

An Integral Approach to Gandhian Thought

Dr. Maikal

*P.G.Deptt. of Gandhian Thought
T.M. Bhagalpur University, Bhagalpur
Email- drmaikalbh@gmail. com*

Abstract

Gandhi is perhaps a much more complex personality to analyse and understand; a freedom-fighter, a statesman, a social reformer, a leader with definite economic and political programmes. A great unifier and above all a saintly and spiritual individual- all in one. If Gandhi baffled his contemporaries, the later writers have in no way been less dazzled by his multi-dimensional personality. Even in his life-time Gandhi had both admirers and critics, and a modern writer, claiming to be objective and scientific in his approach to the study of Gandhi's life and thought, may raise serious doubts with regard to many of his actions. Gandhi was not revivalist but he laid great emphasis on tradition, Gandhi was system-maintainer, attacking only what was wrong in the system, and it has rightly been pointed out that his charisma was based on the means he adopted.

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Dr. Maikal,

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Introduction

Toynbee has classed Lenin and Gandhi together as “two of the greatest figures of the twentieth century”¹ Gandhi is perhaps a much more complex personality to analyse and understand; a freedom-fighter, a statesman, a social reformer, a leader with definite economic and political programmes. A great unifier and above all a saintly and spiritual individual- all in one.² If Gandhi baffled his contemporaries, the later writers have in no way been less dazzled by his multi-dimensional personality. Even in his life-time Gandhi had both admirers and critics, and a modern writer, claiming to be objective and scientific in his approach to the study of Gandhi’s life and thought, may raise serious doubts with regard to many of his actions. Never the less, it is unanimously accepted that his was a charismatic personality exercising a bewitching effect on the masses,³ So much so that he came to be regarded by many as an avatar, and incarnation of God, who had descended on earth to fulfil a great task. Gandhi was not revivalist but he laid great emphasis on tradition, Gandhi was system-maintainer, attacking only what was wrong in the system, and it has rightly been pointed out that his charisma was based on the means he adopted.⁴

But, in order to understand properly the charisma of Gandhi and its unique character, it is necessary to know Gandhi’s worldview, his general philosophy of life which prompted him to act in his own peculiar manner. Gandhi came to be called Mahatma, a realized soul; Toynbee has spoken of him as a “Hindu statesman-saint”⁵ These adjectival terms are very meaningful for an understanding of Gandhi’s thought and action. From his very childhood Gandhi had made Truth the guideline of his actions so much so that his life became just a “A story of experiments with Truth”. He said that morality is the basis of everything. Ahimsa or non-violence, according to Gandhi, was naturally from Truth and, thus truth and Ahimsa combined together may be said to be the touch-stone on which Gandhi would want to test all his action. His conscience derived inspiration from here, enabling him to transcend all narrow discriminations and exhibit a sense of identification with humanity as a whole. Godliness, he believed, is just another name of service to the fellow-beings in misery.

Gandhi was born in Hinduism and he was proud of it. He believed in the Hindu scriptures and very often sought justification for his views and action in them. But he knew more than anybody else that Hinduism was not a creed or dogma⁶ but a response of the whole being to the call of God, who could be substituted by Truth. Truth and non-violence to him were “as old as hills” and anyone acting in accordance with these, he believed, could be acting like a true Hindu. Thus, Gandhi followed Hinduism in its spirit and was different from the traders in the wake of religion.

Gandhi’s religion did not hamper his rationality or close his mind from imbibing ideas from extraneous sources. As he had read the Hindu scriptures, he had also

read the quran and the Bible and was particularly impressed by the 'sermon on the Mount'. The Russian novelist, Tolstoy, had profoundly influenced him. Ruskin and Thoreau are other thinkers of the West from whom he appears to have derived some of his ideas. He thus, had a very broad outlook and then, above all, he prized rationality very much. He would not mind even rejecting the scriptures if they preached irrational things. Thus, on the question of untouchability he said; "Untouchability is not a sanction of religion, it is a device of satan. The devil has always quoted scriptures. But scriptures cannot transcend reason and truth."⁷ It is clear that Gandhi was not in favour of blindly following the letters of the scriptures and, rejecting all claims of priesthood, even reserved the right of interpreting them himself. It is attitude which made him a rebel child of Hinduism, and by constant attacks on the evils of orthodox Hinduism he made for himself a place in the line of Buddha, Mahavira and the saints of medieval India, who had done by the same earlier.

Gandhi wanted to kill the diseases of Hinduism without disturbing its basic fabric or abandoning it altogether. This is clear from his attitude towards the problems of untouchability. Whereas Ambedkar had no hope for the untouchable within the fold of Hinduism and wanted them to dissociate from it completely. Gandhi sought to solve the problem from within, and put a check on the secessionist tendency. Gandhi said that I cannot tolerate untouchability the high-and-low belief.⁸ He made all efforts to avoid brewing up by any breach between the untouchables and other classes of Hinduism. So that there is not left any misunderstanding, he called himself a Sanatani i.e. an orthodox Hindu⁹ and tried to convince the orthodox Hindus that untouchability had sanction of the Shastras. He wanted to achieve the end through the change of heart. "If fifth of untouchability is not swept away", he said, "it will devour Hinduism. In order to achieve this it is necessary to bring about a change of heart among the countless Hindu".

Gandhi was a pragmatic visionary. He never compromised with ideal of truth and non-violence. But, on occasions he changed his position for practical purposes. This sometimes lends an appearance of contradiction and inconsistency in his activities. But, "The fact that he often seemed to move in zig-zags does not alter the further fact that he moved overall in a definite direction towards an impersonal goal".¹⁰ Gandhi himself explained it in this way; "In my opinion, there is a consistency running through my seeming inconsistencies. As in nature there is unity running through seeming diversity."¹¹ Even one of his disciples once explained to him, "you say one thing last week, and something quite different this week?" "An", Gandhi replied, "because I have learned something since last week"¹²

Gandhi is a man who is always prepared to confess his shortcomings and by his confessions he rises in stature. He said of him; "I cannot discard my

leadership... I have become integral part of the nation; it has to keep me with all my faults and shortcomings”

Search for peace

The present century is the flowering era of peace societies. Till then, peace had been an ideal preached individuals and religious groups. Now it is taken up by organization specially formed promote and encourage peace.

Nearly two-thirds of the humanity today lack the daily food. Food is the basis of life and without it there cannot be any peace and progress on the earth. Neither individual morality, nor that of the society could take root and thrive on an empty stomach. But daily food is ultimately attainable for all, and that can really enable them to learn, to live together in true human dignity worthy of their Divine origin.

But hunger and hatred exploitation and sissension are today becoming more prevalent than at any time the post. Gandhi's pregnant saying that there is enough in this world for everybody's greed has yat to be grasped and made the key to this country's holistic development. Hunger and war can be abolished, if only men understood themselves and put themselves in right relationship with men, property and ideas, and worked peace and goodwill on earth.

Attempts for the abandonment of wars and establishment of peace are also found history. Gautama Buddha prached the message of 'Ahimsa' and compassion. Ashoka, one of the greatest emperors, had followed the Budhd's teachings in giving up wars, tread the path of peace, though only after being vexed with the carriage, which the kalinga war had brought about. Jesus Christ, whom the Christians worship as the saviou and Lord, is described as the prince of peace. He has lived and preached the message of love, forgiveness, and peace. In contemporary times, Gandhi has relentlessly voiced the efficacy of non-violence as against violence.

The way of world peace lies in cultivating the spirit of non-violence and peace in the hearts of men. As the individuals are built, so the nation is built And as the nation are built. There is not one law for the atom and another for the universe.

The choice before us is not between non-violence and violence, but it is between non-violence and non-existence. Hence, the world is fast moving into an era of non-violence. We need a non- violent social revolution, a restructuring of the present order on the basis of non- violence. Gandhi declared, “non-violence has come to mean and will remain; it is the annunciation of peace on earth.”

Let us consider the Gandhian approach to the establishment of peace in the background of what is stated above. It is welland wars. He was forever an advocate of non-violence and peace. Gandhi's exposition, clarification, and forceful advocacy of non- violence are unique.

Here we shall be mainly concerned with the Gandhian way of achieving peace without being occupied with his exposition of non-violence, which is quite familiar. The Gandhian way peace springs from the basis concept of non-violence. War is said to be a way of ending wars. As a matter of fact the second world War was fought by the Allies with a view to end all wars. Gandhi is of the firm opinion that war can never end war. Violence breeds only violence but can never end war. War is destructive whereas peace is Further, violence being destructive, is a negative process, whereas peace, being constructive, is a positive process. Peace is a positive force of cementing people. War which is a destroying and divisive force can never contribute to the establishment of peace. Hence the search for peace should be in the way of non-violence alone. What Napoleon had said to the Emperor of Austria in a personal appeal after a fierce battle is worthy of note:

“Thousands of Frenchmen and Austrians have been killed. The prospect of continuance of such horrors distresses me so greatly that I make a personal appeal to you. Amid grief and surrounded by 15,000 corpses, I implore you Majesty, I feel bound to give you an urgent warning. Let us give our generation peace and tranquility. If the men of latter days are such fools as to come to blows, they will learn wisdom after a few years of fighting and will then live peace with one another.”

Napoleon had sent this appeal for peace at the height of his glory and success. He saw the futility of war to end hostilities and appealed for peace. Napoleon subscribed to the Gandhian view, when he said, “there are only two powers in the world, those powers are the spirit and the sword. In the long run the sword will always be conquered by the spirit.”

Can we see any light in the search for peace? The Gandhian answer is in terms of hope born out of conviction in the efficacy of love. His plan of peace was through stepping stones. It is a profound error to suppose that whilst the law is good enough for individuals it is not for the masses of mankind. Individuals and small groups should cultivate the habit of living in peace at lower levels and among small groups, and it would eventually lead to peaceful living at higher levels and finally at the international level. Gandhi, in adopting non-violent means to get swaraj for India, aimed at achieving international peace for doing so. He said, “I suggest to the friends of peace for the world, that the Congress in 1920 took a tremendous step towards peace when it declared that would attain her own, namely swaraj, by non-violent and truthful means. And I am positive that, if we unflinchingly adhere to these means in the pursuit of our goal, we shall have made the largest contribution to the world peace.”

According to Gandhi there are certain conditions which are conducive for international peace. They are: (1) All nations should be independent (2) The equality

of all nations should be reconhnised, and (3) Disarmament should be accepted by the nation both in principle and their practice.

Today, we live in a violent world. But man fundamentally desires peace. It is recognized by all that no positive civilisation, no just social order or stable peace can flow from violence, war and resression. A true social orded must be based upon persuasion, conviction and positive will to cooperation and fellowship among men. These are only bonds which can hold society together with any permanence and to any real advantage, But because of the difference in world outlook, thinkers, statesmen and politiciaians differ as to the effective way of establishing just and lasting peace. Gandhi made singular contribution to the cause of world peace and his views therefore demand close scrutiny.

Gandhi has often been described as an apostle pf peace. Certainly he was. He strove and died for peace. He advocated “ peace- but not at any price”, for his philosophy which was a philosophy of commitment- it was based upon the concept of moral responsibility, as well, not that of “peace at any price” which underlay his ethic of intention.

Gandhi’s philosophy of peace is ti be sharply distinguished from the conservation plea for peace at any cost which is in essence a peace for the maintenance of status quo. Peace he advocated, in integrally related to justice. As Gandhi wrote: “peace must be just.” People is not mere cessation of hostilities. Gandhi did not share the diplomatic view of peace.

Conclusion

Gandhiji believed in the unity of human life, which is a synthetic whole. It cannot be divided into separate, watertight compartments- religious, moral, political, economic, social individual and collective. All the seemingly separate segments are but different facets of man’s life. They act and react upon one another. In reality, there can be no problems that are purely moral, economic, political, social individual or collective. They are inextricably intertwined.

Gandhiji thought then must be judged and evaluated on its own merits and not always on Gandhiji arguments, The student must not content himself with Gandhiji’s reasoning and style or the words and the expression he used. Like every great reformer his thought is great than his words and arguments. Often his conduct is more revealing and eloquent than the arguments he advances for a particular course of action. In studying him, therefore, note must be taken note only of the spoken or written word but also of his life, the way he faced and met critical situation, organized institution and be havd towards friends and opponents. His public and private life were an open book. Therefore, his writings must be studied along with it. The writings alone may not bring out the full implication of his philosophy of life, individual and

social. Further, The student must rely on his own intelligence, knowledge and experience for a proper understanding of Gandhiji's ideas, policies and programmes.

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