He owns no enemy;<sup>79</sup>
- (e) A *Satyagrahi* must ceaselessly strive to realize and live truth. And he must never contemplate hurting anyone by thought, word or deed;<sup>80</sup>
- (f) The *Satyagrahi* strives to reach the reason through the heart. The method of reaching the heart is to awaken the public opinion;<sup>81</sup>
- (g) There is no time limit for a *Satyagrahi* nor is there a limit to his capacity for suffering;<sup>82</sup>
- (h) A *Satyagrahi* is dead to his body even before the enemy attempts to kill him;<sup>83</sup>
- (i) To die without killing is the badge of a *Satyagrahi*;<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Collected Works of Mahatma*, Vol.5.p.81.

<sup>77</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Collected Works of Mahatma*, Vol.III.p.68.

<sup>78</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol.XXV.p.163.

<sup>79</sup> D.G.Tendulkar., *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*, New Delhi: Publication Division, 1952.Vol.. V. p.162.

<sup>80</sup> D.G.Tendulkar., *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*, New Delhi Publication Division, 1969. Vol. VIII, 1952. .p.9.

<sup>81</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. XXVI.p.327.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*,.p.159.

<sup>83</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Mind of Mahatma Gandhi*, (Ed), Prabhu & Rao, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946. p.169.

<sup>84</sup> D.G.Tendulkar., *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*, New Delhi Publication Division, 1969.Vol.VII. p.147.

(j) A *Satyagrahi* would neither retaliate nor would he submit to the criminal, but seek to cure him by curing himself;<sup>85</sup>

(k) No confirmed *Satyagrahi* is dismayed by the damage, seen or unseen, from his opponent's side;<sup>86</sup>

(l) A *Satyagrahi* exhausts all other means before he resorts to *Satyagraha*;<sup>87</sup>

(m) A *Satyagrahi*, whilst he is ever ready to fight, must be equally eager for peace;<sup>88</sup>

(n) In the code of the *Satyagrahi*, there is no such things as surrender to brut force;<sup>89</sup>

(o) A *Satyagrahi* lays down his life, but never gives up. That is the meaning of the 'do' or 'die' slogan;<sup>90</sup>

(p) A *Satyagrahi* may not ride horses, truth and untruth, at the same time, to change the metaphor, trim his tail to catch every breeze as you do in the name of communism.<sup>91</sup>

For Gandhi, *Satyagraha* means self-suffering and sacrifice because the path of truth is full of difficulties for one's self. That is why he calls it the path of sacrifice and moral suffering, though it could be called the path of love. Infact truth itself is the goal of

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<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.* p.148.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.* p.190.

<sup>87</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Mind of Mahatma Gandhi*, (Ed), Prabhu & Rao. p.170.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p.171.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p.171.

<sup>90</sup> D.G.Tendulkar., *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi* .New: Delhi: Publication Division 1969.Vol. VII. p.147.

<sup>91</sup> D.G.Tendulkar., *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*, New Delhi: Publication Division, 1969. Vol. VIII. p.9.

the creed of *Satyagraha* and therefore it is considered to be the weapon of the man of truth. *Satyagraha* does not mean mere theoretical knowledge of truth, but the practical commitment to the truth-based actions. It does not mean that truth is only a distant goal to be realized in the private life of an individual. It is a public action performed in the public gaze of collective morality and determination to lay down life for the sake of truth. Gandhi writes: Non-violence for me is not a mere experiment. It is part of my life and the whole creed of *Satyagraha*, non-cooperation, civil disobedience, and the like are the necessary deductions from the fundamental proposition that non-violence is the law of life of human beings.<sup>92</sup> Thus the principles of *Satyagraha* are derived from the fundamental principle of non-violence. That is why *Satyagraha* is included in the principle of non-violence keeping in view the fact that the nonviolent actions are ultimately based on adherence to truth.

A *Satyagrahi* or follower of truth does not mind sacrificing his life for the sake of truth and thus is ready to encounter any difficulty on the path of truth. This requires that he be spiritually strong enough to suffer for the sake of truth. *Satyagraha* as a political weapon also does not lose its moral grounding in view of the fact that for Gandhi morality and politics go together. In fact, for him politics bereft of morality is an empty notion. *Satyagraha* brings politics and morality together by basing both on truth. Both politics and morality are means to truth and are the ways one can realize truth. It is not that politics and morality are self-sufficient and are an end in themselves; for Gandhi morality itself is way to the realization of truth. The realization of truth is the foundation of the Gandhian morality and politics.

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<sup>92</sup> Raghavan Iyer.,(Ed) *Gandhi, M.K. The Moral and Political Writings*. p.320.

For Gandhi *Satyagraha* is not a mere political weapon to settle score with the political opponent. It is not a coercive method of settling disputes. It appears as if it is a method of forcing the opponent to one's point of view. The vulgarization of *Satyagraha* ends in making it a cheap weapon of coercion. Gandhi could sense this misunderstanding of the concept of *Satyagraha* when he withdrew *Satyagraha* and the civil disobedience as violence broke out. In the Gandhian philosophy of truth and non-violence, *Satyagraha* takes the place of the practical means of achieving both. *Satyagraha* is intended to realize truth and non-violence here and now in the midst of earthly life, not excluding the political life of man. This ideal of *Satyagraha* led Gandhi to launch the Civil Disobedience for achieving India's freedom. His experiments in *Satyagraha* bear testimony to his resolve to make truth and non-violence part of life of man in his quest for emancipation. *Satyagraha* epitomizes the quintessence of the philosophy of truth and nonviolence in the sense that it embodies the human will and determination to make truth and non-violence part of man's everyday life. Gandhi was no metaphysician but what he thought to be a metaphysical principle was translated into life and action. Truth and non-violence are not mere pragmatic principles of action but are in themselves transcendental and metaphysical principles which are given to human reason. Gandhi made the age-old metaphysics of truth a subject-matter of human experience and action.

In *Satyagraha*, truth wears a human face with the implication that truth is the humanly realizable principle. Truth penetrates into the human world as the supreme principle of existence and discloses itself in the "inner voice" of man. Truth speaks to man

in the inner voice, thus compelling man to respond to truth in the most intimate way. This intimate way Gandhi calls the non-violent way of life and the associated religious or spiritual discipline. *Satyagraha* represents the Gandhian conception of a religious or spiritual way of life. Gandhi has reinterpreted the very idea of a religious life in terms of *Satyagraha*.

Gandhi's experiments, in attempting to reconstitute human relations and to bring about progressive political change, always to some extent pointed beyond what could actually be achieved in our finite, limited, everyday political world. Gandhi often saw himself as a Utopian political experimentalist, pursuing political experiments in search of truth, with the intention of radically transforming politics, culture, society, the individual person, and self-other relations. *Satyagraha* and *ahimsa* powered these dynamic experiments in truth that depended on confrontation and opposition to existing cultural and political meanings and material conditions of inequality and domination.

**Chapter 3**  
**Gandhi and Problem of**  
**Untouchability**

## Chapter 3

### Gandhi and Problem of Untouchability

Untouchability in India, as the race and colour problems in the West, rested upon the idea of the superiority of one section of people over another on account of their birth. Eradication of untouchability was one of the central concerns of Gandhi. This chapter discusses his concerns as an ardent social reformer and how his efforts were criticized both by religious orthodoxy and radicals like Ambedkar. Unless Untouchability was removed, he maintained, a large segment of the population would remain depressed even after India had won her freedom. He said *Swaraj* is a meaningless term if we desire to keep one fifth of India's population under perpetual subjection. This evil practice was not

only an ugly blot on Hinduism; it posed the greatest threat to the social cohesion of Hindu society.

The disease of untouchability is fairly old in our society. It generated social hatred and discriminatory feeling of high and low, and as a result the later category suffered for centuries in the hands of the former. Time and again, ceaseless efforts were made by social reformers to alleviate the status of down-trodden and bring them to a level by which they could breathe and subsist with some confidence in the society. This was, however, a most complex problem, the complete or satisfactory solution of which could not be evolved in spite of efforts by prominent personalities including social reformers, educationists and political leaders like, Buddha, Mahavira, Kabir, Nanak, Dayanand.

Gandhi's project to remove untouchability was the greatest endeavour in the field of social engineering undertaken by any Indian. But owing to the inherent limitations of his social outlook it produced only a marginal impact. It did arouse the caste Hindu consciousness and highlighted the indignities suffered by untouchables. But it did little to improve their social or economic status. Notwithstanding this, Dalit leaders, however, mostly considered Gandhi a defender of the caste system rather than their benefactor.

Gandhi felt that if religious equality was provided to the Dalits, their political and economic conditions would quickly improve. His view of the problem of untouchability is basically a religious and spiritual one. He refused to recognise any separate entity for the untouchables. As an advocate of the Varna system, he wanted only four divisions. He

did want the untouchables to have "all the rights common to the four Varnas." It must be reiterated here that in the Gandhian scheme, the four divisions did not signify any sense of superiority or domination, but were simply functional divisions.

The disease of untouchability permeated in our society was seriously diagnosed at various levels by Gandhi and his numerous associates dedicated to the cause of eradication of this evil. The long-drawn struggle for more than three decades had initial difficulties on account of serious opposition from orthodox Hindus. The customs of treating untouchables by our society had greatly lowered their social status. Their dwellings were outside the villages and were not permitted to use public tanks, ponds, wells and other places. The very 'touch' of an untouchable was hateful. Untouchability, in practice, has been almost a total negation of fundamental rights as well as of all criteria of civilized and decent existence. It may appear shocking to people outside India to imagine that in South India, some decades back, a higher caste Hindu could touch a cow, a goat, a dog and a cat without being contaminated but the touch of a human being of the untouchable community could pollute him.<sup>1</sup>

Gandhi fought against these social practices and advised the status-conscious people to behave in a decent way towards untouchables. He opened schools for them, afforded them an honourable place in his Ashram, fought for their temple entry at numerous places, lived amongst them and participated in their social and religious functions.

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<sup>1</sup> Gandhi, M. K., *Removal of Untouchability*, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Press, 1959,p.119.

In a society like ours, where religion and social status play dominant role, Gandhi found numerous obstacles in his mission. But his practical examples were eye-opener to millions of people who still did not wish to come out of the dilemma of religious thoughts. His efforts, however, paved the way for promoting their cause and afforded them a social status which was somewhat improved than what was in the past.

Gandhi supported his conception of absolute equality on the basis of the metaphysical philosophy of non-dualism, according to which, essentially, all people are aspects or modes of the same spiritual entity. He approaches the Dalit problem as a problem of value structure. This is different from Marxists who treated the problem of Dalits in terms of land and agrarian relations, basically defining the Dalit as a landless labourer. Although Gandhi has been the chief representative of value approach in this century, it has a history of several centuries.

Gandhi sought to revolutionize the entire Hindu society. For him, the interdependence of Dalit and Hindu society is crucial. The two societies are organically linked with each other. He uses this as a knife that cuts both ways. There is no point in changing 'myself', excluding the 'other'. The 'other' also should experience a process of change. The inseparability of 'the self' and the 'other', which was the philosophical mainstay of the Bhakti movement, was invested by Gandhi with a new kind of radical militancy. The upper caste liberals romanticise the poor and the untouchables. For them, guilt is the only authentic emotion vis a vis untouchability. Gandhi transformed the notion of historical guilt into a concrete model of action for the present.

Interestingly, it is the 'value school' which highlighted the Dalit problem during the epoch of nationalist struggle. In this regard, even theoretically, Gandhi and his leftist followers like Lohia fared better compared to Marxists. When Marxists raised the Dalit issue, they described it as a problem of land tenure and agrarian structure. Gandhians felt it is a matter of new values, a matter of a new sensibility. Taken to its extreme, the Dalit issue is the greatest sin of the caste based Hindu society. Hence, it calls for an agonising process of internal purification. Here lies the only path of salvation for Indian society.

As mentioned earlier, the 'self' and the 'other' are indivisible in that mode of perception. Both Dalit and caste Hindu societies are organically intertwined. In concrete terms, the notion of untouchability has to disappear from the mind and heart of the caste based Hindu society. Any attempt to eradicate untouchability will not be fruitful without a constant and deep interaction with in the 'other'. Cling to the 'other' Struggle with the 'other' in a spirit of union. Then only change is possible. This is the essence of the Gandhian approach.

Gandhi was the most outspoken and determined prophet who carried on a protracted war on the long surviving fortress of the evil of untouchability. He shocked the Hindu orthodoxy by his repeated declaration that untouchability was not a vital part of Hinduism, but was, as he used to say, only an excrescence and a plague.<sup>2</sup> He claimed to be the devout follower only of the spiritual and moral teachings of the Hindu scriptures. He refused to accept any interpretation of the religious scriptures including even the

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

Vedas if it conflicted with the commands of conscience. Even if a religious and scriptural source would be quoted in support of untouchability he would brush it aside as an interpolation. Thus in his own gentle but terrifically powerful way, Gandhi tried to demolish the religious foundation of untouchability. By so doing not only did he bring the criteria of conscience and right reason to bear their impact on this institution but he damaged its centuries old scriptural support. Untouchability in its extreme form always caused him so much pain, because he considered himself to be a Hindu.

Gandhi maintained that in Hinduism there was no sanction for treating a single human being as untouchable. The Bhagavad Gita has never taught that a *chandala* was in any way inferior to a *Brahmana*. He regarded himself a *Sanatan* Hindu, because he obeyed the eternal precepts of the faith as embodied in the *Shastras* as he understood them. He had no doubt that there are many interpolations in the *Smritis* and the other scriplarut books. He rejected as interpolations everything in the *Smritis* or other writings that was inconsistent with Truth and Non-violence or other fundamental and universal principles of ethics. He argued that the “idea of superiority and inferiority is repugnant to the most elementary principles of morality. A *Brahmana* who considers himself superior to any single creature of God ceases to be a *Brahmana*. If we are children of the same God, how can there be any rank among us? .... What will happen to the body, if these members begin to quarrel about rank? .... The verses in the *Smritis* about *Sudras* deserve to be summarily rejected as being contrary to the spirit of humanity.”<sup>3</sup>

Gandhi remarked, “Hinduism has sinned in giving sanction to Untouchability. It

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<sup>3</sup> Gandhi, M. K., *Dalit*, September 1934.

has degraded us, made us pariahs.”<sup>4</sup> He argued, that the *shastras* “cannot be above reason and morality.” He also said, “ ... if it is proved to me that it is an essential part of Hinduism I for one would declare myself an open rebel against Hinduism itself.”<sup>5</sup>

The apathy of the high-caste Hindus worried him much. He, however, dealt with them as best as he could. During his discussion with Dalits, at Ahmedabad, he opined,

This is a movement for the purification of Hinduism. Think what contribution you can make to it...if you shed your unclean habits, if you reform your way of living, irrespective of what the high-caste Hindus do, I assure you their superiority of birth will automatically disappear. Superiority consists in clean and pure living and I assure you that in spite of your unclean occupations you can live cleaner and purer lives than the rest of us. Yours is a service without which the community cannot do. I want you to be conscious of the dignity of your profession, to learn to practise it in a clean manner and I am sure you will be able to dictate your terms. Depend on yourself, stand on your own legs and work your own salvation.<sup>6</sup>

Gandhi believed that the so-called caste Hindus had a personal obligation to fulfil towards the Dalits which they must do unconditionally and it was to be their atonement. “Whether in this world or the next, it is for each one to free oneself from bondage by one's own effort. Dalits should not look upon themselves as lowly, weak or crippled”.<sup>7</sup>

Gandhi always advised the Harijan workers to work for the promotion of cleanliness and hygiene among the *Harijans*; improve methods of carrying on what were known as unclean occupations, e.g., scavenging and tanning; giving up of carrion and

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<sup>4</sup> Fischer, L., *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, New York: Harper Collins Publications, 1997. p.185.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Gandhi, M. K, *Dalit*, 29 July 1933.

<sup>7</sup> Gandhi, M. K., *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, New Delhi: Publication Division, 1976. Vol. IV. p.364.

beef-eating if not meat altogether; giving up of intoxicating liquors and inducing parents to send their children to day-schools wherever they were available and parents themselves to attend night-schools wherever such were opened. He stated,

On the contrary, I suggest to Caste Hindus that the shortcomings are not inherent to Harijans but that they are due to our criminal neglect of even deliberate suppression of- these brethren of ours.... We must approach Harijan's as penitents or debtors, not as their patrons or creditors extending generosity to the undeserving.<sup>8</sup>

Besides Gandhi recommended that common schools and wells should be opened where the existing ones were not available for Dalits either owing to the violent and successful opposition of the neighbours or some other unavoidable cause. Dalits, he opined, could not be left uncared for in matters of necessary services till public opinion had ripened.

Gandhi called them as *Harijans* which means men of God and believed that all the religions of the world describe God pre-eminently as the friend of the friendless. Help of the helpless and protector of the weak. He stated that the rest of the world apart, in India who could be more friendless, helpless or weaker than the forty millions or more Hindus of India who were classified as 'untouchables'. If, therefore, any body of people could be fitly described as men of God, they were surely these helpless, friendless and despised people. He opined, "when caste Hindus have of their own inner conviction and, therefore, voluntarily, got rid of the present day untouchability, we shall all be called harijans; for according to my humble opinion, caste Hindus will then have found favour

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<sup>8</sup> .*Ibid.*

with God and may, therefore, be fitly described as His men".<sup>9</sup>

Gandhi had the apprehension that "If we came into power with the stain of untouchability unaffected, I am positive that the 'untouchables' would be far worse under that *Swaraj* than they are now, for the simple reason that our weakness and our failings would then be buttressed up by the accession of power".<sup>10</sup>

He assessed the social position of untouchables as follows:

Socially they are lepers. Economically they are worse than slaves. Religiously they are denied entrance to places we miscall 'houses of God'. They are denied the use, on the same terms as the caste Hindus, of public roads, public schools, public hospitals, public wells, public taps, public parks and the like .... The wonder is that they are at all able to eke out an existence or that they still remain within the Hindu fold. They are too downtrodden to rise in revolt against their suppressors.... It is only ceaseless effort that can raise these downtrodden fellow beings from degradation, purify Hinduism and raise the whole Hindu society and with it the whole of India.<sup>11</sup>

He states,

It is the duty of Harijan workers and Caste Hindus to do sweepers' work themselves.... These reforms do not cost much. They require intelligence, hard work and love of an ideal. We may not relegate sweepers' work to one particular class. Therefore all should learn it in the same way as cooking. Each person should be his own sweeper. If this ideal were to be put into practice in society, the miserable condition of sweepers would at once be rectified". Further, "It is the privilege of Harijan Sevaks, no matter to what organization they belong to befriend Harijans, to study their condition in detail, to approach Savarna Hindus and show them as gently as possible what their duty is towards those whom they have treated as outcastes of society and deprived even of legal rights..<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Dalit*, February 1933.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Gandhi, M. K, *Harijan*, March, 1933.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

In fact, Gandhi never reconciled himself to untouchability. He always regarded it as deficiency in Hinduism. He stated emphatically that a religion that established the worship of the cow could not possibly countenance or warrant a cruel and inhuman boycott of human beings. To quote, "...I should be content to be torn to pieces rather than disown the suppressed classes. Hindus will certainly never deserve freedom, nor get it if they allow their noble religion to be disgraced by the retention of the taint of untouchability."<sup>13</sup>

He warned the Hindu brethren against the tendency which he saw of exploiting the suppressed classes for a political end. He stated that to remove untouchability was a penance that caste Hindus owed to Hinduism and to themselves. The purification required was not of "untouchability" but of the so-called superior castes. There was no vice that was special to the "untouchables", not even dirt and insanitation.

It is our arrogance which blinds us, superior Hindus, to our own blemishes and which magnifies those of our downtrodden brethren whom we have suppressed and whom we keep under suppression .... That religion and that nation will be blotted out of the face of the earth which pins its faith to injustice, untruth or violence. God is Light, not darkness. God is Love, not hate; God is truth, not untruth. God alone is great. We His creatures are but dust. Let us be humble and recognise the place of the lowliest of His creatures. Krishna honoured Sudama in his rags as he honoured no one else. Love is the root of religion.<sup>14</sup>

He continues to attack untouchability by saying "The dirt that soils the scavenger is physical and can be easily removed. But there are those who have become soiled with

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

untruth and hypocrisy, and this dirt is so subtle that it is very difficult to remove it.”<sup>15</sup> Comparing the inhumanity of colonial rule with that of Untouchability he said, “What crimes for which we condemn the government as Satanic have not we been guilty of towards the Untouchable brethren?” And, “We shall be unfit to gain *swaraj* so long as we keep in bondage a fifth of the population.” So agonised was he at this barbaric practice that he said,

I do not want to be reborn, but if I have to be reborn I should be reborn as an Untouchable so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings and the affronts leveled against them in order that I may endeavour to free myself and them from their miserable condition.<sup>16</sup>

Gandhi was quite sure in his mind that untouchability would not be removed by the force even of law. It could only be removed, he opined, when the majority of Hindus realized that it was a crime against God and man and were ashamed of it. In other words, it was a process of conversion. i.e. purification of the Hindu heart. “The aid of law had to be invoked where it hindered or interfered with the progress of the reform as when, in spite of the willingness of the trustees and the temple-going public, the law prohibited the opening of a particular temple.”<sup>17</sup>

There are innumerable castes in India. They are a social institution.... This institution has superadded to it restrictions which, in my opinion, are undesirable and are bound to go in course of time.... The difference, therefore, between the caste system and untouchability is not one of degree, but of kind. An untouchable is outside the pale of respectable society. He is hardly treated as a human being. He is an outcaste hurled into an abyss by his fellow-beings occupying the same platform. The difference, therefore, is somewhat analogous to the difference between heaven and hell.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Fischer, L., *The Life of Mahatma*, New York: Harper Collins Publication, 1997. p.183.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Gandhi, M. K., *Dalit*, September 1939.

<sup>18</sup> Gandhi, M. K., *Dalit*, February 1933.

Gandhi believed in the technique of change of heart of the Hindu orthodoxy. But in his philosophy, the change of heart meant doing penances on the part of the leaders of Hindu orthodoxy, because this 'sin' of the institution of untouchability existed on the basis of the support of orthodoxy. He wanted the orthodox leaders to come forward and fraternize with the untouchables. But as an advocate of Ahimsa and "heart unity-" if Gandhi dissuaded Dalit leaders from coercing the perpetrators of social injustice he also asked them not to hate the entire fold of Brahmins. Similarly he would ask the Hindus to fulfill their duties to the untouchables as a part of penances.

It is true that for Gandhi, *Swaraj* is unattainable without removal of the sins of untouchability as it is without Hindu-Muslim unity.<sup>19</sup> Gandhi claimed that the heart of the caste Hindu could be changed by applying moral pressures within the framework of the Hindu tradition. As Bikhu Parekh rightly pointed out,

“untouchability was both moral and political problem. Gandhi’s campaign was conducted only at the moral and religious level. He concentrated on caste Hindus rather than *harijans*, as appealed their feelings of shame and guilt, and succeeded in achieving his initial objections of discrediting untouchability and raising the level of Hindu and, to a limited extent, *harijan* conscience. Since he did not organize and politicize the *harijans*, stress their rights and fight for a radical reconstruction the established social and economic order, Gandhi’s campaign was unable to go further. It gave *harijans* dignity but not power; moral and to some extent, social but not political and economic equality; self respect but not self confidence to organize and fight their own battles. It integrated them into the hindu social order but did little to release them from the cumulative cycle of deprivation.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Gandhi, M. K., *Young India*, December 1920.

<sup>20</sup> Parekh, B., *Colonialism Tradition and Reform*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1989. pp. 245-246.

For Gandhi, the *satyagrahi* should be active in politics if he can stand firmly for social justice and initiates constructive change. Ultimately truth for Gandhi as explained by Akeel Bilgrami, is not a cognitive notion at all. It is an experiential notion. It is not propositions purporting to describe the world of which truth predicated, it is only our own moral experience which is capable of being true.<sup>21</sup> Gandhian model provided the caste-Hindu self with much textured interiority, and what generated the real tensions was the way it initiated the self-conscious Hindu reformer into the sacred ritual of confrontation against the orthodoxy.

### **Criticism by Sanatanists:**

When Gandhi mounted a systematic campaign against Untouchability, the *sanatanists* were deeply alarmed. They feared their powerful hold over the Hindu masses. And since Gandhi attacked it from within the Hindu religious framework, they thought him particularly dangerous enemy. They tried to convince him that untouchability was an integral part of Hinduism and that an attack on it threatened the very survival of the Hindu religious social order.

Two important features of Gandhi's attack on untouchability during this period deserve to be noted. First, he criticised it on the ground that its continued existence hindered national unity and harmed the cause of Indian independence. That is, he did not challenge its scriptural. or moral basis and attacked it on political grounds. Second, in the 'two remarks cited earlier and in many others, he repeatedly compared the untouchables

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<sup>21</sup> Bilgrami, A., *Gandhi, The Philosopher*, (Privately Circulated).

to the Muslims and asked the Hindus to make common cause with them in the same way that they had done with latter.

Though Gandhi continued to argue against untouchability on political grounds, he increasingly began to feel that this was not enough. The political argument neither made only a limited impression on the orthodox Hindus, who neither believed that the struggle for independence required the abolition of untouchability nor cared for one bought at such a 'heavy' price. It made no impression on the illiterate masses either, who were more concerned with religion than with independence and considered untouchability an integral part of it. For reasons to be discussed later, Gandhi wanted caste Hindus to agree to its abolition not for 'ulterior' political reasons but out of genuine conversion. He also felt that "untouchability was not an integral part of Hinduism, and that he owed it to his religion to show that it possessed the resources to mount a successful critique of it. For these and other related reasons, Gandhi decided to debate with the orthodox on their own grounds".<sup>22</sup>

The *sanatanists* had long argued that untouchability was enjoined by the scriptures. Gandhi asked for evidence. When they produced passages from different texts, including the *Manusmriti*, he rejoined that these were interpolations or open to different interpretations. They denied this and the resulting debate was either inconclusive or to his disadvantage. Since the contents and origins of many of these texts were subject to dispute and historical scholarship was still fairly primitive, he could not show that the passages in question were interpolations. And since the

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<sup>22</sup>Kher, V. B., (Ed) *Social Service Work and Reform*, Ahmadabad: Navajivan, 1976. p.53.

passages could be read in several different ways, no interpretation of them was conclusive. When challenged to a public debate by some Hindu pundits, Gandhi wisely declined saying “he was prepared to explain to them his position on untouchability but not to enter into an exegesis on religious texts.”<sup>23</sup>

At this point he shifted the debate to a different level and raised the larger question of how to read scriptures. For reasons discussed earlier, he insisted that a religious text was not a theoretical treatise composed by a philosopher or a pundit given to weighing every word, but the work of a spiritual explorer containing insights too deep and complex to be adequately expressed in a discursive language. As such, “it had to be read over and over again meditated upon, creatively interpreted, and its overall message sensitively teased out. 'The letter killeth, only the spirit redeemeth.' To concentrate on its isolated passages was to reduce it to the profane status of ‘mere’ intellectual construct.”<sup>24</sup>

Since a religious text was a work of profound wisdom, interpreting it required other qualifications than textual scholarship. Just as only a scientist was capable of interpreting a scientific text, only a man who had undertaken the spiritual journey himself was equipped to decipher the deeper meaning of a religious work. A learned but 'dissolute' and sinful Brahmin had neither the *adhikara* nor the necessary competence. Gandhi observed:

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p.53.

<sup>24</sup> Gandhi, M. K., *Young India*, October 1921.

I do most emphatically repudiate the claim (if they advance any) of the present Shankaracharya and shastris to give a correct interpretation of the Hindu scriptures.<sup>25</sup>

Gandhi went on to argue that religious texts were necessarily articulated at two levels. They propounded eternally valid values and principles and were intended to guide all men everywhere. They were also, however, written in a unique society at a specific time, and recommended practices and institutions most likely to realise these values in the specific; circumstances of that society and age. Religious texts thus both transcended and were conditioned by time. While their values were eternally valid, the practices they recommended had only a limited validity. A commentator on a religious text therefore had a duty to distinguish and separate the two. As Gandhi put it,

*Shastras* are ever growing. . . . Each grew out of the necessities of particular periods, and therefore they seem to conflict with one another. These books do not enunciate a new the eternal truths but show how those were practised at the time to which the books belong. A practice which was good enough in a particular period would, if blindly repeated in another, lead people into the 'slough of despond'.<sup>26</sup>

The *sanatanists* were not persuaded by Gandhi's hermeneutic techniques. They contended that sacred texts were composed with infinite care by learned *acharyas* and required literal interpretation. The creative reinterpretation recommended by Gandhi involved the blasphemy of making the commentator superior to the original author. They argued, further, that the spirit of a sacred text could not be dissociated from, and must be elicited by means of, a diligent study of its letter. They also questioned Gandhi's claim to offer an authoritative interpretation of sacred texts. While admitting that he was a noble

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<sup>25</sup> Gandhi, M. K., *Young India*, April 1921

<sup>26</sup> Gandhi, M. K., *Collected Works*, New Delhi: Publication Division, 1958. Vol. XXXIX.p.252.

soul, they insisted that his knowledge of them and of the language in which they were written was disgracefully inadequate and that he was too much 'under the influence of 'Christian religious literature' to appreciate the finer points of his religion.

As the textualist argument was leading nowhere, Gandhi moved the debate to a yet more abstract level and appealed to the 'spirit of Hinduism'. Hindu scriptures, he argued, were an integral part of the Hindu tradition and could not be read in isolation from it. A commentator should first determine its central principles or spirit and read the texts in their light. Unlike almost all other religions, Hinduism was not a religion of the book but a continuing and creative spiritual quest undertaken by its great sages and seers. Some of them left behind texts describing their experiences and discoveries; others did not. Though of great importance, the texts were necessarily inadequate records of their profound insights. Their lives spoke far more clearly and authentically than the formal word and were the true Hindu scriptures. The spirit of the Hindu religious tradition had to be teased out of way the sages lived, the sacred texts having only an instrumental and heuristic value.

For Gandhi, the spirit of Hinduism consisted in its 'three fundamental percepts', namely *satyan nasti paro dharma* (there is no religion higher than truth), *ahimsa paramo dharma* (non-violence is the highest religion), and *brahma satyam jagat mitya* (Brahman alone is real, the world is trivial or inconsequential).<sup>27</sup> Sometimes he added such others as the unity of man, of life and of all creation, *karuna* and *daya*. They had all not only been stressed by a long line of sages but also cherished by the Hindu

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<sup>27</sup> Gandhi, M. K., *Young India*, August 1927.

masses. These and other related values which constituted the 'spirit of Hinduism' provided the hermeneutical canons of Hindu scriptures. Sacred texts must be read and interpreted in their light, and those at odds with them discarded or suitably reinterpreted. Untouchability was clearly incompatible with them. A religion which preached the unity of man, non-injury and universal compassion could hardly be expected to sanction it. Indeed it was grotesque to suggest that a religion which enjoined tender concern for animals and even plants could ever wish to subject human beings to such a degrading treatment. Untouchability was and had to be an excrescence, a corruption, a perversion of the true spirit of Hinduism.<sup>28</sup>

Like many other national leaders, for a long time Gandhi saw no internal connection between untouchability and the caste system. For him, it was not an integral part but a regrettable corruption of it and could be eradicated without attacking it. Although untouchability was evil, the caste system was based on 'scientific principles' discovered by Hindu sages after years of 'research' and 'experiment' and a great monument to Hindu ingenuity and wisdom.

Gandhi defended the caste system on several grounds.<sup>29</sup> First it ensured the continuity of hereditary occupation, for him 'the soul of the caste system'. Hereditary occupation eliminated 'corrosive' competition and class war, was easier to learn and thus saved energy and time, and built up a reservoir of traditional skills. Since Gandhi believed in rebirth and the law of *karma*, he thought that the characteristic occupation of

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<sup>28</sup> Gandhi, M. K., *Young India*, April 1925.

<sup>29</sup> Ambedkar, B. R., *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables?*, Bombay: Thacker and Co. 1946.

an individual's caste corresponded to his natural abilities and dispositions and represented a necessary moment in his spiritual evolution. Second, caste was 'another name for control'. By requiring each individual to observe specific norms of conduct and follow a specific occupation, it encouraged self-restraint and developed powers of self-discipline. Third, caste was a self-governing social unit performing legislative, executive, judicial and other quasi-governmental functions and catering to the educational, social, welfare and other needs of its members. As such, it reduced the role and power of the state, fostered habits of self-government and nurtured the spirit of democracy. Fourth, as India's long history showed, the caste system had saved it from total disintegration during periods of oppressive foreign rule and political instability, and preserved intact its religious and cultural tradition. It had thus proved its value and deserved to be retained. Finally, caste ordered and structured human relationships, provided a ready and easily mobilisable network of emotional, moral and economic support, and constituted an effective safeguard against atomisation and anomie. Gandhi opposed all those who are out to destroy the caste system.

Increasingly Gandhi came to realise that although good in principle and its original conception, in its current form the caste system left a good deal to be desired. It divided the Hindus, bred hostility and suspicion, and hindered concerted action. It was excessively rigid and limited the range of social contacts. Above all, it was closely bound up with and, indeed, led to untouchability. Though he was rather vague on this last point, he seems to have taken this view for two reasons. First, the caste system was based on moral inequality. One's dignity varied with his caste so that the lower his caste, the lower

was one's status as a human being. The most degrading treatment meted out to untouchables was but a concentrated expression of the spirit of inequality inherent in the system. Second, the idea of pollution lay at the heart of the caste system. Untouchability was the most acute manifestation of this pervasive ethos of pollution.

Gandhi's opposition to state-initiated reforms was derived from several- sources. He argued that every man was constituted and perceived the world in his own unique way. His integrity, one of the highest values for Gandhi, consisted in being true to himself, in living by his truth. To force him to behave in a manner contrary to his sincerely held beliefs was to violate him at the very core of his being and thus to be guilty of one of the most unacceptable forms of violence. If others thought him wrong, they were at liberty and, indeed, had a duty to argue with him, persuade him and put moral pressure on him to rethink his position, but they were never justified in compelling and coercing him. Though uneasy about the very institution of the state which he took to be nothing more than concentrated and organised violence, Gandhi was prepared to accept it as an instrument of order but not as an agency of social change or reform. Restraining people from harming one another in the interest of the universally accepted value of human survival was one thing; compelling them to behave in a manner they sincerely abhorred was altogether different.

He also advanced other arguments against state-initiated reforms. They treated men as 'donkeys compelled to carry a load' against their will and dehumanised them. They encouraged moral inertia and a culture of dependency. Rather than explore ways of

mobilising their own and others' moral energies, citizens got into the 'lazy' habit of rushing to the state everytime they felt uneasy about a social practice. Over time, their capacity for initiative and moral resourcefulness dried up and they lost their sense of social responsibility. Gandhi thought, too, that when reforms were externally imposed and did not grow out of the community's own internal moral struggle, they lacked roots and remained fragile and were ignored at the first available opportunity.

For Gandhi, social reform must remain the sole or at least the major responsibility of the community concerned. Every community had several powerful means at its disposal to influence the 'heads' and 'hearts' of its members. These included public discussion, rational persuasion, informal moral pressure, organised pressure by educated public opinion, examples set by leaders, non-violent protest and, when all else failed, the spiritual surgery of the heart in the form of well-planned *satyagrahas*. By suitably mobilising and combining these and creating a 'moral churning' in their society, reformers should be able to bring about desired reforms. Though Gandhi often insisted that a society's organised moral energies had the power to eradicate every undesirable practice, he was realistic enough to admit that sometimes they proved inadequate and required state assistance. A society might lack men and women of high moral calibre, its members might be illiterate, confused and unused to rational persuasion, or an evil practice might have gone on too long and struck too deep roots to be discussed in a dispassionate manner.

Gandhi sought to convince and convert the caste Hindus and mobilise their energies by means of moral and religious appeals. He aimed to awaken them to the moral enormity of untouchability and to inspire them both individually and collectively to do all in their power to eradicate it. Second, he encouraged them to undertake welfare activities among the untouchables in a spirit of remorse and guilt. He thought that this would have desirable effects on both. It would 'cleanse' the caste Hindus, redeem their guilt and draw them physically, morally and emotionally closer to the untouchables. It would also give the latter a measure of pride and dignity, increase their self-confidence and improve their habits and ways of life, thereby removing some of the causes of caste Hindu prejudices against them.

### **Defence of Varna System:**

Gandhi's simultaneous commitment to the Hindu religious tradition and liberal, democratic values often came into conflict. But nowhere was he torn so severely between these two loyalties as in the case of caste versus untouchability. In one case men were born unequal and placed in a rigid hierarchy of social status; in the other all men were born equal, with equal rights. The two positions were inherently irreconcilable, and Gandhi's efforts to square the circle often led him into a sort of reasoning which verged on sophistry.

Gandhi did not find any fault with the 'constitutive rules' of the caste system, and his conviction was that something went wrong with the regulative aspects of it. Only a

strong movement could correct this, thus restoring its original vitality. The radicals, however, did not agree with this: the difference between constitutive and regulative rules was not tenable both ethically and philosophically. The only alternative was to define and articulate different sets of rules, which were a negation of the previous sets at all levels.

Gandhi fully subscribed to the essentials of the *shastric* concept of *chaturvarna-the* four-fold division of society. But Untouchability he rejected outright. He treated it as a later-day interpolation. He said,

I believe that caste has saved Hinduism from disintegration. But like every other institution it has suffered from excrescences. I consider four-fold divisions alone to be fundamental, natural and essential. The innumerable sub-castes are sometimes a convenience, often a hindrance. The sooner there is fusion the better.<sup>30</sup>

But in reality the four-fold division is only a theoretical abstraction and the sub-castes, or *jatis* to be more precise, represent contemporary social reality. So, the 'fusion' desired by Gandhi was just not possible. Secondly, the concepts of 'pollution' and 'purity' are basic to the social structure based on caste. Thus untouchability cannot be just wished away.

Gandhi unequivocally believed in *varnashramadharma-the* caste system. With him it could not be otherwise, as *karma* and *dharma* were integral to his faith. He said, '*Varna* means the determination of a man's occupation before he is born .... In the *varna* system

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<sup>30</sup> Gandhi, M. K., *Young India*, December 1920.

no man has any liberty to choose his occupation.<sup>31</sup> . And, “The law of *varna* means that everyone shall follow as a matter of *dharma* duty-the hereditary calling of his forefathers.”<sup>32</sup> Thus anchored in the basic tenets of Hinduism, for Gandhi the caste system was an article of faith. “I consider,” he said, “the four (caste) divisions to be fundamental, natural and essential”<sup>33</sup> In fact he went to the extent of asserting, it is not a human invention but an immutable law of nature, the statement of a tendency that is ever present and at work like Newton's Law of Gravitation. The use of the words 'natural' and 'law' show the depth of Gandhi's conviction in the validity of the caste system. He firmly believed that if you take away caste, nothing is left of Hinduism.

Gandhi was convinced that caste performed a very useful social function. “I believe,” he wrote,

that if Hindu society has been able to stand it is because it is founded on the caste system .... The seeds of *swaraj* are to be found in the caste system. Different castes are like different sections of a military division. Each division is working for the good of the whole.... A community which can create the caste system must be said to possess unique powers of organisation.<sup>34</sup>

And after his strenuous campaign for the removal of Untouchability, he wrote,

I believe everybody is born in this world with certain natural tendencies. Every person is born with certain definite limitations which he cannot overcome. From a careful observation of these limitations the law of *varna* was deduced. It established certain spheres of action for certain people with certain tendencies.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ambedkar, B. R., *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables?* 1946. p.289.

<sup>32</sup> Gandhi, M. K., *Dalit*, September 1931.

<sup>33</sup> Fischer, L., *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, 1965. p.419.

<sup>34</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Gandhi Shikshan*, Vol. XVIII.

<sup>35</sup> Gandhi, M.K., *Modern Review*, October. 1935.

As to why an untouchable was always born with 'tendencies' towards scavenging only was, of course, explained by the law of *karma*. But Gandhi did not apply the above deductive logic to explain as to how the untouchable *Valmiki* composed the Ramayana, or a Gandhi became a *Brahminic* law-giver instead of pursuing his caste profession of a grocer. He did concede that,

There is nothing ... to prevent the *Shudra* from acquiring all the knowledge he wishes. Only he will best serve with his body and need not envy others their special qualities of service.<sup>36</sup>

Another merit of the caste system, according to Gandhi, was that it eliminated friction between different castes, as this

avoided all unworthy competition. While recognising limitations, the law of *varna* admitted of no distinction of high and low.... My conviction is that an ideal social order will be evolved when the implications of this law are fully understood and given effect to.<sup>37</sup>

Whereas caste is basically divisive, Gandhi says,

What is the system of *varnashrama* but a means of harmonising the differences between high and low, as well as between capital and labour<sup>38</sup>

Irrespective of their merit, the above account embodies most of the arguments traditionally advanced in defence of the caste system. And it is quite understandable for a *sanatani* Hindu like Gandhi to subscribe to them.

### **Gandhi-Ambedkar Controversy:**

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<sup>36</sup> Radhakrishnan, S., (Ed). *Mahatma Gandhi— Essays and Reflections on his Life and Work*, Bombay: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1956. p.470.

<sup>37</sup> Bose, N. K., *Studies in Gandhism*, Calcutta: Indian Associated Press, 1940. p.205.

<sup>38</sup> Gandhi, M. K., *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, August.1934.

We now turn to the views of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and his disagreements with Gandhi on his methods and means to deal with the issue of caste and untouchability.

Ambedkar said, "There will be outcastes as long as there are castes. Nothing can emancipate the outcasts except the destruction of the caste system."<sup>39</sup> In his essay, 'Caste in India', he argued that the caste order was underpinned and legitimized by the *shastras*, and that it was impossible for a Hindu to cut adrift from his spiritual heritage. Hindu social philosophy held that men were born inherently unequal, and their occupations were determined by birth. In view of this position, said Ambedkar, it was impossible for untouchables to seek redemption within such a discriminatory social order. Therefore, they should be treated as a distinctive community in any future constitutional arrangement for the country. Despairing of getting social justice within the Hindu social order, he declared that he would call on the untouchable to leave the Hindu fold and seek conversion to some other religion as the only means of escaping caste tyranny. He said that the movement to give untouchables free access to temples, public wells, tanks, schools, etc., was sheer tokenism and that Gandhi's efforts did not go beyond this. According to Ambedkar, the sanctity and infallibility of the Vedas, Smritis, and Shastras, the iron law of caste, the heartless law of *karma* and the senseless law of status by birth are to the untouchables veritable instruments of torture which Hinduism has forged against the untouchables. In fact Ambedkar did not consider the untouchable a part of Hindu society: "Is there any human tie that binds him to Hindu society? There is not even

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<sup>39</sup> Gandhi, M. K., *Dalit*, February 1933.

the right to touch.”<sup>40</sup>

From the above account it is obvious that Gandhi and Ambedkar looked at the problem of untouchability from two very different perspectives. Gandhi had a very keen sense of justice and human dignity, but it was conditioned by his religious convictions. Ambedkar's views were shaped by personal experience of the inequities of the caste system; he had personally suffered the humiliations and insults meted out to an untouchable by a caste ridden society. Whereas Gandhi wanted to avert a split among the Hindus by removing the grievances of the Untouchables without demolishing the caste system, Ambedkar was convinced that his community could not get social justice within such a system. Ambedkar said, “Nobody can remove your grievances as well as you can and you cannot remove them unless you get political power in your- hands.”<sup>41</sup>

Gandhi was opposed to any legislation to remove Untouchability. He felt that if this Western method of reform was used, it would offend the millions of caste Hindus who sincerely believed that caste was an integral part of their religion. He wanted to bring around the caste Hindus by touching their hearts through appeal to their higher selves. He was so deeply committed to the orthodox Hindu view of caste that he supported the *shastric* injunction regarding the Untouchables having no right to own property. He said,

The *Shudra* who only serves (the higher caste) as a matter of religious duty, and who will never own any property, who indeed has not even the ambition to own any thing, is deserving of thousand obeisance .... The very

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<sup>40</sup> Ambedkar, B. R., *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*, 1946. p.184.

<sup>41</sup> Ambedkar, B. R., *Speeches and Writings*, Bombay: Govt. of Maharashtra, 1979. Vol. II. p.341.

gods will shower down flowers on him.<sup>42</sup>

But he did not ask the upper-caste rich to abjure the lure of possessions and thus qualify for a few flowers from the gods. And as the Christian missionaries were encroaching on the territory of the Hindus, he advised them to pray for the Dalits but not to convert them as they still did not have “the mind and intelligence to understand what you talked. .... Would you preach the Gospel to a cow?”<sup>43</sup>

That was the crux of the matter, and this is the one direction in which Gandhi never made a move. His attitude to the removal of untouchability was essentially paternalistic and patronising. He campaigned to change the hearts of caste Hindus so that they would not practise Untouchability. He tried to get untouchables several concessions like temple entry and access to public utilities. But he never started a *satyagraha* or kept any fast to pressure caste Hindus to treat untouchables as equals. In fact if they ever started a movement on their own, he disapproved of their action. Gandhi's approach to the working of the *Harijan Sewak Sangh* is a case in point. The Sangh had no untouchables as its members, though it was engaged in *harijan* welfare work. And he disapproved of their demand to be associated with its working. His explanation was that,

... the welfare work for the untouchables is a penance which the Hindus have to do for the sin of untouchability. The money that has been collected has been contributed by the Hindus. From both points of view the Hindus alone must run the *Sangh*. Neither ethics nor right would justify untouchables in claiming a seat on the Board of the *Sangh*.<sup>44</sup>

In the case of the Untouchables Gandhi was overly confident of the correctness of

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<sup>42</sup> Mathur, J.S & Mathur, A.K., *Economic thought of Mahatma Gandhi* Jaipur: Arihant Publishing House, 1994. p.51.

<sup>43</sup> Gandhi, M. K., *Dalit*, December 1936.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

his approach and did not pay much attention to the feelings and reactions within these communities to his benign initiatives. The Untouchable leaders were not too impressed by his campaigns to get them some grudging concessions from caste Hindus. He did a great job in highlighting the inhuman treatment meted out to Untouchables and sensitized caste Hindus to their moral obligation in setting right this historical wrong. But his programme of social reform only skimmed the surface and the Untouchable leaders looked upon it as mere tokenism. He spoke for them, but never encouraged them to speak for themselves. As seen above, he consistently resisted any move to induct an Untouchable in the political power structure. He dealt with Untouchability on the moral plane, never on the political. Perhaps he felt that Untouchables were too helpless and vulnerable, and needed his paternal protection and guidance till they had made sufficient progress.

But this is not how Untouchables looked at their problems. Ambedkar stressed that the community could not advance by begging for concessions. Jagjivan Ram said that “reform was not and could not be the way of change.”<sup>45</sup> And they resented the patronising attitude of the caste Hindu leaders. The salvation of Untouchables lay not in the removal of certain social disabilities, but political empowerment. And this was the direction taken by various Depressed Class movements organised outside the Congress fold.

“Gandhism is a paradox,” said Ambedkar, because, it

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<sup>45</sup> Radhkrishnan, S (Ed.), *Mahatma Gandhi —100 years*, New Delhi: Gandhi Peace Foundation, 1968. p.158.

stands for freedom from foreign domination, which means the destruction of the existing political structure of the country. At the same time it seeks to maintain intact a social structure which permits the domination of one class by another on a hereditary basis, which means a perpetual domination of one class by another.<sup>46</sup>

It was, of course, never Gandhi's intention to establish this sort of iniquitous order, though his implicit faith in the theory of *karma*, *varna* and *dharma* inevitably led to such a situation. Now, in such a deterministic cycle with your caste status stamped on you before birth, any aspiration for caste equality was out of the question and violated the *shastric* scheme of things. But Gandhi did not work it out in this manner. In the domain of his religion there was no place for logic. So, the paradox pointed out by Ambedkar did not result from bad faith or lack of sincerity; it was implicit in the limitations of his religious outlook.

Gandhi's 'conversion of heart' theory was attacked by radical critics accusing that the heart of the caste-Hindu was scattered all over-in land, wealth, property, socio-political power, and unless you transformed these, it was difficult to effect the conversion of hearts of caste-Hindus.

Gandhi's view of caste suffered from another paradox. He firmly believed that everybody must earn his bread with the sweat of his brow. This was the crux of his theory of 'bread labour'. But according to the tenets of *varna* this compulsory mandate of 'bread labour' would turn everybody into a *shudra*. In fact manual labour was anathema to a Brahmin. Here again we find Gandhi's democratic and egalitarian ethos coming into conflict with his adherence to *varnashramadharm*.

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<sup>46</sup> Ambedkar, B. R., *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*, 1946. pp.290-91.

D R Nagaraj in his article “Self-purification versus Self-respect”<sup>47</sup> argued that while Ambedkar and Gandhi were political adversaries, in the India of today we need both. We need Ambedkar to remind ourselves that while criticism and even anger are sometimes necessary, so are action and reconstruction. Both Ambedkar and Gandhi were not the same persons they were when they had set out on a journey of profound engagement with each other. They were deeply affected and transformed by each other.

Gandhi's take-off point was that the problem of untouchability was a problem of the self, in this case the collective Hindu self. He had transformed the notion of individual self and the necessity of clearing the cobwebs of the caste ego was shifted to the level of the larger notion of the collective self. But he always stubbornly maintained the importance of internalizing these values at the personal level too. The Untouchable is a part of the Self. He saw the movement to eradicate untouchability as a sacred ritual of self-purification.

Ambedkar has defined the problem in terms of building an independent political identity for Dalits in the structures of social, economic, and political powers, whereas for Gandhi it was purely a religious question, that too an internal one for Hinduism. Gandhi's belief in *varnashrama* dharma have been attacked by radicals and are said to be at the core of his conservative social philosophy. In a way this can also be read as a statement about equality of castes with which majority of Hindu liberals would have no difficulty.

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<sup>47</sup> D.R.Nagaraj in his article “Self-purification versus Self –respect” (Ed) Raghurama Raju. A. *Debating Gandhi*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006. pp.359-388.

Particularly, the upper and middle caste intelligentsia would define the positive aspects of the caste system in terms of its capacity to provide its members with a feeling of identity. These qualities would, certainly, have a positive appeal in the context of homogenizing tendencies of international capital. But from the viewpoint of Dalits the picture is radically different. Instead of offering a sense of identity and security the caste system constantly threatens them with humiliation and insult. Similarly, the problem of identity also carries a stigma, which cannot easily be erased. Against this background, any attempt to defend or show the caste system in a positive light is suspect from the viewpoint of the Dalit movement. It was this position, precisely, that Ambedkar articulated in the first issue of *Dalit*.

To quote,

The out-caste is a by-product of the caste-system. There will be outcastes as there are castes. Nothing can emancipate the outcastes except the destruction of the caste system. Nothing can help to save Hindus and ensure their survival in the coming struggle except the purging of this odious and vicious dogma ...<sup>48</sup>

Gandhian project of penance was that it came to mean different things to different people. For the idealist caste-Hindu it was a cross he had to inevitably bear, for the angry Dalit it was a subtle way of domesticating the radical energy of humiliated communities, and lastly for the conservative Hindu forces it eventually meant, although after a great deal of resistance, a difficult exercise in repressive tolerance.

Ambedkar had no other option but to reject the Gandhian model. He had realized that this model had successfully transformed Dalits as objects in a ritual of self-purification, the ritual being performed by those who had larger heroic notions of their

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<sup>48</sup> Gandhi, M. K., *Dalit*, September 1933. p.3.

individual selves. In the theatre of history, in a play of such a script, the untouchables would never become heroes in their own right, they are just mirrors for a hero to look at his own existentialist anguish and despair, maybe even glory.

Ambedkar and Gandhi transformed each other. The latter extended the very scope and definition of the dalit cause. It was no more a question of mere untouchability. It had become a larger holistic understanding of the untouchables. Because of the confrontation both of them had changed their emphasis, to put it crudely, Gandhi had taken over economics from Ambedkar. Ambedkar had internalized the importance of religion. Both Gandhi and Ambedkar can and should be made complementary to each other. Surely such efforts will be met with stiff opposition from hardened ideologues and they are bound to unearth fresh evidence to fuel the fire between the two. One way of fighting such tendencies, apart from pointing out the political necessity of such hermeneutic exercise, is to file a philosophical caveat highlighting the notion of ontological difference to distinguish between contingent details of historical fact and the truth of a deeper historical concern. At the level of deeper historical truth the conflicting fact disappears to reveal the underlying unity.

The striking difference between Gandhi and Ambedkar on this theme is that Gandhi approached this problem from the caste Hindu point of view and made an attempt to transform them at individual level, while Ambedkar is critical about Hindu social order from the point of dalits, the oppressive communities.

**Gandhi: A Social Reformer**

Gandhi saw the movement to eradicate untouchability as a sacred ritual of self-purification. It had placed a great deal of moral responsibility on the caste-Hindu self. Gandhi tried to undermine the moral basis of untouchability but could not deal with its economic and political roots. His contribution was considerable and greater than that of any other Indian leader. No one before him had mounted a frontal attack on untouchability and launched a vigorous national campaign. His contribution, however, had its limits. Though he discredited and undermined the intellectual and moral basis of untouchability, he failed to shake its social, economic and political roots. The facts speak for themselves. Untouchability continued during his lifetime and does so even today. Dalits remain socially ostracised, inter-dining with them is still uncommon, and intermarriages are rare. The policy of reservation and compensatory discrimination arouses considerable hostility and is often half-heartedly implemented. Gandhi's own Gujarat has seen several high-caste agitations against it. In the villages, the dalits are subjected to a daily diet of insults, attacks and atrocities with the connivance and sometimes support of the agencies of the state. They are systematically discriminated against in private sector education, employment and housing. The bulk of them remain extremely poor and hardly any of them has been able to break through the closed world of trade and commerce. Even the limited economic progress they have so far made has been confined to the public sector and is largely a result of state patronage. They remain clients of the state and helpless without its continuing support. They also lack powerful political presence and a sophisticated national leadership capable of articulating their

grievances and fighting for their basic rights. Such political power as they enjoy is a result of the inevitable electoral arithmetic of democracy and far less than what their number requires.

No individual, however great, can eradicate a practice that has gone on for centuries and is deeply rooted in his community's way of life. However, the catalogue of dalit hardships remains long and frightening and Gandhi cannot escape part of the responsibility for this. As we saw, he took a long time appreciating that the roots of untouchability lay deep within the caste system and continued to attack it while vigorously defending the latter. His attack, therefore, failed to tackle the roots of untouchability and lacked a cutting edge. Since the caste system was allegedly good, he could only argue that the untouchables should become touchables, not that their lowest social and moral status should be ended. The principle of hereditary occupation upon which his *Varna* system rested not only confined them to their low traditional occupations but also blinded him to the very need to do something about them. Gandhi's contention that a degrading occupation need not necessarily lead to social and moral inequality took little account of the enormous weight of tradition. His belief in rebirth compounded his difficulties for, if a man deserved to be born into a specific *Varna*, he also deserved to be confined to the relevant occupation.

Gandhi took a religious view of untouchability and made its eradication an exclusively Hindu responsibility. While this had the great advantage of focusing attention on the centuries of Hindu oppression, it also had the great demerit of treating the dalits as

passive objects helplessly waiting for their masters to get off their backs. Like the cow, they were a 'poem of pity', a tragic symbol of Hindu tyranny about which they were themselves expected to do little. They were therefore never involved in the struggle for their liberation and failed to develop a collective organisation, a corporate identity, an indigenous leadership, a tradition of struggle and memories of collective action. It was striking that Gandhi's campaign threw up extensive Hindu literature *about* them but little *by* them reflecting their own experiences, thoughts and feelings about themselves and the Hindus. Gandhi spoke for them, but did not allow, let alone encourage, them to speak for themselves. Thanks to his mistaken strategy, his love kept them almost just as dumb as had the centuries of humiliation.

Gandhi's style of campaign not only prevented them from developing their own organisation but also denied them an opportunity to work and constantly interact with the caste Hindus. Take the *Harijan Sevak Sangh*, in its earlier incarnation as the Anti-Untouchability League, it was intended to be a forum for both groups and explicitly aimed to eradicate untouchability. Once it was changed into an all-Hindu organisation working for but not with the dalits, the two communities lacked a common platform. Devoid of meaningful contacts at the social level, the two communities remained separate at the political level as well. By taking a narrowly religious view of untouchability, Gandhi not only reinforced Dalit passivity but also betrayed his own profound political insight that no system of oppression could be ended without the active involvement and consequent political education and organisation of its victims.

The Sangh's exclusion of dalits would not have mattered much had the Congress provided a common public space to the two communities. It did not, largely because it, too, shared Gandhi's attitude of serving dalits. Though it recruited them to its membership, it did little to get them elected to positions of power. Gandhi kept insisting that he would like a dalit to become a Congress President, but neither he nor the other Congress leaders made any efforts in that direction. They did little to get dalits nominated or elected to its Working Committee or even to its regional and local committees. The message was not lost on the caste Hindus. It was striking that a man who created scores of great leaders was unable to create a single dalit leader of national stature.

The lack of active Dalit involvement in the Congress and other organisations had unfortunate consequences. In the absence of an organised and vocal dalit presence, Gandhi remained surrounded by caste Hindus enjoying direct and constant access to him. Subjected to their daily pressures and skilful manoeuvres, he exaggerated their fears and anxieties and was insufficiently sensitive to dalit feelings and opinions. He could not rely on the organised power of the dalits to counter the caste lobby, and not having encouraged their mass movement, he was unable to mobilise the grass roots pressure either. His daily mail, too, brought scores of letters from angry and bitter caste Hindus but almost none from the illiterate dalits. Gandhi therefore tended to take the latter for granted and spent far more of his time and energy reassuring caste Hindus. Indeed, it is worth noting that the more vigorous his anti-untouchability campaign became, the more vigorously he disclaimed any intention of fighting against the restrictions on inter-dining and intermarriage. It is striking, too, that while he was prepared to insist on a spinning

franchise, he never thought it proper to insist that no one should occupy a high position within the Congress unless he had participated in the anti-untouchability campaign, dined with a dalit or had a dalit servant. The pledge required during the Non-Cooperation Movement, mentioned earlier was never revived.

Since Gandhi was surrounded by high-caste Hindus, his conscience remained his only protection against their constant and powerful pressure. Though his conscience was strong and sharp, it had its obvious limits. Operating in a biased political context and subjected to one-sided political pressure, it often lost direction and sense of urgency and fell prey to easy rationalisation. Gandhi's conscience was anguished by both the Dalit degradation and the passionate protestations of hurt feelings by the caste Hindus. Since he was far more exposed to the latter, it was finely tuned to and liable to be swayed by exaggerated Hindu fears. Furthermore, Gandhi was involved in several battles that against untouchability being only one of them, and political exigencies inevitably dictated their order of importance. In the absence of organised Dalit pressure, Gandhi found it politically neither necessary nor possible to place anti-untouchability high on his political agenda. It was therefore hardly surprising that he gave it his undivided attention only when the restless untouchables clamoured for action and threatened the unity of the independence movement. This was not because he did not genuinely abhor or intend to eradicate untouchability, as Ambedkar suggested, but because his passionate moral commitment could not generate an equally strong political commitment within a politically imbalanced context created by his style of campaign.

**Chapter 4**  
**Gandhi on Empowerment of women**

## **Chapter 4**

### **Gandhi on Empowerment of Women**

The upliftment of women, does not form part of Gandhi's main agenda, nevertheless is one of his concerns as a part of social reform. He worked for the progress and upliftment of women. He stressed on the whole course of human evolution and the place which nature has given to women. When nature has given equal potentials to both, he argued, man need not think of himself as superior to a woman. When Hindu scriptures such as the *Veda* and the *Upanishad* have not made any distinctions between men and

women, the practice of Hinduism should treat them equally.<sup>1</sup>

Gandhi's views on women were rather unconventional. He was not a traditional champion of women's rights. He argued that men and women and their mutual relationships have to be reviewed and studied, so that humanity may adopt the best course in the journey towards perfection. He made no distinction between men and women so far as the spiritual goal is concerned. He held that men and women, though equal, were complementary to each other and neither was complete without the other.

Such a view on women has generated considerable ambiguity in Gandhi's thought, leading to various interpretations which may be broadly grouped in these categories: Liberal, Marxist, and Radical. We would examine these interpretations in the following.

### **Liberal Interpretation:**

Liberal perspective emphasizes on equality of opportunity for all and liberty and rational choice of the human being. It also advocates the need for liberating the individual from any sort of oppressions and exploitations. It gives importance to the freedom and welfare of the people and the possibility of social progress by change but not in a revolutionary process. The main thrusts of liberal are that women's subordination is rooted in a set of customary and legal constraints that block or prohibits women's

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<sup>1</sup> Rudolph, S. H & Rudolph, L. I., *Gandhi: The Traditional Roots of Charisma*, Chicago: Orient Longman, 1967. p.65.

entrance in the so-called public life. As there is a false belief that women are, by nature less intellectually and physically capable than men, there is a tendency to exclude women from the public life. It also advocates that women and men are to get the same opportunities and equal civil rights.<sup>2</sup>

Regarding Gandhi's views on women, Antony Copley in his book, *Gandhi against the Tide*, cited the example of Kasturaba, his wife who found herself a part of Gandhi's experiment with truth.<sup>3</sup> He considered Gandhi who first made her educated and enabled her to cooperate with him in his great fight against the British. Before talking about the basic rights of the women in the society, Copley narrates how Gandhi gave inspirations and freedom to his wife. It is only with Gandhi's inspiration that Kasturaba helped him in his social and political reform movements. The author narrates how Gandhi was spiritually related to women and inspired women to participate in the fight against injustice towards them.<sup>4</sup>

J.B. Kriplani in his book, *Gandhi: His Life and Thought*, projects him as a liberator of women from the scourge of social evils. To him, Gandhi made no distinction between men and women and was against all sorts of social and religious evils like child marriage, *sati* and so on.<sup>5</sup> He argues that Gandhi invited the women of India to participate in the *satyagraha* movement as they are not only equal to men, but they have also possessed the virtues which made them superior to men in a non-violent fight which

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<sup>2</sup> Tong, R., *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1998. P.64.

<sup>3</sup> Copley, A., *Gandhi Against the Tide* New York: Oxford university Press, 1993. p.7

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*p.33.

<sup>5</sup> Kriplani, J. B., *Gandhi: His Life and Thought*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987. p.392

require infinite patience and silent suffering<sup>6</sup>

Kriplani said that Gandhi was critical of those religious practices, which instead of protecting the women's freedom made ways to suppress them. In this context Kriplani quotes Gandhi's idea,

we cry out for cow protection in the name of religion, but refuse to protect to the human cow in the shape of the girl widow. We would resent force in religion. But in the name of religion we force widowhood upon our girl widows who could not understand the importance of marriage ceremony.<sup>7</sup>

To force widowhood upon a girl child is a brutal crime, which the Hindus are committing. He criticized such *Shashtras* and *Puranas* that had sufficient laws to create girl widows but no rules to over come it.

Kriplani argued that Gandhi accepted voluntary widowhood rather than enforced one, as voluntary widowhood adopted by a woman adds grace and dignity to her life and uplift the religion itself. However, widowhood imposed by religion or custom is an unsocial, unbearable agenda and itself degrade religion.<sup>8</sup> Kriplani thought that Gandhi was critical of *purdah* and dowry system in the society. He said how Gandhi criticized those customs and rituals, which forced women to put *purdah* and made them burdensome to the family as well as to the society in the name of dowry.<sup>9</sup>

Interpreting Gandhi's views on women Judith M. Brown in her book *Gandhi: The*

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p.392.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p 393.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* pp 393-94.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p. 394.

*Prisoner of Hope*, argued how Gandhi stressed on the female role in his struggle for *Swara* and in this context proclaimed that *pardah*, enforced seclusion of women practised among the Hindus as well as among the Muslim women was inhumane, immoral, and deprived the emerging nation of the work for *Swaraj* which its women could function.<sup>10</sup> Indian women must become conscious of their potential and must exercise their rights and duties to serve inside as well as outside their homes. The author also pointed out Gandhi's ideas about the importance of male role by co-opting, cooperating, and inspiring the women who are interested to join in *Swaraj* movement.

In this context, the author also pointed out that Gandhi outlook was directed against the traditional dowry system. Here Gandhi was in favour of educating women, which not only make them better managers of their home affairs, but also strengthen them outside home.

Ronald R. Terchek in his book, *Gandhi: Struggling for Autonomy*, narrates how Gandhi had a deep and persistent commitment to the autonomy of women. According to him, autonomy, for Gandhi, was not through man's violence but through the women's inherent characteristics of non-violence and believed that of all the evils which man had made was only to abuse women and degrade their social position.<sup>11</sup> He found that the contemporary status of women reflects historical relations. Gender relations are made by men, not by women.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 209.

<sup>11</sup> Terchek, R. J., *Gandhi: Struggling for Autonomy*, New Delhi: Vistar Publications, 1998. p.65.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

Terchek pointed out that Gandhi' considered neither man nor woman to be treated as superior or inferior. Women have accepted the position assigned to them and therefore, they have developed an inferiority complex.<sup>13</sup> He brings out the main reasons, which Gandhi considered as the basis of woman's subordination in the society. These are: <sup>14</sup>

- (1) Not giving basic education to the girl child or to the women.
- (2) The traditional practice of dowry, which treats women as commodities meant for buying and selling.
- (3) Thinking girl child as socially evil and burden for the family.

In this context, Terchek argues that Gandhi wanted women to be educated and self sufficient and have their own voice in their own lives.

He further adds, Gandhi believed that child marriage was nothing but child widows, which denies girls to develop themselves either physically or mentally and bear acute poverty and humiliation.<sup>15</sup> Any tradition, which is inconsistent with morality, should vanish. He also criticized the parents who kept girl children the under utterly ignorant and illiterate environment and brought them up only for marrying them.<sup>16</sup>

At last Terchek identified that Gandhi was appealing to the parents, even the society, not to think of woman as an evil, burden to the society, but should, operate and inspire the female sex to grow and live peacefully.

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* pp.65-66.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p.66.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p.66.

Shahid Amin in his article, "Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakpur District, Eastern UP, 1921-1922", portrays Gandhi as 'Mahatma' having charismatic personality over the masses of the Indian society.....Gandhi was having such influence over the Indian masses that even women who never stirred out their homes, did not fail to see and hear him.<sup>17</sup> Gandhi founded *Sewa Samities* and *Hitakarini Sabha* in early 20<sup>th</sup> century as a part of social reform movement to help the poor parents in their daughters' marriage. He also made efforts to cut down "foolish expenditures on marriages"<sup>18</sup>

Amin says that with the inspirations of Gandhi, women of the lower castes refused to work as housemaids or as forced labourers under both the *sarkar* and *zamindar*.<sup>19</sup> While starting any procession, Gandhi called up women to participate because according to him their participation was significant as it gave symbolic expression to the human association of human fertility with that of nature and to *Shakti* (power), the principle of female energy that gave village goddesses their potency.

Amin also pointed out that Gandhi criticized the male section of the society who during famine and acute poverty sold their wives and girl children or forced them to adopt prostitution for the means of family livelihood. Men preserved their own chances of Survival by sacrificing women. Gandhi severely condemned the sale of women and girl children for 12 *annas* for their own survival and sometimes passing away their wives

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<sup>17</sup> Amin, S., "Gandhi as Mahatma" (Ed) Ranajit Guha, *Sub-Altern Studies: Writing on South Asian History and Society* Vol. III, New Delhi: Oxford University Publications, 1984. p.7.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p.5.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p 9.

into the hands of the grasping moneylenders.<sup>20</sup>

Amin wrote that Gandhi was very serious about the female and child manual labourers doing hazardous work. He was also concerned about the women, whose male counterparts in the family died of acute hunger. The condition of the widows was also very grave, as there were restrictions in their joining in any job. He asked for the better co-operation of women, mostly *adivasis*, *harijans* and of lower caste in cutting of toddy trees, closing liquor shops and propagating spinning and weaving khaddar.

With the growth of capitalism, the liberals raised demands for democracy and political liberties and the value of individual autonomy is stressed. They have demanded that the prevailing liberal ideas should also be applied to women when their individual self-fulfillment is concerned. They argued women as well as men had natural rights and demanded that the state should actively pursue a variety of social reforms in order to ensure these rights and opportunities for women. They believe that human beings are essentially rational agents and have equal potentiality for reason. They argued that, the society must not only give women the same status as men, it should also provide women with the same civil liberties, economic opportunities that men enjoy. Liberals have inferred that a good society should also allow each individual to the maximum utilization of freedom. They do agree that, the single most important goal of women's liberation is sexual equality and gender justice. What liberals wish to do is to free women from oppressive gender roles, i.e., from those roles that have been used as justifications for giving women a lesser place, or no place at all. They argue that patriarchal society thinks

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p.16.

that women are ideally suited only for certain occupations, teaching, nursing and cooking and are largely incapable of other tasks like ruling, preaching and investing.

A liberal tries to protect each individual's right to a fair share of the available resources while simultaneously allowing him or her the maximum opportunities for autonomy and self-fulfillment. The goal of liberal has been the application of liberal principles to women as well as to men and opposes laws that establish different rights for women and for men and any kind of discrimination against women. They argue that division of society according to sex role cannot be justified. They have campaigned for educational opportunities for women, which will develop their capacity for rationality. They have criticized any discrimination of women on the ground of gender.

According to liberal writers, including Copley, Kriplani and others, Gandhi first talked of women's emancipation from various existing religious, social customs. He stressed on the equality between men and women, so far as development is concerned. For them, Gandhi accepted changes in women's status with a gradual process, than in a revolutionary way. They interpreted Gandhi as liberal who demanded more personal freedom to the women and certain equal rights for them. While interpreting him as a liberal, they primarily view his account on the relationship between public and private sphere of woman's life in society. They argued that Gandhi believed in woman's socio-economic independence. Liberals also considered Gandhi as a ceaseless crusader of woman's equality with men, brought the women out of their homes, and made them equal participants in all walks of life, social as well as political. Under Gandhi leadership,

thousands of women took leading roles in several movements for independence. In this context, liberal writers, while recognizing Gandhi work, claimed that woman is equal to man and practiced it in strict sense. Because of his influence thousands of women, educated and illiterate, housewives, widows, students and elderly participated in the national movement.

Liberals also highlighted Gandh's notion that the role of the family is to educate and liberate women from the scourge of illiteracy and bondage. For him, womanhood is not restricted to kitchen and felt that only when the women are liberated from the slavery of the kitchen, their true spirit may be discovered. Gandhi wanted women to outgrow the traditional responsibilities and participate in the affairs of the nation.

### **Marxist Interpretation:**

Marxist interpreters assume that all fundamental relations and the changes in social relations are mostly determined by the means of production or economic forces. The economic relation in the society creates two classes, the Haves and the Have-nots; while the former are the rulers, the later are the ruled. It holds that economic system determines the class structure and social relation. The class-consciousness among the ruled of the society regarding their economic and material distribution creates class conflict. Marxists believe that, to understand why women are oppressed in ways that men are not, there is need to analyse the links between women's work status and women's self image and their relations with the economy.

Heleieth I.B. Saffioti in her book, *Women in Class Society*, depicts Gandhi's view on women in a capitalist society. She maintained that the underdevelopment of women is only for the patriarchy and less political participation in the name of family and evil customs. Gandhi talked about the importance of reforms in women's status. Women's liberation is impossible without their equal participation in production and the socialisation of domestic duties.

The Saffioti pointed out that Gandhi criticized the family, which maintains women as a reserve labour force and keeps them in an inferior position in the family as well-as in the society<sup>21</sup> and upholds Gandhi's argument that the unpaid labour of women in the household directly produces surplus and indirectly helps men without their own profit.<sup>22</sup>

These sort of negative attitudes of men discourage women from organizing, striking and fighting against exploitation. He pointed out that, the ruling class, which holds power and controls the means of production, represents the existing relations of production in society, while others appropriate the ruled class labour.<sup>23</sup> In this process, women suffer oppression economically, politically and socially. The denial of civil and political rights to women has limited her field of action. The class society deprived women of equality with men.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Saffioti, H. I. B., *Women in Class Society*, Chicago: Mc Nally College, 1977. p.12.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p. 14.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p.22.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p.32.

P.K. Kara, in his book *The Indian Society* points out how Gandhi criticized Manu's ideas, which suggests that women are to be dominated by men, otherwise the society will be destroyed.<sup>25</sup> At no point of time, she is independent. Women as a dependent class, does not deserve to be independent. Gandhi was against ideas that believe woman was inferior to man as regards to her physical and mental abilities are concerned. Manu also made provision of punishment for women who disobeyed the husband. Gandhi criticized that woman are not the slaves of man. They have their independent lives. He questioned the idea of Manu that women do not have property rights. Gandhi did not agree with Manu that woman did not have separate identity without man. He argued that women were dominated and exploited as slaves in the name of social practices, religious belief, inhuman superstitions, deteriorative custom, child marriage, enforced widowhood, *sati*, *devadasi*, *pardha*, dowry and the practice of polygamy.<sup>26</sup> Saffioti argued that, with the inspiration and leadership of Gandhi, women organized and agitated and gradually raised their mass participation. Women's movement was taking place against the evil customs and various means of domination and exploitation. Women's movement paved the way for their liberation from the social evils. Women were free to choose any form of education and professional training to enable them for a career.

J.S Mathur and A.K Mathur, in their book, *Economic Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, argued that Gandhi was striving for creating a society based on equality,

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<sup>25</sup> Kar, P. K., *Indian Society*, New Delhi: Kalyani Publishing House, 1998. p.245

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

economic, religious and social. They realized that economic motive predominates over social aim and that is the reason the social life is dominated by violence and maximum exploitation.<sup>27</sup> The authors are of the view that Gandhi was critical of the modern civilization on the ground that it is not spiritually modern, but materially developed. It brings the rule of majority by minority, suppression, exploitation and domination of the weaker sex by the stronger.

For the economic salvation of women, the authors highlighted that Gandhi asked them to spin and weave clothes not only for their family but also for the society and for the nation.<sup>28</sup> With Gandhi's inspirations majority of the women of India spun yarn as a national duty. They indirectly supplemented finances of their husbands and were able to save crores of rupees going out of the country every year. They were invited to join in national activities and in agriculture to solve the growing problem of poverty in the country.<sup>29</sup>

The authors quoted Gandhi who considered *swadeshi* as '*kamadhenu*' supplying all our wants and solving many of our problems including growing poverty. For widows it is the most important occupation, which save their honour and provide them their livelihood. Through spinning and weaving, they could also visualize their sufferings through-various arts.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Mathur, J. S & Mathur, A. K., *Economic thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, Jaipur: Arihant Publishing House, 1994. Vol.I. p.3.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* p.5.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* p.9.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

To get real *swaraj*, women must have to achieve economic independence. Women could uphold their self-respect, dignity and independence through economic self-sufficiency. Spinning does protect a woman's virtue physical abuse and exploitations because it enables women, who are working on public roads and are often in danger of having within a lustful society. Spinning by the women inside their home and during their leisure is mostly accepted by Gandhi and solves the problem of India's economic deficiency.<sup>31</sup> In this way women will not only help their family, but also save money for future national development.

Subrata Mukherjee, in his book, *Facets of Mahatma Gandhi: Economic and Social Principles*, argues that Gandhi said little on the problem of independent incomes for women. He definitely advocated fundamental changes in Hindu inheritance laws to give man and woman equal property rights.<sup>32</sup> He accepted the concept of economic equality where all persons should be supplied with the necessary inputs to satisfy their natural needs. He subscribed to the Marxian principles, which says "each according to his capacity and each according to his needs"<sup>33</sup>

Marxists highlights the notion of class, exploitation, and sub-ordination, which are the key elements to understand all social phenomena, including the phenomenon of women's oppression. Marxists think it is impossible for anyone, especially women, to obtain genuine equal opportunity in a class society where the wealth produced by the

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* p 19.

<sup>32</sup> Mukherjee, S., (Ed) *Facets of Mahatma Gandhi*, New Delhi: Deep & Deep Publications, 1994. Vol. III. p.327.

<sup>33</sup> Mathur, J. S & Mathur, A. K., *Economic Thought of Mahatma Gandh*, 1994.p.328.

powerless ends up in hands of powerful few.

Marxists argue that women's subordination is a form of their oppression. Their subordination can be known only through its historical importance. When the work performed by women within their family is unrecognized, unremunerated and uncompensated, then what will be their position in the society? Marxists assume that a sexual division of labour has characterized in every society. Private ownership of the means of production by male inaugurated a class system, which latter created exploitation and suppression of women's will, and their freedom. Marxists presuppose the cause and remedy of women's oppression. They argue that it is the human nature for which men are opposed to the liberal conception. They believe that in every class society there is a dialectical relation between the dominant ideologies. In such a situation, it is always an economically dominant class consisting of men who rule over the economically dependent class, consisting of women. They argue that men because of the traditional order of inheritance of property hold more important positions than women in the society. They argued if women are to be emancipated from a male dominated society, women must first become economically independent of men. Marxists are also concerned that unless a woman is freed from her domestic and unpaid duties, her entrance into the work force will be a step away from liberation.

Marxist writers including Saffioti, Kara, Subrata Mukherjee point out that Gandhi's views on the role of women in economic development has been underestimated. Women are not treated at par with men. Women have no economic independence and

right over their property. That is why Gandhi talked of property rights being given to women. They argued, Gandhi was of the belief that though women are economically dependent, they cannot adhere to the rigid social values and customs. He talked of educating women so that they could be able to earn their livelihood. The social position of a woman depends on her economic position. In this context, Marxists viewed that Gandhi's ideas on women's movement would overcome various societal problems and would enable them to liberate themselves and participate in socio-economic and political activities. According to them, Gandhi believed that the domestic division of labour clearly pictures a power relation, which is based on woman's economic dependency that deprives them from their real choice and raising their voices against the prevailing division of labour.

Marxist writers consider Gandhi as the man of the masses who are the real sufferers of the society. He was kindness personified and dedicated his life for the upliftment of mankind for them. They saw continuous stress of Gandhi on the economic self-sufficiency of women through cottage craft, woman folk, spinning and weaving *khaddar*.

### **Radical Interpretation:**

Radicals believe that neither Liberals nor Marxists have gone far enough. They argue that it is the societal system, which includes patriarchy, caste, religion, sex-roles and so on that oppresses women and it is characterized by power, dominance, hierarchy,

which cannot be wiped out. Traditionally, women in Indian society suffered from various social and religious handicaps like caste, colour, religion, etc. Caste has been a major factor in deciding women's fate. When we talk of women of lower caste, their situation is the worst. They have the additional burden from the society in the manner of untouchables, backward, illiterate, etc. These factors distinguish them from the higher caste women. Women discussed their experiences and the systematic and widespread nature of their oppression became apparent to all, they came to feel that their primary political task must be to explore, to explain, and to come at the various sources of oppression of women. We have included the dalit perspectives under radical interpretations because dalits and dalit leaders, including Dr.B.R. Ambedkar, were highly critical of Gandhi views on women's empowerment, which is elaborately discussed in the following paragraphs.

Ambedkar's, *Writings and Speeches*, argued that *Dalits* are somehow critical towards Gandhian philosophy. Ambedkar was not sure whether *Dalit* women could enjoy democratic rights in an undemocratic state. He was very critical towards Gandhi and of the Congress Party regarding the empowerment of *Dalit* women. Gandhi fought for India's freedom and for the emancipation of women. Was he really concerned about the problems of untouchable women who are having extra burden in the form of caste? Ambedkar pointed out that Gandhi was the first Indian leader who fought for social upliftment of women but he did not give them political power. Both Gandhi and Ambedkar agreed that without social upliftment women could not achieve political

power.<sup>34</sup>

Gandhi upholds that the suffering of lower caste women is much more than the upper caste women. Gandhi also agreed with Ambedkar's emphasis on women's liberations. He emphasized that the caste system subordinates the women and prevents them from participating in overall development of the society. Gandhi maintained that it is the sole responsibility of the higher caste people to take the charge to liberate their own brothers and sisters who are suffering in the society in the name of caste. Gandhi emphasized the need of educating the lower caste women and after education; they could be able to overcome their acute poverty.

Gail Omvedt in her book, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, wrote that Gandhi wanted to reinterpret Hinduism to give an alternative identity to women, which was seriously criticized by Ambedkar.<sup>35</sup> She wrote that Ambedkar was of the view that Gandhi wanted liberation of women including the lower caste women, living under the broader arena of tradition and justified the *chaturvarna caste* system where the women are the worst victims.<sup>36</sup> Ambedkar was convinced that Gandhi and the Congressmen were not the real social reformers but were higher caste Indians concerned to maintain their monopoly over socio-economic and political powers. Ambedkar, according to Omvedt, did not agree with the relationship between Ram and Sita constructed by Gandhi. Ambedkar asked Gandhi and his followers to find out the practical problems of

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<sup>34</sup> Ambedkar, B. R., *Writings and Speeches*. Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1991.

<sup>35</sup> Omvedts, Gail., *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1994.p.243.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* p.244.

women, which became the hindrance for their growth and development.<sup>37</sup>

T K N Unnithan, in his book *Gandhi and Social Change* is writing that how Gandhi ideas regarding the lower caste women were very orthodox whereas, he held progressive views on other matters.<sup>38</sup> Unnithan's study presents the Gandhian ideas relating to lower caste women, where he defended caste as an essential form of social organization.<sup>39</sup> Again he was of the opinion that caste was to Gandhi an extension of the principle of the family, as both were governed by blood and heredity and it was essential for the best possible adjustment of social stability not only for men but also for women and their mutual progress.<sup>40</sup> He argues that Gandhi, without arguing against the existing caste system and its impact mostly on women, made a distinction between the ideal caste systems as practised in India.<sup>41</sup>

Aparna Basu and Bharati Ray in their book *Women's Struggle: A History of the All India Women's Conference 1927-1990*, point out that though Gandhi fought for the upliftment of lower caste women, his significance in this respect is less because women belonging from the lower caste groups raised their voice against all sorts of discrimination towards them in the name of Hindu religion.<sup>42</sup> They argued that Gandhi's role regarding the upliftment of women though significant, most of the time he was supported by the upper caste women. It was only certain women's organizations and

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* p.172.

<sup>38</sup> Unnithan, T.N.K., *Gandhi and Social Change*, Jayapur: Rawat Publications, 1979. p.68.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* p. 68.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Basu Aparna and Ray, Bharati., *Women's Struggle: A History of the All India Women's Conference 1927-1990*. p.12.

women's groups that took up the cause of oppressed, rural and schedule caste and tribal women<sup>43</sup>

S.S. Gill's book, *Gandhi: A Sublime Failure*, portrays Gandhi as a leader who fought against the evil of untouchability and deprivation of men and women from the whole community.<sup>44</sup> He writes how Gandhi believed in caste system. He quotes Gandhi, "if Hindu society is able to stand it is because it is founded in the caste system. The seeds of *Swaraj* are to be founded in the caste system."<sup>45</sup> Gill was of the view that in all walks of Gandhi life, he used traditional symbols to empower women or men but forget to explain as to how the untouchable Valmiki composed the Ramayana or how Sita was supported and encouraged by untouchables during her *ashram* life.<sup>46</sup> The author was also of the view that Gandhi was opposed to any sort of legislation to remove untouchability and against property rights for untouchables including women.<sup>47</sup> He saw Gandhi wanted to avert split among the Hindus by removing the grievances of the untouchables without demolishing the caste system.<sup>48</sup>

The radical interpreters, including Ambedkar and Omvedt, and Unnithan believe that the oppression of women was at the root of all other systems of oppression. The most significant insights of these writers have been drawn from the reality of sufferings of women belonging to the lower castes category. They have no interest in preserving the

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* p.13.

<sup>44</sup> Gill.S.S., *Gandhi: A Sublime Failure*, New Delhi: Rupa &Co., 2001. p.96.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* p. 98.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* p. 98.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 99-100.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* p. 102.

kind of natural order or social status that not only subordinates women to men, but also keeps one separated from the other. Their aim too is to question the concept of natural order and to overcome whatever negative effect society has had on women. They also believed that the roots of women's oppression are essentially social and economic condition of the hierarchical ideas of better-worse, higher-lower, stronger-weaker, and especially dominant and submissive. They argue that gender is not the only way in which women are differentiated socially from men. Gender is an elaborate system of male domination over women. They argue that there could be first elimination of social distinctions between the sexes. The sex role itself must be destroyed.

Radicals conclude that women must struggle against men in order to achieve liberation. They believe that women's way of understanding the world contradicts the patriarchal way of knowing. Men dominate systematically over women in every area of life. The social system can be changed when women will fight through a separate and autonomous organization. Women's liberation can be possible with the destruction of patriarchy because women's mind and body are seen as the victim of patriarchal power. Radicals also strongly oppose the division amongst women, between economically privileged and disadvantaged or between upper caste and lower caste. Though the aim of radicals is to liberate women from the scourge of evils, the suggested means are very revolutionary, which is perhaps incompatible with the principles of Gandhi. When Gandhi argued for women's social upliftment, the radicals argued for political power. Gandhi recognized the importance of women's involvement in the national movement because of their inner capacity to be non-violent volunteers. Gandhi believed in women's

involvement in politics, but was not ready to accept that political involvement of women's will change their social status.

The radical interpreters point out that Gandhi stressed on the changes in the traditional understanding of woman's place and identity in the society. They argue that Gandhi demanded the freedom of choice by woman and demanded for control over their bodies and expressed more than a desirable equal rights. Gandhi fought for the right for woman to decide for herself as she has right to her own body and mind.

The above views suggest that most of the writers regard Gandhi as a liberator of women from the traditional role and wanted to improve their capacities. Gandhi wanted a comprehensive plan of action to counter the various problems of escalating violence against women. He was eager to help womankind. His experience had convinced him that the real advancement of women could come only by and through their own efforts. He transcended the boundaries, which hide women from their private lives to public. He acknowledged the debt of his mother, wife, and the black women in South Africa as influences on the evolution of his concept of *nonviolence* and *Satyagraha*. He was emphatic on the issue of equality of women as integral to the founding of a just society. His advancing of women's right was a step forward from the 19<sup>th</sup> century consciousness of the women's problem, which was combined with their status within the traditional family structure. To understand Gandhi as an emancipator of women, it is imperative to know his faith in the capability of women to control their own destiny, which formed an important part of his worldview.

Gandhi first described women as helpmates. He took the vow of *Brahmacharya* in his endeavor to understand and respect all women, including his wife. Gandhi understood how both his mother and wife quietly resisted their exploitation in the conservative mid 19<sup>th</sup> century Gujarati household. He learnt the method of *Satyagraha* from them and made good use of this weapon in his fight against exploitation by the British as a part of a major strategy to humble their might.

Gandhi's strong advocacy of women's rights began from the day when he assumed leadership in the nationalist movement. His successful call to the traditional house bound women to join the Indian freedom struggle, which served a lot for the wider participation of women in public life. Gandhi wanted women to fight against injustice not by injustice and violence but by developing inner strength and the power to suffer. He tried to free the women of India from fear and inferiority and proclaimed that so long as women in India do not take equal part with men in the affairs of the world and in religious and political matters, the whole idea of independence could not be realized. Gandhi firmly believed that women possessed trust and endurance as innate qualities. These were to be applied for the realization of *truth* and *non-violence* that were the essence of *Satyagraha*. By giving a call to the women to join the *Satyagraha*, he expected them to shoulder the responsibilities of the constructive programme.

Gandhi looked at woman as an entity in her own right capable of shaping her own destiny. No other reformer before Gandhi had expressed the concern the fundamental

inequality and social injustice that women found socially, economically, and politically. He wanted women to come out of the kitchen as domestic slavery of women is a subject of male barbarism. He attacked the custom of *purdah* and notion of female purity. He appealed to the women of India to tear down the *purdah* with one mighty effort. It cannot be superimposed on them if they are not ready to accept it.

For Gandhi, it was not enough that the women of India should be liberated socially from the web of superstitions and rigid ancient customs. The first reform for the women should be to understand the important ideas of freedom and cherish it as a part of *dharma*. Women alone can work and achieve great results through their own capacity and own labour. Oppression is not always an abstract moral condition but often relates to questions of economic power. Gandhi advocated *khadi* as an area of employment and means of livelihood for women. Gandhi was a great advocate of economic independence of women. He firmly believed that a woman by staying at home contributes to the income of the home by cooking and managing the household. On the issue of economic independence of women liberals thought that Gandhi was far ahead of his time. Gandhi consciously tried to involve women in the non co-operation movement with the objective of leading them to their struggle for social emancipation.

### **Gandhi on Empowerment of Women:**

Gandhi's contribution towards the empowerment of women is invaluable and incomparable. To realize the greatest service that Gandhi had done to women, one must

know what was the position of women more than 100 years ago, just at the time when he made his first appearance on the stage of Indian politics. Women's positions either in the home or outside were of a subordinate nature without freedom and for the convenience of men. It was because of his firm faith in the equality of men and women that Gandhi inspired women to take their share in the struggle for independence. The self confidence that the Indian women have and the better position that she enjoys today than what she enjoyed 10 years ago, is significant to a large extent due to Gandhi's efforts. The role that Gandhi played in drawing a large number of women into the mainstream of the freedom movement was a landmark in the nation building. Gandhi's ideas about women and their role in public life were a departure from those of the 19th century reformers. He saw women as a potential force in the struggle to build a new social order. He consciously and continuously attempted to articulate connections between private and public life in order to bring women into the national struggle. Along with national movement Gandhi also reflected the importance of the issue of women's freedom and strength in the struggle to build a humane and exploitation free society.

Gandhi believed that empowerment of women alone will make it possible to realize the basic social goal of equality. There can be no social development until women, who constitute half of human resources, become equal and active participants in the development process. The vulnerability of girl children and women are not a good reflection on our civil society. Though women constitute almost half of the world's population, there is need to increase their socio-economic and political status. During the process of empowerment of women, the role of civil society and its various organizations

are vital. History of the world was not the struggle of classes, but it was the struggle between the sexes. The battle lines are drawn between men and women, rather than between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat and the determining relations of reproduction, not production.<sup>49</sup> The root cause of lower status of women is the private ownership of the means of production. Mahatma Gandhi also took a leading role towards women's problem. Throughout the 19th and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries' women issue has been continuing to dominate the social reform activities.

In order to improve the condition of women and to carry out the social reforms effectively, social reformers felt the need for providing education to girls. Gandhi strongly criticized "excessive subordination" of the women to the men. Education, though is the key to progress in women's rights, has been sadly neglected. Tradition and custom played important parts in determining women's position in the social life. Women are deprived of equal status both in opportunities and also under law. Gandhi called upon women to join national movement with the idea that there can be no national awakening without the awakening of women. He was of the view that once the women of India were awakened, national awakening would not be delayed.<sup>50</sup>

Gandhi had great faith in the Indian women about their potentialities. Women in India have suffered from numerous oppressive social customs, traditions, laws, and values, norms and deprivations that are sanctioned by various religious scriptures besides

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<sup>49</sup> Firestone, S., *The Dialectic of Sex*, New York: Bantam Press, 1970. p.8

<sup>50</sup> Mehata, H., *Women in India Today*, Delhi: Butlala & Company, 1981. p.101.

being a part of everyday essential life. Even today, an overwhelming majority of them are suppressed because of being women. From the final *non-violence* campaign in South Africa in 1913 until his death in 1948, Gandhi was supported, and was inspired by and also inspired women to a degree incomparable in Indian history. Gandhi brought women to the frontline of the national fight. Never before in Indian history women joyfully participated in public activities as they did under the charismatic call of Gandhi<sup>51</sup>

Gandhi was fully conscious of and made efforts to remove several social problems including various problems of women in India. The credit of bringing women out of their homes into the mainstream of India's social and national life and entrusting them with greater responsibilities of educating and awakening them and inspiring women to take part in the non-violent 'struggle either for freedom or for other civil liberties, certainly goes to him. He was uncompromising in the matter of women's right. His call to women to come out of their homes and take part in the *Satyagraha* against injustice, suppression and exploitation was significant. He was of the belief that women were the most suited to carry on the non-violent movement. His protest against enforced widowhood, against the crime of child widows, the curse of child marriage, polygamy, the cruelty of the *purdah* and everything that reduced women to a secondary status are very well known. He told that freedom and liberty to women were not only essential, but also precious to Indian culture and Indian womanhood.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Sing, S., (Ed) *Kasturaba and Women Empowerment*, New Delhi: Gandhi Smriti & Darshna Samiti, 1994.

p.7

<sup>52</sup> Chattopadhyaya, K., *Inner Recesses. Outer Space*, New Delhi: Abhinava Publications, 1983. p.7.

In various *ashrams* and other educational and social work organisations including *Sewa Ashram*, *Sabaramati Ashram*, *Hitakarini Sabha* carried on Gandhian lines, where the women's various social problems were discussed. Girls and women were treated on par with boys and men and were paid equal attention. Gandhi was keen that women should be given equal responsibilities as men not only in the national struggle but also in the building up of the nation. Gandhi observed that the general condition of women in India was distressing due to several oppressive social practices, values, norms and laws. Their condition was miserable both in the public and private sphere, i.e. in the family as well as in the society.

Gandhi learned much from Kasturaba and perhaps even more from his mother. His devotion to women began with his devotion to his mother and Kasturaba. Motherhood became increasingly his model for the liberation of India and for his own life. He saw no hope for India's emancipation while her womanhood remained unimancipated. He held men to be largely responsible for this tragedy. In the course of his social reform work, the realization came to him that if he wanted to reform and purify society of various evils that had crept into it, he had to cultivate a mother's heart.<sup>53</sup> Women in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century created organisations and founded educational institutions that transformed the conditions of women predominantly among the upper middle class in urban centers.<sup>54</sup> He made use of traditional Indian symbols to convey a contemporary socio-political message. Sita, Draupadi and Damayanti were the

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<sup>53</sup> Joshi, P., (Ed) *Gandhi on Women, Collection of Mahatma Gandhi's Writings and Speeches on Women*, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1988. p.387.

<sup>54</sup> Johnson R.L., *Gandhi's Soul Politics: The Liberation of Men and Women in India*, New Delhi: Gandhi pPeace Foundation. 1999. Vol. XXI.p.

three ideals of Indian womanhood that Gandhi repeatedly invoked as inspiration for the downtrodden women of India not because they sincerely followed their husbands but because their active and fearless participation in the public spaces. He presented the idea of Sita for Indian women to emancipate themselves. He used Sita as a symbol of *swadeshi* to convey an anti-imperialist message. Gandhi's Sita was not a helpless creature. Even the great physical might of Ravana dwindled when pitched against her superior moral courage. Thus, Gandhi realized if women were to be free, they have to be fearless. The real strength of a woman was her consciousness of her purity and charity. He said, if most Indian women had lost the spirit of strength and courage, the power of independent thinking and initiative, which actuated the women of ancient India such as Maitreyi, Gargi and so on. The liberation of women was therefore set as fundamental task before Congressmen. Let Congressmen begin with their own homes.<sup>55</sup> They should begin by imparting education to their own wives, mothers and daughters. If they believe that "freedom is the birth right of every nation and individual and if they were determined to achieve it, then they should first liberate their women from the evil customs and conventions that restricts their all round healthy growth and keep them outside the public Domain of life."<sup>56</sup> He emphasized that women needed to face the task of their upliftment into their own hands. Ultimately women will have to determine with authority what she needs. Women must protect against being treated as sex objects. Like men, women should have the right to her own body.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Tendulkar, D.G., *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*, Delhi: Publication Division, 1969. Vol. VII. p. 24.

<sup>56</sup> Gandhi .M.K., *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Ahmedabad: Navijvan Trust 1982. Vol. XI. p.165.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* p.165.

### **Role of Society to empower Women:**

Gandhi wished to generate awakening of self-consciousness about women's present condition in the Society. He showed a sense of unhappiness over the various social evils impose on the women. Therefore, to empower women, he pointed out that the role of the society is much more important than any other social institutions. Women and the institution of Marriage: It is significant that Gandhi repeatedly dismissed the institution of marriage. Though he was of the belief that marriage was not only the union of two bodies but also a union of two souls, still he saw the curse of child marriage, high mortality among women, early widowhood which were directly or indirectly related to marriage. He said, "In the name of marriage it is unethical to give religious sanctions to evil customs."<sup>58</sup> He also marked, relating to the institution of marriage, family plays a vital role where in most of the cases parents forced their daughters to marry even if the girls are reluctant to do. Gandhi appealed those parents to inspire their daughters to stand on their own legs and need not look for protection from their partners.<sup>59</sup> Gandhi was of the belief that, the institution of marriage has a number of laws to create ten widows but has not single law for their emancipation from this bondage.<sup>60</sup> Gandhi felt that, the presence of various glaring abuses to the women in the family and the society was more or less because of the religious and social sanctions to the tradition of marriage. Therefore, he hold, 'marriage must cease to be a matter of arrangements made by parents for money. The system is intimately related with caste. So long as the choice is limited to

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<sup>58</sup> Gandhi.M.K. *Young India*, August 1926.

<sup>59</sup> Kher .V., (Ed) *Social Service Work and Reform*, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1976. p.159.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* p.493.

a few young men or young women of a particular system, the system will persist, no matter what is said against it. The girls or boys or their parents will have to break the bonds of caste if the evil is to be eradicated.<sup>61</sup> Gandhi not only said about inter caste marriage but also asked for inter-religious marriage.

Though Gandhi preferred arranged marriage of a girl, but he insisted that the girls should have the final say over her parents' choice, which signifies that Gandhi personally was interested for autonomous decision by girls regarding their private and future lives.<sup>62</sup>

Gandhi also appealed that the parents too need to educate their daughters so that they can stand on their own legs and refuse to marry that man who wanted price for marriage. Gandhi, therefore, said that marriage is partnership, not a hierarchical arrangement. He laments that, a vast majority of girls disappear from public life as soon as they leave schools and colleges because they are married off. In other words, Gandhi insisted the women of India to feel that they are not born to marry. They have come not only serving their family but the greatest national works are also to be shouldered by them.

When Gandhi assumed India's leadership the average life span of the Indian women was very less. Child marriage was very common, widows were in very large number, and women did not have any identity of their own. Women could not go outside their homes unless accompanied by men. It is in this context; Gandhi claimed that women

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<sup>61</sup> <http://www.mkgandhi—sarvodaya.org/kapadia.htm>

<sup>62</sup> Brown, M.J., *Gandhi: The Prisoner of Hope*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992. p.213.

could not get proper place in the society until and unless they were emancipated from the scourge of social evils. The empowerment of women can be possible if they can go away from the social bonds.

### **Widowhood:**

Gandhi was especially considerate regarding the plight of the young widows. He lent wholehearted support to the efforts of earlier reformers to put an end to the evil customs of child marriage. He shows a sense of unhappiness over the social plight of millions of widows. He opposed the custom of enforced widowhood and opined that, "every widow has as much right to marry as every widower. Voluntary widowhood is a priceless boon, enforced widowhood is curse."<sup>63</sup> In Gandhi view, one of the glaring examples of the problem of Indian womanhood was the custom of child marriage. He saw the evil of neglect of childhood as intimately related to child marriage. Gandhi argued that women's health was necessary condition for their emancipation and empowerment. Gandhi emphasized the potential of widows as servants of the nation as well as in public services. Gandhi hoped that while including themselves in the public service, women could be able to devote certain time for the better cause of the nation. Lastly, he said that widowhood imposed by religion or custom is an unbearable agenda and degrades the religion itself. It is good to swim in the waters of tradition or religion, but to sink in them is suicide.<sup>64</sup> He Says,

Therefore, if women were to get justice, scriptures needed to be revised and all religious texts biased against the rights and dignity of women

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<sup>63</sup> Hingorani, A. T., (Ed) *To the Women*, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publications, 1941. p.132

<sup>64</sup> Gandhi, M. K., *Collected Works*, Ahmedabad: Navjivan Trust, 1925. Vol. XXVII. p.308.

should be changed. For this Indian women had to produce from amongst themselves new *Sitas, Draupadis and Damayantis*, pure, firm and self-controlled.<sup>65</sup>

### **The Tradition of Sati:**

Gandhi was very much disturbed with the continuing tradition of *sati*. A '*sati*' has been described by our ancients, and the description holds good today as one who, ever fixed in love and devotion to her husband, signalizes herself by her selfless service during her husband's lifetime as well as after and remains absolutely chaste in thought, word and deed. Gandhi disapproves *sati* on the ground that *sati* is not the way for a wife to show love and devotion to her husband. A woman should prove her satihood not by mounting to the funeral pyre, but by renunciation, sacrifice, self-abnegation and dedication to the service of her husband, family and the country. He extends the view that if the wife has to prove her devotion to her husband, so has the husband also to prove his allegiance and devotion to his wife.

### **Religion:**

The social status of women in India deteriorated due to the religious practices practised by the people throughout the ages. The religious tradition has a deep bearing on the role and status of women. Like the untouchables, she was not allowed to practice any sort of religious norms. Traditional norms has been repeatedly interpreted that in childhood a women must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, in old age to

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<sup>65</sup> Gandhi, M. K., *Women in The Smritis, Collected Works*, 1936. Vol. XIV. pp 84-85.

her sons and her lord in death. A woman must never be independent. Gandhi was highly critical of religious interpretations of woman's life and her freedom. He criticized such religion, which can create sufficient laws to prohibit women to take part in public life and be dependent in their lives, but is silent in eradicating the inhumane practices. He maintained the view that religion should be used to liberate women as religion is not only for men but for women also. The religion, practised by Hindus, should give women a position of honour in the family and in the society. Like men, women too have right to take part in the religious activities. Gandhi while giving a speech at women's meeting, highlighted,

not only in India but all over the world, religion has been and will be safeguarded by women. They have safeguarded not by writing big treaties or delivering lectures, but by their own actions. No religion has been propagated through lectures or books. Woman's capacity for sacrifice, suffering and patience make them more religious.<sup>66</sup>

Therefore, Gandhi called the women of India to give up mourning and come out of the houses, as mourning will bring no credit for their liberation and empowerment. Again, it will impose all sorts of evil practices upon them.

### **Dowry:**

The practice of a woman giving dowry or gift to a man at marriage is said to have had its origin in the system of '*Streedhan*' (women's share of parental wealth given to her at the time of her marriage). As a woman had no right to inherit a share of the ancestral

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<sup>66</sup> Gandhi, M. K., *Speech at Women's Meeting, Collected Works*, New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Gov. of India, 1958. Vol. XXVII. p.113.

property, *streedhan* was seen as a way by which the family ensures that she has access to some of its wealth. It was a formidable problem in Gandhi time as it is now. He strongly opposed this evil custom. He preferred girls to remain unmarried all their lives than to be humiliated and dishonored by marrying men who demanded dowry. He considered the system heartless and advocated, "the system has to go, marriage must cease to be a matter of arrangement made by parents for money."<sup>67</sup> The system of dowry contributed to gender discrimination at the very birth of child and became the greatest hindrance to the overall development of a girl child. Moreover, Gandhi opposed heavy expenditure in marriages. He was of the opinion that the dowry system and heavy expenditure in marriages forced the parents to think of girls as the burdens in the family. He also pointed out that the evil system is intimately related with caste and asked the women to be independent while choosing their life partner. Women can refuse to marry the men who demanded huge dowry. He suggested that a strong public opinion had to be created in condemnation of the degrading practice of dowry, which considers girls as commodities to buy and sale. He also made fervent appeal to young men and women to take active steps to do away with these evils. "Any young man who makes dowry a condition of marriage discredits his education and his country and dishonors womanhood."<sup>68</sup>

### **Education:**

Education has been regarded as the most significant instrument for changing

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<sup>67</sup> Choudary, K., 'Women's Suppression in India: Gandhian View', *Gandhimarg*, 1998. Vol. XIX. p.26.

<sup>68</sup> Gandhi, M. K. *Young India*, June 1928.

women's subjugated position in the society. It not only develops the personality and rationality of individuals, but also qualifies them to fulfil certain economic, political and cultural functions and thereby improves their socio-economic status. To develop the right type of mentality to fight this evil, Gandhi stressed the role of education. Along with education, he pleaded for the need of taking recourse to radical measures like organizing youth movements and offering *Satyagraha*. Gandhi saw education as an essential means for enabling women to uphold their natural rights and knowing their actual position in the society. He insisted "there is no justification for men to deprive women or to deny them equal rights on the ground of their illiteracy."<sup>69</sup>

#### **The *purdah* system:**

The *purdah* system refers to the tradition of seclusion and veiling of women, particularly prevalent in upper castes and classes in India. It was highly oppressive of women. It crippled their free movement. It hindered their advancement and their capacity for doing useful work in society. The system of *purdah* was strongly resented by Gandhi and he condemned it as a barbarous custom, which did incalculable harm to the country. He failed to understand why men should arrogate to themselves the right to regulate female purity when women do not claim any such right with regard to men's chastity. In the name of *purdah* women were veiled and not allowed to take part in public life freely. Therefore, Gandhi thought that if women were to liberate and empower themselves, they had to tear down the surrounding wall of *purdah*. He knew that *purdah* was a real drag on women's social progress and a symbol of Hindu decline. He said we want that the women

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<sup>69</sup> Gandhi, M. K., *Young India*, June 1928.

of our nation should be as free to move about and take their legitimate part in the life of the community. No serious step for their welfare can be taken unless the veil is torn down and if once the energy of half of our population that has been imprisoned artificially, it will create a force which will be of immeasurable good of our province.

### **Prostitution:**

Of all the evils for which man has made himself responsible, none is so degrading, shocking or brutal as his abuse of the better half of humanity, the female sex. It is the prostitution, which is nothing but the use of woman's body for sex by a man, he pays money, and he does what he wants. Gandhi protested against prostitution, which he termed as moral leprosy but not against the prostitute who were to be pitied and helped to regain their virtue rather than hated and condemned to lead a life of sin. In his view, "it degraded men no less than it did women. It is a matter of bitter shame and sorrow, of deep humiliation, that a number of women have to sell their chastity for man's lust."<sup>70</sup> However, he felt that the men who visited prostitute houses brought shame on society. The fight against prostitution and the rehabilitation of the 'fallen sisters'<sup>71</sup> was an integral part of the programme for national reconstruction and purification, which Gandhi urged women to take up. Gandhi organized them and inspired them to join in the national movement. Under his leadership these women had organized them to undertake social work like helping the poor, nursing the sick, spreading education among them, promoting spinning and weaving. Gandhi advised them to do humanitarian works before reforming

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<sup>70</sup> Gandhi, M. K., *Young India*, June 1928.

<sup>71</sup> Gandhi, M. K., *Women and Social Injustice*, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1942. p.19

themselves.

It is evident from the above discussion that Gandhi was completely opposed to many social customs, traditions, norms and values like child marriage, widowhood, dowry system, *purdah* system and prostitution which had been oppressive to women. Gandhi helped women in finding a new dignity in public life, a new place in the national mainstream, a new confidence, a new self-view and a consciousness that they could themselves act against oppression.

However, as we reconstruct Gandhi's ideas on women's empowerment in the society, his ideas often appear to be reinforcing the captivity of women rather than destroying it. Even though he managed to draw many women into the mainstream of political protest, his views on women appear outdated in the sense that they flow from the open of a typical patriarch. However, if we critically examine his ideas on women empowerment, we will surely find a strong disjuncture between Gandhi precept and practice. Gandhi often stressed that the woman is defined by her role as mother and that it is motherhood, which must prescribe the parameters of her position in society. With women firmly located in the home and with men forming and regulating public life,

Gandhi himself developed the split between the private and public life of human being. This has contributed to increasing sex inequality. Though Gandhi wanted women to be a major participant of his struggle for *Swaraj*, evidences show that he did not want women to join the salt march. He was holding unto the traditional values and cultures and gave only a passive and subordinate role to women. It is wondered whether he took

Kasturaba's views into consideration when he took the vow of *brahmacharya*.

It is incontestably evident that Gandhi had a deep interest in issues affecting primarily women. Most singularly, Gandhi as a firm advocate of equality between men and women and was not prepared to countenance discrimination against women in any form. In the matter of sexuality he deprecated those 'double standard' by which a man who engaged in unregulated sexual conduct was easily forgiven, but a woman who did likewise was considered as a prostitute, traitor to her sex and to the noble ideas of wifeness and motherhood. He said that, "why is there all this morbid anxiety about female purity? Have any women said in the matter of male purity?"<sup>72</sup> Gandhi advocacy of equality between sexes did not prevent him from being patriarchal, with respect to the occupation to be followed by women. In fact, he did not think that women should assume the roles and occupations pursued by men, and he was rather adamant in adhering to the view that the principal breadwinner would continue to be the men. But the value of housework was not demeaned and was of the opinion that women, in contributing to good standards of house keeping, sanitation, child bearing, nutrition, were thereby performing a far more valuable service to the nation than doctors, engineers, scientists, or other experts. Most importantly, Gandhi highlighted more on the duties of women, not their rights. Sometimes Gandhi also thought that the rules of politics were the rules laid down by men, and women were capable of humanizing the public sphere and rendering it more accountable to the conscience of men and women. Through his recourse of fasting, Gandhi sought to negate the supposed distinction between men's fast as political and public, and women's fast as ritualistic and private.

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<sup>72</sup> Gandhi, M. K. *Young India*, November 1926.

Gandhi was against the brutal custom of child marriage and fought for the removal of it. But in practice he married to Kasturaba at a very early age. It can be argued that Gandhi was wrong to exclude women from the important public sphere and enforcing their role most importantly in the home. Gandhi recognizes that human relationships require a mutuality of understanding, but on the contrary, Gandhi forgot that, this mutuality could be achieved when a justified consensus is reached.

Gandhi tried to categorize and explain the social relationship with male domination and female subordination. He was also mistaking that when the work performed by women within the family is unrecognized, unremunerated and uncompensated, then can they achieve anything after participating in public activities? But the domestic division of labour clearly entails a power relations based in part on women's economic dependency that deprive women of real choice and of equal voice in the distribution of various tasks.

Gandhi did not advocate any changes in women's role as mother and housewife. He believed, "the main role of woman is to be a mother and housewife. The duty of motherhood, which the vast majority of women will always undertake, require qualities which men need to possess. She is passive, he is active. She is essentially mistress of the house. He is the breadwinner; she is keeper and distributor of the bread."<sup>73</sup> The very belief of Gandhi that the primary duty of a woman is to look after the family, but in spare time she could undertake other activities as well. But can it be justified? It is not proper for them to remain mere housewives. Women too have the right to spend their time in the

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<sup>73</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *Opp Cit*, p.26.

public life. She has the right to show that she has an independent personality by her ability to take up public activities.

Gandhi protested against unjust social customs, which led to the subjugated conditions of women. He was also of the belief that women should be considered equal to men. But his concept of equality was within the framework of Hindu religious texts. He said,

She has the right to participate in the minute details of the activities of men, and she has the same right of freedom and liberty as he. She is entitled to a supreme place in her own sphere of activity as man is in his.<sup>74</sup>

Though Gandhi was not against women working outside the four walls of their homes, he was not in favour of independent career for women in the wider world. Moreover, he continued to demand that women should be pure, firm and self-controlled. She should be '*pativrata*', a devoted and chaste wife who should view the voices of her husband with tolerance.

To summarize, Liberals portray Gandhi as a great synthesiser of women's rights and as a man who fought for bringing personal autonomy for women and stressed and wanted women to be treated as autonomous decision makers in their own lives. They also pointed out that Gandhi argued for sexual equality, gender justice, equal civil rights, liberties, and economic opportunities for women. It has been argued that Gandhi was

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<sup>74</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *Opp. Cit.*, p.26.

opposing the very notion that women are, by nature, less intellectual and less capable than men.

Marxists interpreted Gandhi as a man who worked for economic independence of women. However, Gandhi found it to be impossible for women to obtain genuine equal opportunity when the wealth produced by women is manipulated by men. Gandhi, according to Marxists, claimed that the private ownership of the means of production and the right to property over the ancestral property by men inaugurated a system where women developed a feeling of deprivation and powerlessness. They found in Gandhi a person who wanted women have to be economically independent in order to get rid of inequalities in social and political spheres.

Radical interpreters, however, believe that neither Liberals' nor Marxists' have been critical enough on Gandhian ideas on women's empowerment. They criticize Gandhi's belief that the patriarchal system alone stands in the way of women. Gandhi had forgotten that besides patriarchy, caste, sex, gender, religion too played vital roles in weakening the women's power in society. The radicals are also critical of Gandhi suggestion to preserve the natural order of women.

Gandhi, however, made a significant contribution, calling women to join actively and fearlessly in various public activities including National Freedom Movement. Gandhi was keen to give equal responsibility to women in their public as well as in private lives. He made use of traditional symbols of Indian women, including Sita, to encourage

women to be active in society. Gandhi also highlighted how men, in the name of society, tradition, religion, and the institution of family and marriage, has been dominating women and keeping them outside the public activities. He was opposed to the patriarchal system as a major hindrance to women's empowerment. He wanted to keep women out of the traditional Indian patriarchal system. He helped women in finding a new dignity in public life, a new place in the national mainstream, a new confidence, a new consciousness, a new self view from the evils of patriarchal system and a new consciousness that they could themselves act against oppression. Our study also examines how Gandhi's ideas on women's empowerment in the society often appear to be reinforcing the captivity of the women within social norms, values, and customs. He highlighted women's social role, as mothers or wives and their locations of lives should be in home. Most importantly, Gandhi's idea on women's occupation makes him a staunch patriarch who believed that the principal breadwinner would be the man. He did not seem to advocate any radical change in women's role.

This chapter has argued that the Gandhian ideology is no doubt taking an enormous leap by giving a significant role to women in contemporary Indian society. It is also making a significant change on the image of women developed by the reformists. No doubt, Gandhi made women into a subject, making her realize that she had freedom, qualities and attributes which are crucial to contemporary society. In a radical reconstruction, he gave her confidence in herself and in her essence. He made woman realize that she has a significant and a dominant role to play in the family, that both she and her husband are equal, and that within the family they both have similar rights. In a

path-breaking intervention, he made it possible not only the involvement of women in politics, but made them realize that the national movement could not succeed without their involvement in the struggle. Gandhi ultimately empowered woman in the family and in marriage.

But, this reconstruction of women and femininity did not make a structural analysis of the origins and nature of exploitation of women. In fact, Gandhi used essentialist arguments to reaffirm her place as mother and wife in the household. He denied her sexual needs, yet emphasized her distinct social role in the family by glorifying some of her 'feminine' qualities. By giving these qualities a separateness and a justification of morality he was simultaneously able to assert a positive and a creative role for the married woman in certain situations but enclose her in those of the others that extend outside the family and the household. If he constructed a significantly new place for the married Indian woman in the household, he reconstructed another one for the unmarried one outside the household. Yet, there was an attempt thereby to invert the essentialist 'separate spheres' doctrine. Gandhi fails in this task miserably because he is only able to extend logically the doctrine rather than demolish it. If the 'separate spheres' doctrine is based on the 'givenness' of biological differences, Gandhi's new woman can now break the 'Lakshman Rekha' of the 'home' only by denying her biology. Thus the inversion and questioning can never take place and marriage remains sacrosanct and remains the 'essence' of modern Indian society. It is no wonder that the present-day women's movement is now attempting to fight this legacy through its struggle.

**Chapter 5**  
**The Philosophy of Sarvodaya**

## Chapter 5

### The Philosophy of Sarvodaya

Gandhi envisaged *Sarvodaya* as consisting of the welfare of all beings, 'good of all', 'service to all' and 'welfare of all'. The universal in this distinguishes him from others such as utilitarians who proposed greatest happiness to greatest numbers. This also brings him close to the ideas of socialism. While striving for the socio-economic development of all, it seeks to reconcile egoism and altruism. The main purpose of *Sarvodaya* which is based on truth, non-violence is to create moral atmosphere in the society.

At the very outset it can be noted here that in order to overcome the difficulties of the problems of caste, communal evils, economic inequalities and social divisions, Gandhi had propounded the philosophy of *Sarvodaya*. He dreamt of a classless society and partyless Democracy. *Sarvodaya* prevents socio-economic ills in the society. It focuses on the development of villages which are the foundation of Indian Democracy.

According to Gandhi, *Sarvodaya* is not a mere utopia but it is a guiding vision and principle that can reconstruct society and individuals. *Sarvodaya* “seeks to build a new society on the foundations of old spiritual and moral values of India and attempts to meet the challenge of the contemporary problems”<sup>1</sup>

In *Sarvodaya* there is no space of politics of power, instead it is based on ethics of co-operation. It envisages a well-balanced and integrated development of the nation with no distinction among have and have-nots, privileged and underprivileged, ruler and ruled. The essence of *Sarvodaya* thought lies in socialising matter through the strength of the spirit. The idea of *Sarvodaya* is not dogmatic. The philosophy of *sarvodaya* “is not a set of dogmas, in its essence, it is compatible with an attempt of the spirit to prevail over matter and to socialise itself”<sup>2</sup>

### **Sarvodaya: Meaning and Genesis**

'*Sarvodaya*' is comprised of '*Sarva*' meaning all and '*Udaya*' meaning rising, that is rising of all, welfare of all. This word *sarvodaya* is found in religious books like *Vedas*,

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<sup>1</sup> Varma V. P., *The Political Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi and Sarvodaya*, Agra: Lakshmi Narayan Agarwal, 1980. p.279

<sup>2</sup> Mohanty, J. N., 'Sarvodaya and Aurobindo A Reapproachment', *Gandhi Marg*, New Delhi: Gandhi Peace Foundation, 1960. Vol. IV p.211.

*Upanishads*, in the epics such as *The Ramayan*, *The Gita*,. But Gandhi gave to this age-old principle and ideal an extended meaning and application.

*Sarvodaya* is essentially a spiritual activity which has two meanings, viz., negative and positive. As a negative concept, *Sarvodaya* is not limited to one person or to one group of persons. Nobody is excluded from enjoying anything from other.<sup>3</sup> It is not something which one man or set of men can gain or enjoy to the exclusion of others.<sup>4</sup> As a positive concept *Sarvodaya* implies the participation of all kinds of people irrespective of class, caste, creed and religion. It also stands for the total blossoming of all the faculties- physical, mental and spiritual of the human being. It is an activity in which all may partake and it amounts to a full realization of the human faculties of the human soul.<sup>5</sup>

According to Vinoba Bhave, the term *Sarvodaya* commands a two-fold meaning. Firstly, *sarvodaya* means making all happy by removing suffering and poverty with the help of scientific knowledge. Secondly, establishing a world state with divinity, kindness and equality.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to the *laissez faire* theory, which endorses the survival of the fittest, *sarvodaya* believes in the survival and development of all. To Vinoba, "The idea of *sarvodaya*, as preached by the *Gita* is to merge oneself in the good of all."<sup>7</sup> The philosophy of *Sarvodaya* makes the attempt of reorienting human mind for reconstructing human society. It means welfare and prosperity of all. All must progress together without

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<sup>3</sup> Rathnam Chetty, K. M., *Sarvodaya and Freedom: A Gandhian Appraisal*, New Delhi: Discovery Publishing House, 1991. p.46.

<sup>4</sup> Sharma, B. S., '*The Philosophical Basis of Sarvodaya*', *Gandhi Marg*, New Delhi: Gandhi Peace Foundation, 1960. Vol. IV. p.259.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Rathnam Chetty, K. M., *Sarvodaya and Freedom: A Gandhian Appraisal*, New Delhi: Discovery Publishing House, 1991. p.47.

<sup>7</sup> Gandhi, M. K., *Harijan*, February 1949.

collision of interest. Dada Dharmadhikari says, "*Sarvodaya* is a term with a wider connotation since it conceives of assimilation of all and not only of many or most."<sup>8</sup> *Sarvodaya* is a philosophy, which provides checks against the imperfections of human mind and soul.

Regarding the meaning of the word '*Sarvodaya*', there are two views: the first, in its micro-form, means simply the rise of one. Secondly, the macro-form connotes the rise of all, the universal welfare and the all-round development of all.<sup>9</sup> According to Vinoba Bhave, it stands for not only making all happy by eliminating suffering from all but also for bringing a world state based on equality. For Gandhi, *Sarvodaya* stands for the merger of one in all with self-sacrifice and a selfless service. It aims at not only fulfilling the minimum material needs but also developing the ethico-spiritual aspects of all people.

The primary focus of universal welfare is the village or the small community. The microcosmic community is the building block of a nation. It is, as Gandhi said, the center of expanding concentric circles that interlock at many different points. The 'village' is the symbol of humanity in miniature, of humanity compressed into the immediate orbit of our multiple personal and social obligations. It is a community of duties not rights, of cooperation not competition. It can only regenerate itself through initiatives from the individual within the context of the local, but only from the standpoint of a shared vision. This is the principle of *swadeshi*, local self-reliance, or the principle of using and serving one's immediate surroundings – religious, political and economic.

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<sup>8</sup> Dharmadhikari, D., *Sarvodaya Darshan*, Varnasi: Sarva Seva Sangh, G.D.K.Publication, 1984. p.18.

<sup>9</sup> Rathnam Chetty, K. M., *Sarvodaya and Freedom: A Gandhian Appraisal*, 1991.p.14.

*Sarvodaya* is the realization of the happiness and elevation of all. There are two techniques for stabilisation of power of the people. (i) Constant propaganda and publicity (ii) Decentralisation of power. The aim is to change the heart of the people. *Sarvodaya* opposes to the ideas of egoism and wealth. There is no scope for class struggle in *Sarvodaya*. Social good, rationality and communal harmony are basic principles of *Sarvodaya*. *Sarvodaya* accepts the universalisation of self-government. Thus, the political philosophy of *Sarvodaya* is a powerful intellectual attempt to build a plan of political and social reconstruction on the basis of metaphysical idealism.

Gandhi rejected utilitarianism and its purpose of life. In addition, we can point to the fact that as compared with *Sarvodaya* it shows a lack of humanity. It would be in order, for example, as Gandhi shows, to sacrifice the happiness of 49 percent of mankind in order that the good of 51 percent might be promoted. In the light of facts like these, if one were to judge the issue on purely practical grounds alone, *Sarvodaya* would appear to be a more dignified and humane doctrine.<sup>10</sup> If it is argued that sarvodaya is an unattainable ideal, and that in the end one may have to settle for the happiness of good of 51 percent, it could be stated in reply, that it is infinitely better to strive, for *Sarvodaya* and aim to realize it, than to start out with a limited objective and attain it at the expense of an unfortunate minority. That is, it is better to go for an unattainable ideal than a limited attainable goal when it comes to the welfare of our fellow men. At least it can be said that the former shows a more commendable motivation.

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<sup>10</sup> Gandhi, M. K. "*The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*", (Ed) Shriman Narayana, Ahmadabad: Navajivan Publishing House, Vol. VI, p.230.

Gandhi's understanding of Truth and the essential unity of all that exists means that he has not only to realize his highest Self or *Atman* but also recognize his oneness with all his fellow men and with all sub-human forms of life. What can be deduced from this is that religion as he understands involves belief in an ordered moral government of the whole universe and in the fact that religious and ethical ideals would inform all our actions. Religion is not an individualistic affair, it is not something that concerns a man in isolation from his fellow men; it is not simply a matter for the individual seeking release, or *moksa*, from the endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth, or *samsara*. Rather it is bound up with all life's activities whether they are social, political or economic, and it can not be divorced from morality. As Gandhi says: "I am endeavoring to see God through the service of humanity, for I know that God is neither in heaven nor down below, but in every one."<sup>11</sup>

Religion without morality is inconceivable for Gandhi. If religion propagates cruelty and untruthfulness it is 'sounding brass' and can not claim to have God on its side. Should it be unconcerned with the practical affairs of men and take no action to solve men's problems it does not deserve to be called religion. A true Hindu, according to Gandhi, is one 'who believes in God, immortality of the soul, transmigration, the law of *Karma* and *Moksa*, and who tries to practice Truth and *Ahimsa* in daily life.'<sup>12</sup> The main value of Hinduism is its belief that all life is one, and it is not possible to hold fast to this belief without accepting that man is the servant and not the lord of creation, and that all men are brothers. It is not possible to accept the belief that "God pervades

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<sup>11</sup> Fischer, L., *The Essential Gandhi*, New York: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1963. p.229

<sup>12</sup> Gandhi, M. K., *In Search of the Supreme*, Ahmadabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1961. Vol. III p.88

everything that is to be found in this universe down to the tiniest atom,'<sup>13</sup> and not at the same time accept the idea of universal brotherhood and the essential unity and equality of all earthly creatures. Sarvodaya embodies and seeks to implement just this belief.

### **Ends and means in Sarvodaya**

Morality is the essential means to achieve spirituality and good society or good ends. But Machiavelli maintains that end justifies the means. This reveals that through any impure means like cunning, hypocrisy, hatred or violence one can get one's own desired end. To them, ends and means are watertight compartments, End is everything, no matter what or how the means are. Means become good if they serve the end. J.P. Narayan observed: "In Marxism any means are good means provided they serve the ends of the social revolution."<sup>14</sup>

For Gandhi means determine the end. He says, "As the means so the end."<sup>15</sup> Means are as important as the ends. In a way, his unique contribution to the world lies in maintaining that the "means are more important than the ends."<sup>16</sup> His emphasis on means rather than on the end is based on the doctrine of *niskamakarma* which holds that a person can have control over actions and not on their fruit. Gandhi is fully convinced that man can only strive but cannot command results. He maintains that "means are after all everything. There is no wall of separation between means and ends. Indeed the creator

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p.108.

<sup>14</sup> Narayan, J. P *Socialism, Sarvodaya, and Communism*, Bombay: Anamika Prakashan. 1964. p.149.

<sup>15</sup> Gandhi, M. K, *Young India*, p.364.

<sup>16</sup> Gopalan, S, *Means and Ends: The Gandhian View, Gandhi Centenary Volume*, New Delhi:Gandhi Peace Foundation, 1969. p.70.

gives us control over means, not over the end. Realisation of the goal is in exact proportion to that of the means. This admits of no exception.<sup>17</sup> Gandhian stress on the strength of the means is based on the following reasons:

1. He believes in the progressive evolution of man;
2. He fixes the end of man as self-perfection;
3. He feels that the end is always out of man's grip till it is attained; and
4. He is convinced that if means are subordinated to ends, the ends to which means are subordinated are likely to be less effective.

All the above convictions made Gandhi to hold the view that man must have complete control over means.<sup>18</sup>

According to Gandhi, the end justifying the means is dangerous in practice and unsound ethically. If it is accepted, it permits recourse to violence, fraud, untruth, opportunism etc. Gandhi viewed human beings as supreme. They are ends in themselves. If the means are pure, the end also becomes pure. When we take care of the means, the end will take care of itself. By emphasizing only the means, Gandhi does not intend to give a secondary place to the ends. To him, means and ends are inseparably connected just like seed and sprout.

By considering means and ends as a continuous process, Gandhi dissolved the age-old opinion of viewing both as watertight compartments. The difference between

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<sup>17</sup> Gandhi, M. K., *Young India*, July 1926.

<sup>18</sup> Tendulkar, D. G., *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*, New Delhi: Publication Division, 1954. Vol.II. p.299.

them is imaginary.<sup>19</sup> Therefore; he takes them as an organic whole. In a way, he proposes that both means and end must be homogeneous. He also holds that the extreme of means is itself the end. That is, the end progressively realizes itself through the means. The end can never result all of a sudden out of the means. In fact, when means slowly progresses, it turns itself into the end. The means apart from leading to an end shapes the end. In Gandhian philosophy, self-realisation or spiritual freedom is the end of all human actions. Gandhi throughout his life tirelessly tried to use *Sarvodaya* social order as the means to achieve spiritual freedom. *Sarvodaya* society guarantees moral freedom to every individual. This moral freedom, in turn, progresses itself into spiritual freedom, when it is followed meticulously placing faith in the supremacy of God. Moral freedom as means and spiritual freedom as end forms a continuous process or organic wholes. They cannot be divided into watertight compartments. Thus, the problem of ends and means, as an organic whole, occupies a unique place in Gandhian thought, contributing to *Sarvodaya*, moral freedom, spiritual freedom, political freedom, and economic freedom.

With *Satyagraha* as the means and socialism as the objective to be achieved, Gandhi offered an alternative to the class war and proletarian dictatorship that communists and scientific socialists had espoused as the only means for the achievement of what they called socialism. The difference lay not only in the means to be followed but also extended to the content of the objective itself. For Gandhi's socialism was not limited by class constraints. He believed in a classless society but did not think that this involved the destruction of the individuals who constituted the propertied class. He was not prepared to identify capitalism with capitalists nor agrarian exploitation with landlords,

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<sup>19</sup> Gandhi, M. K., *Harijan*, February 1949.

even as he was not prepared to identify Englishmen as individuals with British rule. He was a believer in the essential unity of man. For him, all human activities, whether political or economic, social or religious, had to be guided by the ultimate vision of God, and this could be secured only by the service of all. "I am a part and parcel of the whole," he declared, "and I cannot find Him apart from the rest of humanity."<sup>20</sup> It was this profound identification with all human beings, what the modern intellectuals would call humanism and what as a Hindu he derived from Advaita, that lay behind Gandhi's unending reiteration of his love and friendship for the Englishman even when he was trying his hardest to fight against the Englishman's rule over India. He fought the British on the political plane but not the Britisher. Even so with capitalism, what he wanted to destroy was the system, and not the individuals who constituted its unjust beneficiaries. His goal was *Sarvodaya*, the welfare of all; and this included not only the humble, the lowly, and the lost, but also the capitalist and, the landlord. The capitalist had to forswear the use of capital for his personal ends, the landlord must give the land in excess, of his basic needs, and the exploited must be taught the strength that comes from non-cooperation with the exploiter, but all men had an equal right to life and the necessities of life. It was, therefore, that he declared: "And if I would recognise the fundamental equality as I must" of the capitalist and the labourer, I must not aim at his destruction. I must strive for his conversion."<sup>21</sup> He used the same language that he had used with the foreign rulers of his country. In fact, it was the same language that he used with all those whom he regarded as either holding an unjust position or acting unjustly. The target of attack was always the system and never the man behind the system. The objective was

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<sup>21</sup> Gandhi, M. K. *Harijan*, August 1936.

conversion, and not physical destruction; the means was *Satyagraha*, and not violence. Gandhi believed that it was possible through non-violence to transform the existing relationship between the classes and the masses into something healthier and purer and he could not subscribe to any social order; however, good it was in other respects that did not conform to his fundamental conviction in Truth and Non-violence.

### **Sarvodaya Social Order**

Gandhi had a clear vision and definite approach to the problems which faced India of his time. Indian society was full of deep-rooted evils. It had totally degenerated itself socially, politically, economically and educationally. Poverty had further ruined Indian social conditions which were already corroded with caste-conflicts, child-marriages, untouchability, *Sati*, *Purdah*, negation of education to women, dowry, polygamy, corruption, exploitation, etc. Gandhi tried to find immediate solutions to all these problems.

In *sarvodaya* society, there is no scope for exploitation, discrimination, inequality, and violence. Gandhi envisaged, that *sarvodaya* society should also be free from evils like 'politics without principle', 'wealth without work', 'knowledge without character', 'commerce, without morals', 'science without mankind' and service without 'sacrifices'. It should not be divided into watertight compartments called social, political and religious where all these act and react upon one another. His aim of *sarvodaya* made him to establish a close correlation among these problems. The *Sarvodaya* society is an indivisible whole. In order to establish a democratic and free society, Gandhi suggested every individual to imbibe the spirit of love, tolerance, kindness, fearlessness, non-

violence etc. A nonviolent society, however small it is, is the strongest one. Non-violence as the law of life includes individuals, societies and nations. To him, non-violence is both a personal and social virtue. A society built on the basis of complete *Ahimsa* is the purest anarchy.

Gandhi has offered the 'eleven vows' to discipline oneself so that a disciplined society could emerge. Self-sacrifice is the essence of *sarvodaya* social order. Every individual is to be ready and willing to sacrifice his happiness for the sake of others. Everyone is to follow the policy of giving and not taking. He is to work for others and not expect anything in return. Through *sarvodaya* he wanted to rebuild the nation "from the bottom up-wards" and establish a new social order based on freedom, justice, equality and fraternity. Gandhi's ideal society will be marked by following characteristics.<sup>22</sup>

1) There should be no coercive state power in it and social cohesion should be maintained through the citizen's sense of social obligation like the obligations of *Varnashrama dharma* in ancient India.

2) It should consist of villages or rural agricultural settlements in which wants are few and cooperation, conservation and decentralisation are the governing norms of social, civil and economic activity.

3) Besides agricultural, other production should be based on cottage industries and handicraft. Even education should be handicraft-centred.

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<sup>22</sup> Gangal, S. C., *Gandhian Thought and Techniques in the Modern World*, Delhi: Criterion Publications, 1988. pp. 158-159.

4) The ruling, principles of decentralised and handicraft centred production, three other economic norms should be maintained or practiced, namely, village self-sufficiency, bread-labour (*i.e.*, winning one's bread through work done by one's own body labour), and non-possession (acquiring or using the minimum possible articles of consumption). Heavy machines and heavy transport will have no place in this society.

5) In such a society, disputes or conflict will be few and far between. But in order to deal with such disputes, as may possibly or occasionally arise, village panchayats should be organised. In the unlikely event of the failure of panchayats, recourse may be had to *Satyagraha*.

### **Sarvodaya Political Order**

*Sarvodaya* as a political doctrine is mildly anarchist. In fact, the political ideal of *Sarvodaya* is an anarchism of its own variety. It concedes that a fully stateless society is beyond the reach of man, and the goal of human endeavour can only be to reduce the power. The politics of sarvodaya is politics of *lokaniti* instead of *rajaniti*. *Lokaniti* is a comprehensive term, which denotes simultaneously a way of life, a form of social order and a method. As a way of life, it stands for the self-regulation of individual conduct and for a habit to act on one's own initiatives. As a form of social order, it envisages a society in which police and military will have little to do and the law will interfere, least with life. A man will have the utmost freedom of action. As a method, it stands for social change in a manner that would maintain men's freedom of action. The *Sarvodaya* political order is based on certain fundamental political assumptions:

- (i) All individuals are equally born.
- (ii) People are the custodians of the supreme power in the State.
- (iii) Political power should be decentralized both at individual and the village level.
- (iv) All must train themselves for self-rule.
- (v) All should believe in the divinity of every individual and strive for the welfare of all people.<sup>23</sup>

In *sarvodaya* political order tyranny of majority rule has no place. Vinoba Bhave writes "Political science lays down that everything should be decided by majority. It started counting votes. If there are fifty-one votes in favour and forty-nine votes in opposition, then the former must have an overriding voice." Similarly, to quote Jayaprakash Narayan, "Because fifty-one people out of hundred decide to do a certain thing in a certain manner, why should the forty-nine people who do not agree with that, be forced to accept that decision? What kind of democracy is this? The laws passed in this way are not only oppressive to the minority, but also violate the principle of human unity and dignity as they consider the individual as one of the many rather than as a unique individual possessing a personality. It thus tends to dehumanise humanity."<sup>24</sup> The advocate of *Sarvodaya* also points out that a representative democracy strengthens the bureaucracy in the country and that is not a desirable thing. Therefore, *Sarvodaya* society

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<sup>23</sup> Rathnam Chetty, K. M., *Sarvodaya and Freedom : A Gandhian Appraisal*, 1991. p.66.

<sup>24</sup> Narayana, J. P., *From Socialism to Sarvodaya*, Kashi: Akhil Bharat Sarva Seva Sangh, 1958. p.48.

is to be self-regulated and self-managed in small communities, whether urban or rural. There is to be no political coercion and also no coercion of any kind. People in *Sarvodaya* society are bound together in love and by love. Every individual is to live for others and all others are to live for every individual. *Sarvodaya* stands for national unity and solidarity and no place for provincialism and religious fanaticism. *Sarvodaya* aims to replace thoroughly the manipulative politics of power by the participant politics of cooperation.<sup>25</sup> It emphasises mutualistic activities spontaneously engaged in by the people.

### **Sarvodaya Economic Order**

Gandhi had adopted an integral approach to human problems. His basic aim was to reduce economics to terms of religion and spirituality. For him, ethics and economics are not two different entities. Economics that hurt the moral well-being of an individual or a nation are immoral and therefore sinful.<sup>26</sup> True economics, according to Gandhi "stands for social justice, it promotes the good of all equally including the weakest and is indispensable for decent life."<sup>27</sup> He mainly wants to formulate such an economic constitution for both India and the world that no one suffers from want of food, clothing and shelter. All necessities of life "should be freely available to all as God's air and water are or ought to be ...."<sup>28</sup> Such an economic constitution, he aims at building not on material wealth but on spirituality. This is only possible when everyone shows more truth

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* p.48.

<sup>26</sup> Bose, N. K., *Selection From Gandhi*, Ahmadabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1994. p.40.

<sup>27</sup> Gandhi, M. K., *Harijan*, October 1937.

<sup>28</sup> Gandhi, M. K., *Young India*, July, 1928.

than gold, greater fearlessness than pomp of power and wealth, greater charity than love of self.

Gandhian *Sarvodaya* economic order is based on simplicity, decentralisation, self-sufficiency, cooperation, equality, non-violence, sanctity of labour, human values, self-sufficient village units, nationalisation of basic industries, *swadeshi*, and the theory of trusteeship. These, in turn, will solve the problems pertaining to labour, capital, production, distribution and profit etc.

In Gandhian economic order, dependence on others, is slavery and self-sufficiency is freedom. Regional self-sufficiency is must in *Sarvodaya* economic order. People should produce their own needs of life. Production must be in accordance with the need.

In *Sarvodaya* economic order, man is totally free from material bondage. He never becomes a slave to material wants. He lives above his greed and amassing of riches. He views work as service. It is divine for him. He cherishes the principles of self-suffering, sacrifice, dedication and renunciation. His eating, clothing or dwelling shows no superiority or inferiority. He finds no difference between the rich and the poor. *Sarvodaya* economic system is practical, realistic and humane.

### **Trusteeship**

Gandhi evolved the theory of trusteeship not only on his deep religious conviction that everything belongs to God and therefore, a human being can hold either his property or talent only as a trustee, but also on a number of practical considerations. He knew that

to dispossess the men of property or of talent by force was bound to involve class war, hatred, proletarian dictatorship, an all powerful and coercive State, and the consequent elimination of all hope of creating a non-violent society. He also felt that many men who had acquired property had some special abilities for increasing production and many men of talent had exceptional contributions to make, and, therefore, to destroy them by force, may lead to much less of production and would be like killing the goose that lays the golden eggs. Hence his emphasis on persuading them to function as trustees rather than dispossessing them, by force, of their income or wealth. At the same time, knowing human nature as he did, he knew that mere persuasion may not be enough. He, therefore, conveyed the warning that the alternative to their being amenable to persuasion would be the triumph of forces that would dispossess them by violence. At the same time, he reminded both tenants and workers that their exploitation was possible only because of their failure to recognise their own strength and the consequent passive acceptance of their exploitation. He wanted the poor to know that the rich cannot accumulate wealth without the co-operation of the poor in society; and he recommended non-violent non-co-operation and civil disobedience as the right and infallible means for getting the rich to change their attitude and become trustees in the public interest instead of continuing as exploiters. He was prepared to advocate the implementation of ameliorative measures through the legislative channel, give trusteeship a statutory form, and make it a legalised institution. Appeal to the better instincts in the rich, persuasion, education regarding the inevitability of change and the greater unattractiveness of the alternative of change by violence, non-violent, non-co-operation by the exploited that would make the exploiter's functioning impossible, and finally legislative action were the series of measures that he

contemplated for his programme in bringing about the change that he desired in property relations and the use of personal talents in the public interest.

Gandhi also claimed for his socialism of *Sarvodaya* and Trusteeship the ability to survive on a self-sustaining and permanent basis which, he held, was not possible in the case of the socialism or communism of the Marxian conception. This was not only because the latter used violence as its means but also because socialism through violence only destroyed possession. According to Gandhi, nothing secured by violence could survive on a permanent basis.

The theory of trusteeship, elimination of exploitation in every shape or form; a classless society which offers no privileges by the birth or wealth or talent; mutual cooperation being the driving force of motivation and behavior; and above all, securing the welfare of all without any distinction of race, religion, sex, political affiliation: these may be said to be the highlights of the *Sarvodaya* society envisioned by Gandhi. Further human values, individual development that's always consistent with its use for the development of society; promotion of altruism to the highest degree; integration of the individual with society; lifting the whole human society to the highest level of existence where love and fair play will have the most crucial roles to play; these are the most predominant characteristics of the *Sarvodaya* ideal.

*Sarvodaya* then is the application of the principle of nonviolence in the transformation of societies: from their present forms which are mostly exploitative and disfavour the most disadvantaged, toward more balanced, inclusive and equalitarian forms.

For Gandhi no ideology and no one particular form of government is not equivalent to truth nor can it embody the universal good. Each ideal form of government or ideology is a relative truth and is always subservient to the social good. Universal welfare is an ethical principle or ideal, not a political or economic one *per se*. The political and economic patterns are secondary and regulated by the ethical and the social.

In a sense, the Trustee must emulate the Hindu *guru*. When a devotee puts a garland of flowers around the neck of a spiritual teacher, the spiritual teacher will graciously return it to the devotee. The garland is now magnetically blessed. It is a gift but with far greater value than when originally offered. When a trustee redistributes his influence or wealth, it is of far greater worth to the community than when he received it by his honest labor. His 'gift' not only increases the collective well being of the community, but it is now blessed by the sacrifice of hard work and the wish of the trustee to benefit the less fortunate. This kind of voluntary relinquishment is contagious and increases the prospect that trusteeship can be practiced by all. Trusteeship, then, should by no means be seen simply in terms of material redistribution, but in terms of moral uprightness and personal sacrifice, which can be practiced by the poor as well as the wealthy.

Trusteeship as a viable revolutionary force can be seen in the Bhoodan- Gramdan Movement initiated by Vinoba Bhave during 1950s to combat the potential communist uprising among the landless in India. Bhave relentlessly pursued voluntary contributions from all land owners whether of wealthy or moderate means to be redistributed to the landless. It saved India from a communist revolt by the dispossessed and desperate.

Bhave was once criticized for accepting a land donation from someone who had barely enough to sustain his family. The man donated it to the village elders to redistribute to the landless. Bhave commented that such an act shows that the spirit of sacrifice has no limits. He pointed out that such acts inspire gratitude on the part of those receiving the gift and shame those who are reluctant to share.

### **Socialism, Communism and Sarvodaya**

Gandhi called himself a socialist and even a communist but for him Socialism and communism were transcendental forms of egalitarian social philosophy that find their fulfilment and culmination in sarvodaya.<sup>29</sup> Although the situational background from which socialism and *Sarvodaya* have emerged is different, still their humanist idealism is almost similar.<sup>30</sup> According to Jayaprakash Narayan, *Sarvodaya* represents the highest socialist values. Socialism arose in the west as a philosophy of the industrial proletariat and challenged the pretensions of the contemporary state, which bolstered the interests of the capitalists. Socialism and communism are basically idealistic, ethical and humanitarian in nature. They are concerned with the illumination of the misery of the millions, elevation of the status of poor, unfortunate and downtrodden and founding a society based on the principle of economic equality and social justice. *Sarvodaya* stands for the just society free from all types of exploitation and human miseries. According to Rajendra Prasad, *Sarvodaya* represents an aspiration “towards a society based on truth and non-violence in which there will be no distinction of caste or creed, no opportunity

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<sup>29</sup> Mahajan, V. D., *Modern Indian Political Thought*, New Delhi: S.Chandana and Company, 1986. p.569.

<sup>30</sup> Narayan, J. P *Socialism to Sarvodaya*, Madras: Socialist Book Centre, 1956. p.96.

for exploitation and full scope for development both for individuals as well as groups."<sup>31</sup> Jayaprakash Narayan writes about *Sarvodaya*, "What we desire is the establishment of a society in which there will-be no exploitation, there will be perfect equality and each individual will have equal opportunities for development." *Sarvodaya* aims at a "classless, casteless and non-exploitative society."<sup>32</sup> There is no permanent conflict between the two ideologies Communism and Sarvodaya. Whatever differences there might be between Gandhism and Communism, there are also points of similarity between these and these too are important. The cause of the have-nots is the basic sentiment running through both. Both Gandhism and Communism regard the well-being of the poor and the oppressed. K.G. Mashruwala, prominent Gandhian observes, "the common point between Gandhi and Marx is the extreme concern of both for the suppressed and the oppressed, the resourceless and the ignorant, the dumb and starving section of humanity." Similarly, Jayaprakash Narayan said "If we are true socialists, we would be true follower of *Sarvodaya* as well."<sup>33</sup> In spite of some fundamental similarities, between socialism and *Sarvodaya*, there are great differences between them on the question of means and methods. From the *Sarvodaya* stand point; there are two shortcomings in the socialist philosophy. First, the basic technique for achieving socialism is supposed to be nationalisation. But nationalisation may entrench the control of the bureaucrats and may be another name for state capitalism. *Sarvodaya* pleads for villagisation while socialism believes in nationalization. Secondly, socialism adheres, at least in some cases, to the concept of violent revolution. But *Sarvodaya* has no place for violence in its philosophy

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<sup>31</sup> Varma, V. P., *op.cit.*p.283.

<sup>32</sup> Mahajan, V.D, *op.cit.*, pp569-570.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p570.

and technique.<sup>34</sup>On the contrary *Sarvodaya*, believes in persuasion and change of heart. Both Marx and Engels expressed their conviction that violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie lays the foundation for the proletariat. Lenin and Mao used the technique of violence to bring about a change in the Soviet Union and China. While Gandhi taught the ethics of self suffering to convert the opponent because violence can never be the foundation of a just and equal society.<sup>35</sup>Violence breeds counter violence. And on the basis of violence it is not possible to establish the just social order. In fact a new form of exploitation of man has come into existence and that is exploitation by the party bosses, bureaucrats and the state machine.

*Sarvodaya* avoids the evils of legislative or legal coercion in democratic socialism and violence and physical coercion involved in communism. It relies on the technique of conversion for bringing about social transformation in the direction of a non-exploitative and egalitarian society. Gandhi was concerned with the welfare of all and hence rejected the view that the welfare of all can ever be attained by physical, intellectual and moral coercion perpetrated by a section of the people against the rest of the community. Gandhi believed that *Sarvodaya* could be realised only by the application of a moral and ethical method. Gandhi believed that through the application of the technique of persuasion and appeal to the innate good sense of the rich and the privileged, they might be made to renounce their privileges and apply their superfluous wealth for the welfare of the community. Such renunciation of wealth and privilege was to be for the good of the poor and the rich. "The essence of the revolution contemplated by *Sarvodaya* is that it plans its faith on human approach, at the root of which stands the concept of revolution by human

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<sup>37</sup> Varma, V. P., op.cit. p.285.

<sup>35</sup> Bhave V., *Swarajya-Shahstra.*, New Delhi: Sasta Sahitya Mandal, 1953. pp58-68.

beings for the proliferation of human values and human virtues, and through a method that is strictly humane.”<sup>36</sup>

The advocates of *Sarvodaya* also differ from the communists and socialists in respect of the role of the state. Both the communists and the socialists have their faith in the potency of the state to bring about equality in society. In the economic sphere, the communists and socialists advocate centralisation and concentration of economic powers in the hands of the state and the proliferation of the economic activities of the state. To quote J.P. Narayan, "Democratic socialists, communists as well as welfarists are all statisticians." The concentration of both political and economic power in the hands of the state leads to too much of bureaucratisation, dehumanisation and loss of individual freedom. He further says: "The democratic state remains a Leviathan that will sit heavily on the freedom of the people." The state is still worse under communism. It is true that the communists talk about the withering away of the state in the long run, but during the period of transition, the state is not only tolerated but also becomes more and more powerful. It devours the lofty ideals of classless society, liberty, equality, fraternity and fellowship. Jayaprakash Narayan writes, "The remedy is to create and develop forms of socialist living through the voluntary endeavour of the people rather than seek to establish socialism by the use of the power of the state. In other words, the remedy is to establish people's socialism, rather than state socialism."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Mahajan, V. D., *opcit*, pp.573-574.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

Considering from all angles, according to the followers of Gandhi, *Sarvodaya* is a far nobler, subtler, loftier, broader, deeper and transcendental concept than socialism or communism.

The philosophy and sociology of sarvodaya, based on the insights and experiences of Gandhi, is a reassertion of the valuation and moral approach to the problems of mankind. In fact Gandhian concept of *Sarvodaya* stands for not only making all happy by eliminating suffering from all but also for bringing a world state based on equality.

Lastly let us conclude this chapter with some comments on the relevance of the Gandhian ideal of *Sarvodaya* for the contemporary world. When we speak of relevance of an ideal or ideology we usually refer to certain conditionals like time, place, situation, people, issue etc. Hence relevance of an ideology is bound to be relative, though it might have some lasting significance for mankind. Does *Sarvodaya* have any lasting contribution to mankind?

We have already discussed that Gandhi lived in an age of colonialism and imperialism. During his life span, two world wars were fought causing great devastation, and threatening human existence and civilization. In his own country he witnessed poverty, hunger, destitution and deprivation of millions along with many social evils. In such a scenario he was very much skeptical of the prevailing political and economic ideologies to fare better for a peaceful world. His primary concern was to build a non-violent, peaceful and progressive society with a humanistic agenda; under the above historical compulsion he imagined a socio-economic alternative with the greatest stress on moral elevation. His notion of a decentralized village republic which appeared very

fascinating to him in those days has lost its relevance in today's globalized world. The modern development in science, technology and communication has created the hope to alleviate poverty and improve the standard of living of the deprived millions. Globalization has also created the hope of going beyond parochialism, sectarianism and communalism. Scope of international integration and cosmopolitanism is rising day by day in the world through various world agencies working all over the world. Technological know-how has revolutionalized the system of production. Standard of living along with quality of life has improved in many countries beyond what it was during the time of Gandhi. So the possibility of going back to industrial primitivism and self-dependent village republic has become an impractical proposition.

Despite all that *Sarvodaya* as a political ideal has its importance to fight against imperialism, may it be political or economic. Gandhism will never lose its moral importance, rather it creates new hope when we see the distressing predicament of the modern man. It is a fact that there is explosion of knowledge and scientific knowledge now, still economic subjugation and exploitation with new design are continuing as it was in Gandhi's time. The modern life style, consumeristic culture and technology throw great challenge to the environmental ecology. The ecological imbalance that is increasingly growing has become a matter of great concern. Besides, communalism and power-oriented politics are rising day by day. In many third world countries and particularly in our country economic gap between people is alarmingly increasing. Violence, terrorism and dehumanizing trends are also rising in many countries. All these cumulatively yield a gloomy picture about the future. Besides in Indian context bureaucratic corruption, erosion of values in all walks of life and caste and communal

violence of great magnitude sometimes give a dismal picture of a debilitated Indian society.

Gandhi was an ardent advocate of non-violence, equality and freedom. He set the ideal of revolution. His *Sarvodaya*, apart from other ideals, basically stood for human dignity, brotherhood and peaceful coexistence. He gave a humanistic touch to all spheres of human affairs. These ideals and value ends of *Sarvodaya* will always remain a source of motivation to redesign our socio -cultural structure.

*Sarvodaya* as a model of development may not appear inspiring but its moral and humanistic appeal will never lose its importance. Whatever model of development may be designed but that cannot do away with the basic values of *Sarvodaya* without running the risk of bringing decadence to the society. Similarly Gandhi's version of technology may not appear interesting and even may appear irrational in the present context, but at the same time man cannot go on polluting the environment and depleting the earth unabatedly without running the risk of self -annihilation. Man has to think of alternative technology. Gandhi will reappear again as he always favours eco-friendly and sustainable development as most of our natural resources are not unlimited. So too war, violence, aggression and racial or communal bitterness in this nuclear age will lead mankind to total annihilation unless we accept non -violence as the guiding value of all policies and programmes. Thus *Sarvodaya* as a moral ideal will never lose its appeal for a better and peaceful world.

# **Conclusion**

## Conclusion

### 1

**T**radition and Modernity are not contradictory or exclusive. They are merely two different classes of things which can however interact beneficially. Tradition is still very often considered as a "thing of the past" without any contemporary legitimacy, and modernity is often mistakenly considered as modernism. "Tradition" and "modernity" are widely used as polar opposites in a linear theory of social change. It is incorrect to view traditional societies as static, normatively consistent, or structurally homogeneous. The relations between the traditional and the modern do not necessarily involve displacement, conflict, or exclusiveness. Modernity does not necessarily weaken tradition. Both

tradition and modernity form the bases of ideologies and movements in which the polar opposites are converted into aspirations of the people. Gandhi was neither an uncritical traditionalist nor a dogmatic opponent of all aspects of modernity. The way Gandhi drew upon tradition in formulating his worldview was creative and owed much to his exposure to western values and institutions. The Brahmanical tradition acknowledges four sources of dharma, namely, revelation (*shruti*), remembered tradition (*smriti*), the example of good people (*sadachar*) and 'self-validation' or conscience (*atma tushti*). The last named notion is the same as Gandhi's 'moral sense'. He also called it the 'inner voice', and claimed that it often 'spoke' to him in times of crisis. He consistently claimed to be a *sanatani* Hindu, but rejected the authority of even the scriptures on particular issues if tradition offended reason or morality. He wrote in 1921, "I do not believe in the exclusive divinity of the Vedas. I decline to be bound by any interpretation, however learned it may be, if it is repugnant to reason or moral sense."<sup>1</sup>

In regarding reason and moral sense as the primary sources of good conduct, Gandhi asserted the right of the individual to arrive at judgments and, if necessary, to defend them against collective opinion, whether traditional or contemporary. His excoriation of the practice of untouchability was not merely an assertion of his own individual right to make moral judgments — indeed he considered this an obligation — but more importantly the assertion of the moral worth of every single human being, irrespective of his or her ascribed social status. Such moral worth is the basic premise of good society; whether it is enhanced or eroded depends on the dialectic of social pressures and individual agency.

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<sup>1</sup> Gandhi, M.K. *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India, Vol. XXI. p.246

Gandhi elaborated what he derived from various sources (Jainism, Hinduism, Christianity) by emphasising the criterion of compassion and glossing social action as selfless service (*seva*), particularly of the needy and the oppressed. Gandhi's position may be called moral or altruistic (other-oriented) individualism as against amoral or utilitarian (self-oriented) individualism. In his worldview, the actor as a self-conscious choice-making individual is the foundation of a moral civil society. He is wedded to truth and non-violence: he is the *satyagrahi*. In his constant fight against injustice and untruth, it was difficult for him to compartmentalize the social, political economic and ethical issues.

## 2

Gandhi's secularism and openness to all kinds of theological and philosophical schools is well-known. It was through an assimilation of various concepts and philosophical tenets that Gandhi arrived at his understanding of non-violence. Jainism and Buddhism were the most important influences that lay behind the foundation of Gandhi's non-violence theory. Both Jainism and Buddhism preached non-violence as the basic principle of existence. All other thoughts and actions propagated by these two religious schools were based on this base of non-violence. Gandhi was deeply influenced by his readings of these scriptures.

Non-violence had always been the founding principle of Gandhian spirituality, and his bedrock of his political philosophy. Gandhi's distrust of violence as a mode to assume political power and as a tool of revolution was ingrained in his world-view from the very early days of his political career. It is impossible to look at Gandhi's political activism in isolation. Springing deeply from his belief in truth, Gandhi's political goals

were ultimately specific correlatives of higher commitments to humanity and world peace. Gandhi most often places truth and non-violence on the same level and claims that truth and non-violence are the two sides of the same coin. He is of the opinion that a truthful man is bound to be non-violent and vice versa. That is why it is supposed that truth and non-violence cannot be kept apart. However, one can see the difference between the two principles in morality. While truth is the bed-rock principle, non-violence follows as a corollary. All forms of non-violent behaviour follow from the one adhering to truth as a deep moral commitment. A *Satyagrahi* is necessarily nonviolent because he contradicts himself if he is not so. This necessary relation between truth and non-violence need not commit Gandhi to the identity of the two. A non-violent person is in better position to realize truth as the supreme value. Non-violence preaches world peace and brotherhood, whereas political movements naturally revel in polemics of difference and antagonism. Gandhi's greatness lies in bringing together these two apparently combative and incongruous ideas and putting them on a common platform, where they do not subtract, but support each other. Gandhi's significance in the world political scenario is two-fold. First, he retrieved non-violence as a powerful political tool, and secondly, he was the one of the chief promulgators of the theory that political goal is ultimately a manifestation of a higher spiritual and humanitarian goal, culminating in world peace. For Gandhi, the means were as important as the end, and there could be only one means - that of non-violence. This non-violence was used in conjunction with the philosophy of non-attachment. Gandhi declared the two goals of his life to be ensuring India's freedom and to achieve it through non-violence. One without the other

would be unacceptable and weakening. Violence, Gandhi believed, bred violence, and can never be a solution to India's problem.

Gandhi was truly a martyr for the cause of non-violence, who not only preached but practiced what he preached. His life was a glorious example of his thoughts, and thousands of Indians from all walks of life, from cities and villages alike, took encouragement and force from his simple life and unshaken faith in the innate goodness of the human soul. He wielded the weapon of love and understanding, and succeeded to upturn even the strongest of the martial nations with it. Gandhi has left the world richer with a renewed faith in the dictates of non-violence.

In the context of *Satyagraha* as spiritual advancement (or moral refinement), which Gandhi considered intensely personal, the actor's psychological disposition was regarded as more crucial than his social persona. It followed that any external pressure that might erode one's autonomy had to be resisted. Whatever diminished one's capacity to act responsibly — whether caste prejudice, colonial domination or technological encroachment — was to be considered evil. Gandhi's individualism was not anti-social, but the community was not to be allowed to diminish the individual's autonomy. Self-aware and responsible individuals with a capacity for altruism are, in Gandhi's thinking, the basic constituents of good society everywhere. The enemy of the autonomous individual and therefore of good society is the unbridled power of the state, the economy and the inward-looking social groups; hence, the need to assert the power of the individual against them without the use of force. Autonomy, it may be clarified, is not hostile to collective action through the voluntary association of individuals.

*Satyagraha* is fundamentally a way of life, which guides the modes of political activism undertaken by the followers of its principle (or *Satyagrahis*). On a personal front it involves a life committed to truth, chastity, non-attachment and hard-work. On the political front, *Satyagraha* involves utilisation of non-violent measures to curb the opponent, and ideally to convert him rather than to coerce him into submission. A *satyagrahi* wants to make the evil-doers see the evil that they are indulging into, and realize their injustice. In an ideal way, it involves transforming them into acceptance of the right, and if that fails to come around, then at least to stop them from obstructing the right. Picketing, non-cooperation, peaceful marches and meetings, along with a peaceful disobedience of the laws of the land were typical modes of resistance adopted by *Satyagraha*. Reverence to the opposition was one of the unique features of the *Satyagraha* preached by Gandhi. Resistance on the part of the authorities would be expected, but a true *Satyagrahi* had to bear all hardships, including physical assault with patience, not ever stooping to anger, and to defend the faith even at the cost of life. Gandhi believed that the *Satyagrahis* had to be extremely strong in inner strength and moral courage in order to do that, and also realized that could not be achieved unless the *Satyagrahis* maintained a pure and simple life. He made his own life a veritable example of his teachings. Absolute secularism and eradication of every shade of untouchability were also distinct characteristics of *Satyagraha*. It was only in such a way, Gandhi believed, that the Indians would be strong enough to tread the paths of a truly non-violent revolution. *Satyagraha* is more than a political tool of resistance. It is a holistic approach towards life, based on the ideals of truth and moral courage.

With *satyagraha*, Mahatma Gandhi ushered in a new era of civilian resistance on the political scenario of the world. *Satyagraha* for Gandhi was the only legitimate way to earn one's political rights, as it was based on the ideals of truth and non-violence. *Satyagraha* has not been free of criticism, but its methodologies have gained wide acceptance around the world as a more potent tool of resistance than armed violence.

Gandhi's system of *Satyagraha* on the basis of truth, non-violence and non-cooperation was largely unheard of, and generally distrusted. However, Gandhi's faith was strong. It was a faith based not on arms and antagonism, but on extreme moral courage that drew its strength from innate human truth and honesty. He applied his systems with success.

### 3

Gandhi was highly grieved about the caste system that characterised Indian society. But it was untouchability that particularly pained him. All his life, he worked hard at eradicating this heinous practice from its very roots. He drew sharp distinction between caste and *varna*. *Varna* was based on profession. And in present day India, wrote Gandhi, there is no other trace of *varnashram*, as they are easily interchangeable, and were are actually interchanged at times, except for the *varna* of the *Shudra*. Their plight continued uninterrupted from the ancient times. Gandhi thought caste system to be a social evil, but untouchability was a sin. All his life, Gandhi worked for the untouchables. In fact, in one of his letters, Gandhi elevated the *bhangis*, or the night-soil cleaners as the very epitome of service for god, as they do their unclean work and cleanse society of its perils, and receive nothing but shame and admonition for it. Every man,

thought Gandhi, should find a lesson in it. They should dispense their services to society and expect no reward in return. That would be the greatest service to God. Gandhi worked relentlessly to elevate the social status of the untouchables in India. He wanted penance for crimes of discrimination that have been perpetuated for thousands of years as he wanted society to work hard to relocate the untouchables on an equal footing with the other members of society. He called them *harijans* or 'gods own people'. Gandhi sought to convince and convert the caste Hindus and mobilise their energies by means of moral and religious appeals. He aimed to awaken them to the moral enormity of untouchability and to inspire them both individually and collectively to do all in their power to eradicate it. Second, he encouraged them to undertake welfare activities among the untouchables in a spirit of remorse and guilt. He thought that this would have desirable effects on both. It would 'cleanse' the caste Hindus, redeem their guilt and draw them physically, morally and emotionally closer to the untouchables. It would also give the latter a measure of pride and dignity, increase their self-confidence and improve their habits and ways of life, thereby removing some of the causes of caste Hindu prejudices against them.

However, Gandhi was overly confident of the correctness of his approach towards untouchability and did not pay much attention to the feelings and reactions within these communities to his benign initiatives. The untouchable leaders were not too impressed by his campaigns to get them some grudging concessions from caste Hindus. He did a great job in highlighting the inhuman treatment meted out to untouchables and sensitized caste Hindus to their moral obligation in setting right this historical wrong. But his programme of social reform only skimmed the surface and the untouchable leaders looked upon it as

mere tokenism. He spoke for them, but never encouraged them to speak for themselves. As seen above, he consistently resisted any move to induct an untouchable in the political power structure. He dealt with untouchability on the moral plane, never on the political. Perhaps he felt that untouchables were too helpless and vulnerable, and needed his paternal protection and guidance till they had made sufficient progress. Gandhi took a religious view of untouchability and made its eradication an exclusively Hindu responsibility. While this had the great advantage of focusing attention on the centuries of Hindu oppression, it also had the great demerit of treating the dalits as passive objects helplessly waiting for their masters to get off their backs. However, since Gandhi was involved in several battles that against untouchability being only one of them, and political exigencies inevitably dictated their order of importance. In the absence of organised dalit pressure, Gandhi found it politically neither necessary nor possible to place anti-untouchability high on his political agenda. It was therefore hardly surprising that he gave it his undivided attention only when the restless untouchables clamoured for action and threatened the unity of the independence movement. This was not because he did not genuinely abhor or intend to eradicate untouchability, as Ambedkar suggested, but because his passionate moral commitment could not generate an equally strong political commitment within a politically imbalanced context created by his style of campaign.

#### 4

Gandhi respected traditions of the society, but not at the cost of loss of individual dignity. He never hesitated to criticize the evils which had gripped the Indian society, and

tried to mobilize public opinion against such evils. He realised that there were deep-rooted customs hampering the development of women, and women's freedom from such shackles was necessary for the emancipation of the nation. He assumed a pioneering role in attempting to eradicate the social wrongs committed against the women of the country through ages. When Gandhi emerged on to the political scenario, social evils like child marriage and dowry system were rampant. The percentage of women with basic education was as low as two percent. The patriarchal nature of the society confined women to the status of an inferior sex subordinate to their male counterparts. The *pardah* system was in full vogue in Northern India. Unless accompanied by their male guardians, the women were not permitted to venture out on their own. Only a handful few could avail of education and attend schools. It was in such a dismal milieu that Gandhi took the responsibility of shouldering a social crusade that led to a major reorientation of the common notion of women in the Indian society.

According to Gandhi, social reforms were essential for the restructuring of the societal values that had so far dominated the perception of Indian women. Although, he had great reverence for the traditions of the country, he also realized that certain customs and traditions of the Indian society were antithetical to the spirit of development of the women of the nation. His practical and dynamic advice was, "It is good to swim in the waters of tradition, but to sink in them is suicide". The system of *pardah* came under Gandhi's attacks and he questioned the very foundation of this practice. For him, the *pardah* system was no less than a "vicious, brutal and barbarous" practice. The predicaments of the *devadasis*, a part of the lower, untouchable segment of the society, had an indelible effect on the sensitive mind of the Gandhi. The pathetic conditions of the

child prostitutes disturbed him immensely. He left no stone unturned for rehabilitating this segment of the society, as for him guarding the honour of women was no less than protecting cows. According to Gandhi, one of the first tasks that need to be accomplished as soon as the country won freedom was to abolish the system of *devzdasis*. Gandhi throughout his life waged a crusade for the upliftment of the socially downtrodden, making significant contributions for the enhancement of the status of women in India. Women under his aegis, took a milestone step towards re-establishing their identity in the society. Gandhi's inspiring ideologies boosted their morale and helped them to rediscover their self esteem.

With the emergence of Gandhi, a new conception of women gradually gained currency. For Gandhi, women were not mere toys in the hands of men, neither their competitors. Men and women are essentially endowed with the same spirit and therefore have similar problems. Women are at par with men, one complementing the other. According to Gandhi, education for women was the need of the time that would ensure their moral development and make them capable of occupying the same platform as that of men. In Gandhi's views, women can never be considered to be the weaker sex. In Gandhi's words, "To call women the weaker sex is a libel; it is man's injustice to women." In fact, women for Gandhi were embodiments of virtues like knowledge, humility, tolerance, sacrifice and faith. These qualities were essential prerequisites for imbibing the virtue of *Satyagraha*. The capability of enduring endless suffering can be witnessed only in the women, according to the *Mahatma*. The doctrine of *ahimsa* as preached by Gandhi incorporates the virtue of suffering as is evident in the women. Therefore, Gandhi envisaged a critical role for women in establishing non-violence.

Gandhi invoked the instances of ancient role models who were epitomes of Indian womanhood, like Draupadi, Savitri, Sita and Damayanti, to show that Indian women could never be feeble. Women have equal mental abilities as that of men and equal right to freedom. To sum up in Gandhi's words; "The wife is not the husband's slave but his companion and his help-mate and an equal partner in all his joys and sorrows - as free as the husband to choose her own path." Gandhi's reformist spirit seasoned the role that he played in uplifting the status of women in India.

Not only there was a general awakening among the women, but under Gandhi's leadership, they entered into the national mainstream, taking parts in the National Movements. According to Gandhi, the role of women in the political, economic and social emancipation of the country was of overriding importance. Gandhi had immense faith in the capability of women to carry on a non violent crusade. Under his guidance and leadership, women shouldered critical responsibilities in India's struggle for freedom. Gandhi's urge to women to join India's struggle for independence was instrumental in transforming the outlook of women. Swaraj uprooted age old taboos and restrictive customs. Through their participation in Indian struggle for freedom, women of India broke down the shackles of oppression that had relegated them to a secondary position from time immemorial.

It can be said without an iota of doubt that Mahatma Gandhi was indeed one of the greatest advocates of women's liberty and all throughout his life toiled relentlessly to improve the status of women in his country. His faith in their immense capabilities found expression in his decisions to bestow leadership to them in various nationalistic endeavours. However, as we reconstruct Gandhi's ideas on women's empowerment in the

society, his ideas often appear to be reinforcing the captivity of women rather than destroying it. Even though he managed to draw many women into the mainstream of political protest, his views on women appear outdated in the sense that they flow from the open of a typical patriarch. If we critically examine his ideas on women empowerment, we will surely find a strong disjuncture between Gandhi precept and practice. Gandhi often stressed that the woman is defined by her role as mother and that it is motherhood, which must prescribe the parameters of her position in society. With women firmly located in the home and with men forming and regulating public life,

## 5

Gandhi lived in an age of colonialism and imperialism. During his life span, two world wars were fought causing great devastation, and threatening human existence and civilization. In his own country he witnessed poverty, hunger, destitution and deprivation of millions along with many social evils. In such a scenario he was very much skeptical of the prevailing political and economic ideologies to fare better for a peaceful world. His primary concern was to build a non-violent, peaceful and progressive society with a humanistic agenda; under the above historical compulsion he imagined a socio-economic alternative with the greatest stress on moral elevation. Gandhi visualizes an integral development in society through *Sarvodaya*. *Sarvodaya* is the name Gandhi gives to his vision of the new human society embracing the betterment of the entire humankind and the world at large. *Sarvodaya* seeks to build a new society on the foundations of old spiritual and moral values of East and West and attempts to pass on the values of the past

to the present generation. It is a society directed towards the integral welfare of all living beings. It is through *Sarvodaya*, Gandhi strives for the establishment of a new socio-politico-economic order that aims at the integrated welfare of the whole person and every person.

The greatest good for all living beings is the goal of *Sarvodaya*. It aims at the integral liberation of every individual. The goal of *Sarvodaya* is not the suppression or liquidation of an individual or a group but the triumph of truth that is victory of the oppressor and the oppressed, the exploiter and exploited. A votary of *Sarvodaya* dedicates his/her whole life for the greatest good to one and all even at the cost of his/her life. Gandhi's liberated society defends and stands for the dignity and the rights of every human person. While rejecting the principles of the greatest good of the greatest number, it upholds the maximum welfare of every individual on the basis of sharing goods and services regardless of one's own contribution. By providing sufficient opportunities to every individual for their personal initiatives and capacities *Sarvodaya* aims at the total and integral development of every individual in the human society. Gandhi states: "I want to save time and labour, not for a section of mankind, but for all; I want the concentration of wealth not in the hands of a few, but in the hands of all." No individual or group will be left out suppressed in the *Sarvodaya* society. Gandhi firmly believed that the individual has to work for the welfare of all. There is no growth of the individual without the growth of the society and vice-versa. Both are inter-related. Further he advocates economic equality in the sense that both intellectual work and bodily work are equal in status. He also advocates dignity of labor

Gandhi firmly believed that economic equality is the master key to removal of conflict. Working for economic equality means abolishing the eternal conflict between capital and labour. It means levelling down of the few rich in whose hands is concentrated the bulk of the nation's wealth, on the one hand; and the levelling up of the semi starved naked millions, on the other. A nonviolent system of government is clearly an impossibility so long as the wide gulf between the rich and the hungry millions persists. Promotion of altruism to the highest degree; integration of the individual with society; lifting the whole human society to the highest level of existence where love and fair play will have the most crucial roles to play; are the most predominant characteristics of the *Sarvodaya* ideal." *Sarvodaya* then is the application of the principle of nonviolence in the transformation of societies: from their present forms which are mostly exploitative and disfavour the most disadvantaged, towards more balanced, inclusive and equalitarian forms in which there is Social Justice for All. Thus Gandhian concept of *Sarvodaya* advocates a casteless society in the social realm, in politics it shares a democratic vision of the power of the people, in economics it promotes the belief that small is beautiful and in religion it asks for tolerance for all faiths and its final goal is to promote peace for all mankind. Gandhi's political ideologies, strongly anchored in humanitarian values, were a reflection of his spiritual self. His personal life moulded to a great extent his political strategies, with which he steered Indian on the path to freedom. For Gandhi, politics was not an exclusive category, but it was very much a part of one's holistic spiritual approach towards life in general. Therefore politics could not be divorced from social factors. To Gandhi, social emancipation was as critical as political emancipation. Gandhi throughout his life waged a crusade for the upliftment of the

socially downtrodden, making significant contributions for the enhancement of the status of women in India. Contrary to what is generally believed, Gandhi was neither an uncritical traditionalist nor a dogmatic opponent of all aspects of modernity and he firmly believed that tradition and reform must go hand in hand. Because any reform according to Gandhi must be based on moral and spiritual values that tradition offers. Without these values, a reform will be directionless and loses its meaning.

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**Synopsis**

**GANDHI ON TRADITION AND REFORMATION:  
A CRITICAL APPRAISAL**

**Synopsis submitted to the University of Hyderabad in  
fulfillment of the requirement for the award of the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy**

**By**

**G. LAKSHMI PRASAD**



**Department of Philosophy  
School of Humanities  
University of Hyderabad  
Hyderabad – 500 046  
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Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi is widely recognized as one of the most original and influential political thinkers and activists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Of all the great figures of the twentieth century, he perhaps stood the test of time. In the aftermath of a century of unprecedented mass violence, many see Gandhian Philosophy of non-violence is the only possible future for mankind, a future without hatred, greed and lust for power. Interest in his thought and an action, far from diminishing, is on the rise and his message to the world appears uniquely relevant.

Gandhi never wrote a comprehensive and systematic political or philosophical work in the mode of Thomas Hobbes or Hegel, and the pamphlets and books he did write are extremely diverse in topic: they include criticisms of modern civilisation, the place of religion in human life, the meaning of non-violence, social and economic programmes and even health issues. These works are constructed upon a series of concepts (*satyagraha*, *swaraj*, *sarvodaya*) which Gandhi elaborates into thematic strands. Gandhi combined political activity with social reform. As early as *Hind Swaraj*, he insisted that merely getting independence from the British is not enough. He stressed the need for social reform. Without the latter, the former, he argued is not enough. Social reform includes eradication of poverty, and untouchables by highlighting values such as truth, non-violence etc. All these according to Gandhi must be undertaken simultaneously. He also celebrated manual labour, traditionally despised by the upper castes. This was to lead to the rehabilitation of village level cottage industries, which alone would remove seasonal unemployment and reduce rural poverty. These socio-economic priorities together with the abolition of untouchability are the priorities Gandhi envisaged. More

than claiming whether he is for the modern or for the tradition, he was more interested in ending the exploitation of the masses. Further, rather than envisaging an unrealistic Utopia, he insisted on social reform that proceeds gradually. He displayed unhesitating courage in opposing authority of the tradition, wherever they are not consistent with his core beliefs. At the same time he did admit his limitations and even defects. He continuously experimented and changed wherever he was convinced. Gandhi is usually branded as a forceful critic of modernity which made many to see him as proposing a return to past. But he was not a religious fundamentalist or a cultural revivalist like many critics of modernity. The reformist element, the idea of a tradition, at times explicit and at other times implicit in Gandhi is the debate in this thesis.

Gandhi was neither an uncritical traditionalist nor a dogmatic opponent of all aspects of modernity. The way he drew upon tradition in formulating his worldview was creative and owed much to his exposure to western values and institutions. He consistently claimed to be a *sanatan* Hindu, but rejected the authority of even the scriptures on particular issues if tradition offended reason or morality. He wrote in 1921, "I do not believe in the exclusive divinity of the Vedas. I decline to be bound by any interpretation, however learned it may be, if it is repugnant to reason or moral sense".<sup>1</sup>

This thesis, since it is a study on Gandhi's concept of tradition and reform, we need to spell out what constitutes his conception of tradition. The first chapter is on Gandhi on Tradition and Modernity which seeks to show that his conception of tradition includes reforms. For Gandhi, the two cannot be isolated because tradition is not a static

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<sup>1</sup> Gandhi, M.K., Collected Works, New Delhi: Publications Division. Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Gov. of India, 1958. Vol. XXI. p.246.

concept and thus the idea of reform is built into the very conception of reform. From this perspective, we find the corpus of Gandhian tradition consists of the following components. They are:

1. Truth, Non-violence and *Satyagraha*
2. The problem of untouchability
3. Empowerment of women
4. *Sarvodaya*

We will present a brief resume of the above topics in order to have an idea of the corpus of Gandhian tradition.

First *Satyagraha* is the basic governing principle which as Gandhi insists a tradition must accept in order to attain its goal like human freedom and social welfare. *Satyagraha*, for Gandhi is essentially a means in pursuit of truth - a pursuit which is carried out without resorting to violence, hatred or animosity. *Satyagraha* should not be viewed as implying passivity, weakness or helplessness. It is not even be mistaken a strategy. It is, on the other hand, an attitude of mind and a way of life based on just causes. A way of life means a form of practice which is directed towards the constant search for truth and to fight against untruth. But this fight must be nonviolent. The search for truth cannot be guided by violent method. *Satyagraha* thus essentially has a moral and spiritual meaning. It is in this sense that Gandhi considers Indian freedom struggle a *Satyagraha*. It is a moral or spiritual struggle against political and economic domination which implies denial of truth. The reason is the colonial power in order to rule India takes the means of falsehood and manipulation. The struggle for freedom thus does not mean only to attain political and economic freedom but more importantly it is an upliftment of

human conscience that lends to the nonviolent battle for the victory of truth. *Satyagraha*, in this sense is an universal ideology – a world-view which that takes into account of all aspects of human existence and thus seeks to solve political, social, economic as well as religious problems of the society.

It is with this view the second chapter of this thesis seeks to explore Gandhi's idea of tradition and reform in the light of his philosophy of *Satyagraha*. It is truth and a nonviolent search for truth that must characterize a tradition. As said earlier, tradition is not a static concept – a body of unalterable truths. Hence the idea of reform is built into the very corpus of tradition. Reform is to be understood as search for truth in nonviolent terms. A tradition needs reform when it is found that there are certain existing practices in a society which lead to evil and falsehood. One has to fight against these practices in order to adhere to truth. But this fight, as Gandhi insists in no uncertain terms must be nonviolent because it is only through nonviolent means that truth can be attained. It is in the light of *Satyagraha* that Gandhi takes the issue of untouchability and the role of women in our society. The next two chapters of the thesis are devoted to the discussion of these two issues within the programme of *Satyagraha*. *Satyagraha* is not just an abstract moral or spiritual thinking. It is also a programme – a scheme for action towards attaining truth.

Gandhi's critique of untouchability unmistakably points out his deep concern for bringing changes in tradition to make it more humane and rational. For Gandhi, untouchability is a crime against God and man. Gandhi makes upper caste hindus

responsible for the suffering of the untouchables. The issue of untouchability as Gandhi argues is not separate from the ideal of *Swaraj*. As Gandhi boldly proclaims Hindus have no right to claim *Swaraj* unless exploited classes get freedom from social bondage perpetuated by our inhuman caste system.

Gandhi believed that *varnashrama* and the caste system in ancient India had a constructive role to play. It helped to integrate the different ethnic groups under Hindu society. Further, it gave rise to a practicable system of social division of labour. But subsequently the caste system became oppressive and exploitative. This is where Gandhi brings his modern ideas of truth, justice, equality dignity of the individual etc., to the very corpus of traditional values. In view of this he urges people to see or to realize the inhuman and irrational nature of caste system. Gandhi is convinced that unless people realize this, untouchability cannot be removed by force or law. This forms the content of the third chapter.

The other area that exhibits Gandhi's deep concern and involvement with changing of tradition is the role of women in our society. The fourth chapter is on empowerment of women which forms the major part of his interpretation of *Swaraj*. Gandhi's idea of society is one which is based on justice, peace and equality. In order to achieve these three cardinal principles it is necessary to give equal status to both men and women since they function as two pillars of the society. Gender equality thus forms the basis of peace and development of society. In order to put women on the same footing as men, Gandhi advocated various measures. In economic terms, Gandhi says that there should be complete equality between men and women with respect to inheritance and

property. As he argues, depriving women from family property is the main cause leading to male domination. At social and cultural level, Gandhi was against *pardah* system. He denounced it as a barbarous custom. He, like other social reformers was against child marriage and was vocal about widow marriage. Gandhi branded dowry system as social evil – a hateful practice. All this according to Gandhi is primarily due to lack a education among women. As a remedy he strongly advocated compulsory education for women.

Gandhi at one level retains the traditional role of women and at another level he attacks some of the customs tradition ascribes to women. These customs degrade women's existence as human beings. Gandhi says that prostitution is one of such practices which for him is a social disease. Gandhi, while commenting on Devadasi tradition, says "it is good to swim in the waters of tradition but to sink in them is suicide". Here we find how Gandhi in a very significant way unites tradition with modern ideas in order to save tradition collapsing into degeneration.

Finally, the fifth chapter is on Gandhi's idea of *Sarvodaya*. It is a concept which stands for a holistic development of man and society. In the context of our present study, his philosophy of *Sarvodaya* has a special significance. It is a concept which successfully unites Gandhi's idea of tradition and reform. The term '*Sarvodaya*' articulates his vision of Indian society and the way the transformation can be brought in the light of this vision. It is a spiritual and moral approach to the problems of mankind. As Gandhi claims, it is not a new approach that he is offering; it is on the other hand rooted in the ancient Indian thinking. It is not only stand for the welfare of all but

visualizes a world order based on equality. The merger of one in all is based on self-sacrifice and selfless service.

Gandhi's idea of *Sarvodaya* makes it absolutely clear that *Swaraj* cannot be identified only with political power and economic prosperity. As Gandhi thinks even if India gets free and achieves economic prosperity it would still not a real *Swaraj*. Real *Swaraj*, for Gandhi, means not only political power and economic prosperity but more importantly it means a certain moral development among people. A man who is having a moral life can alone have this attitude. He is the man, as he puts it, "does not cheat anyone, does not forsake truth and does his duty."

The thesis seeks to show that Tradition and Modernity are not contradictory or exclusive. They are merely two different classes of things which can however interact beneficially. Tradition is still very often considered as a "thing of the past" without any contemporary legitimacy, and modernity is often mistakenly considered as modernism. "Tradition" and "modernity" are widely used as polar opposites in a linear theory of social change. It is incorrect to view traditional societies as static, normatively consistent, or structurally homogeneous. The relations between the traditional and the modern do not necessarily involve displacement, conflict, or exclusiveness. Modernity does not necessarily weaken tradition. Both tradition and modernity form the bases of ideologies and movements in which the polar opposites are converted into aspirations of the people. In Gandhi's world-view tradition and reform must go hand in hand because any reform must be based on moral and spiritual values that tradition offers. Without

these values, a reform will be directionless – it will lose its meaning. Tradition in this sense is indispensable to reform.