

GANDHI'S PURUSHARTHA: A NON-WESTERN FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING HUMAN NATURE

Dr. Vijay Chauhan
Assistant Professor
Department of Political Science
Maharana Pratap National College,
Mullana, Ambala
Email: drvijaympn@gmail.com

Abstract

Political theory which does not start from a theory of human nature tends to become either pretentious or trivial. A human being, unlike an animal, can formulate and articulate his intention to act for his own benefit or for the good of others, according to his own conception of himself in relation to others as well as his view of the world around him and his expectation of an order of events in the future. Any Political and social philosophy involves a search for "a definition of man" and the major political thinkers differ in the account they give of the power essential to men.¹ This research exercise will try to explore how human nature has been the basis of various social and political theories and what is the fundamental difference between the theories of the West and the East regarding human nature? In this research we will also try to explore what Gandhiji understood about human nature before formulating his principles.

Keywords

Human Nature, Political Theory, Humanity, Individualism

Reference to this paper should
be made as follows:

Received: 31/07/25
Approved: 10/08/25

Dr. Vijay Chauhan

*GANDHI'S PURUSHARTHA: A NON-
WESTERN FRAMEWORK FOR
UNDERSTANDING HUMAN NATURE*

Article No.31

RJPSS Apr.25-Sept.25, 2025
Vol. L No. 2, Pg. 237-243

Similarity Check - 07%

Online available at:

[https://anubooks.com/journal-
volume/rjps-2025-vol-l-no-2-sept](https://anubooks.com/journal-volume/rjps-2025-vol-l-no-2-sept)

[https://doi.org/10.31995/
rjps.2025.v50i02.031](https://doi.org/10.31995/rjps.2025.v50i02.031)

Introduction

What is man? How does he form society? What are his racial traits? There is still disagreement among philosophers on these complicated issues. These issues are important because the answers will determine how society should be viewed. Given that human connections shape society, considering their nature is a crucial aspect of its understanding. The concept of human nature we follow also determines what we will consider the purpose of our life, what kind of humanity we will imagine and what kind of social change we will work for.² In order to comprehend society, it is necessary to comprehend why we begin by comprehending human nature. Regarding this relationship, there are various kinds of models. According to one of them, society is made up of individuals, thus in order to comprehend society, one must first comprehend man; that is, one must comprehend the character and behaviour of man in order to comprehend the reality of society. The most influential proponents of this concept were the Social Contract theorists, including Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. Using the explanation of human nature as a foundation, all three philosophers developed conceptions of society and state. This theory's proponent, Karl Popper, asserts that human nature and behaviour can be used to explain any social event. Individuals should be the basis for defining social institutions, not a collection of individuals. The establishment and operation of social institutions are also determined by the choices made by individuals. Since social institutions represent the abstract representation of human nature, their interpretation must also take into account the actions of those who participate in them.³ This is a kind of individualistic interpretation of social events and systems. You must have seen written on the walls of many cities of India that 'Aap Badlo, Jag Badlega'. The philosophy behind such slogans is that man is the basic unit of society and to understand and change society, we have to understand and change man. It is not that this understanding is completely baseless. Generally, it seems correct to common sense that if society is made up of a group of individuals, then it is necessary to understand the individual to understand society. But the problem with this understanding is that man is born into a kind of society and his behavior cannot be completely independent of society. In such a situation, how can society be interpreted without accepting its independent existence. Take the caste system for example. If man is born in castes, then how can his nature be understood apart from his social context. This clearly means that we will have to have a different understanding of the philosophy of society, it is not enough to accept that society is just a group of humans.

The purpose of this research work here is not to discuss different perspectives regarding the relationship between society and man, but to emphasize that whatever

the model, we cannot talk about society without talking about human nature. There are two arguments in favor of this. First, if man is the ultimate unit of society and his behavior has an impact on the system of society, then it is important to understand his nature. It is a different matter that it would not be right to say that we can explain all the processes and structures of society with some understanding of human nature. Man, social structures and this web of relations all altogether form society. The second argument is that even the actual behavior of abstract institutions is greatly influenced by the personality of the person involved in it.⁴

In actuality, the individuals who participate in institutions also influence their nature. For instance, even without altering a nation's constitution, the head of state's legal authority, etc., a change in leadership can have a significant impact. How could someone like Gandhi have been so influential in the Indian liberation movement that the government was forced to submit to him? Gandhi had no official political authority after independence, but the state's top brass would consult him for guidance. Alternatively, the same powerful individual experienced a period of powerlessness. This proves that there is a complex relationship between a person and society, his recognition in society also affects his ability to influence society and this recognition depends on many things.

Understanding of Human Nature in the West:

First of all, let us try to understand the concept of individualism. The most important theory prevalent in the early period of social studies was the theory of social contract, which explains the form of society and state from the concept of human nature. Therefore, many concepts are prevalent in the West about human nature. How a human being transforms into a person, how a person creates a society and then how personality is formed, these topics have been debated a lot by the philosophers of the West. In this, three major thinkers, Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, have their own different views on human nature and the natural state formed on its basis, yet their conclusion is the same that the unit of understanding society and state is man and the formation of both of these is the result of an agreement between humans. According to Hobbes, man is lonely by nature, his tendencies are bestial. Pettiness is a part of his nature and therefore the relationship between humans is full of hatred and animosity. But a solitary life is difficult and insecure for humans, so they also need to live together. The problem is that due to their selfishness and mistrust of other humans, their living together becomes more violent and less safe. Tired of the insecure life of this natural state, an agreement is made between them, the result of which is the state. In this agreement, man becomes social and hence he can be called a person. According to the agreement, the person involved surrenders

all his powers and rights to the state and now the security of the people is the responsibility of the state. The state creates the customs and rules and laws of the society for this purpose. According to this principle, the power of the state is so wide that no part of human life is outside it.

John Locke, another thinker of the social contract, also made human nature the basis of his thinking, but in complete contrast to this, he imagined that human beings are good by nature. Just like that song in a Hindi film in which it is said that 'children are true at heart'. According to Locke, as human beings grow up, new consciousness fills them. They are like a chameleon that keeps changing its colour according to the environment. They also have the ability to live in cooperation, but if the rules and laws in the society are not clear or there is no authority to enforce them, then their mutual disputes start. Then the kind of natural system that Hobbes talks about comes into being and people develop distrust towards each other, there is conflict, their life, their property, everything comes under threat. According to Locke, to get out of this crisis, human beings consider it necessary to establish a separate power and make a social agreement. According to Locke, before the establishment of this power, people make a constitution through which this power is exercised. Like Hobbes and Locke, Rousseau also considered it necessary to understand human nature to understand society and the state. The difference was that Rousseau did not agree with Hobbes' understanding at all. He believed that in the natural state, man is a simple creature who does not understand morality or sociality but has ordinary goodness. In the course of the development of civilization, his innocence disappears and then he is filled with deceit or selfishness.⁵ He always remembers his goodness which he loses in the development of so-called civilization. There is a similarity among all these three of these theories. Firstly, according to them, the source of power of the state is mutual agreement and not any divine power. Second, the unit of analysis for understanding society and the state is man, therefore it is important to understand the nature of man.

Gandhian Understanding of Human Nature

How to comprehend Indian society was a major concern for Indian intellectuals during the nation's independence movement. A certain type of social studies was unquestionably required to forward a national movement, just as a foreign power required knowledge of society to administer its authority. Are these two types of social studies different in any way? If we attempt to examine the ideas of Gandhi, Tagore, Nehru, and Ambedkar from a sociological standpoint, the differences will become clear. They had also created an image of Indian civilisation that was both universal and particular. It is astonishing that the ideological accomplishments

of these intellectuals have not yet been adequately incorporated into the understanding of Indian society by scholars. For instance, social studies classes study Rabindranath Tagore's views on nationalism and his works on religion, but they do not comprehend how he came up with his theories. He made it apparent in his Oxford University lecture that the Baul singers' philosophy served as the foundation for his ideas. After all, his poetry, stories, and novels—all of which are based on this philosophy—must have some knowledge of society and humanity.⁶

To take this understanding further, here we only want to find the facts in Gandhi's thoughts through which he tried to understand the society. Gandhi met Fredrick Pickett while trying to practise law in South Africa. Gandhi sought his counsel on how to become an effective lawyer. Gandhi's counsel that "it is most important for a lawyer to understand human nature so that he can understand the character of a person just by looking at his face" was the first item that deeply affected Gandhi. Then Gandhi studied many books for this." It is difficult to say how much Gandhi must have learned about human nature from these books, but it is certain that this question became an important question for him and Gandhi kept searching for the answer to this question till his last days. In this context, Gandhi's critique of modern politics, society, and especially societal and individual ethics is based on his beliefs about human nature and perfectibility. He started out with an unwavering faith in the basic nature of man, what he is and becomes when he has a skewed conception of himself, what he should be and may become, and how he fits into a law-governed universe. Understanding human psychology thoroughly is a prerequisite for any political or social theory, at least in terms of how individuals behave and what their moral objectives are in society. He said again and again that human nature will only come to terms with the fact that it must be vicious or beastly in order to be human. "A fairly accurate student of human nature and vivisector of my own failings," he declared in 1921. I have learnt that man is better than the system he advocates. He stated in his autobiography that man is man because he is capable of exercising self-control, and that a brute by nature lacks this ability. He claims elsewhere that what sets humans apart from animals is the obligation to renounce. The degree to which a man strives for the well-being of his followers is precisely the measure of his greatness. Men differ from one another only in degree and not in kind. Maybe we were all brutes at first. I am prepared to believe that we have become men by a slow process of evolution from the brute." Gandhi was more Victorian than Hindu in the degree that his ideas were Darwinian. Once more, "Man must choose between the upward and downward courses, but because he is a brute, he will choose the downward course more readily than the upward, especially

when the downward course is offered to him in a beautiful garment.” Every man has the “downward distinct” in him. Gandhi asserted that since violence is the law of the brute, non-violence is the law of our species and that he was a pragmatic idealist rather than a visionary. “The brute’s spirit is dormant, and he is only aware of the rule of physical might. Obedience to a higher law—the strength of the spirit—is necessary for maintaining human dignity. A guy can no longer be violent once he awakens to his inner essence. Man and the brute are fundamentally different in that the former can respond to the call of the spirit within him, rise above the passions that he shares with the brute, and thus rise above violence and selfishness, which are characteristics of brute nature rather than the immortal spirit of man. This is the core idea of Hinduism, which attributes the realisation of this truth to years of hardship and penance.

In this context, it is natural to agree that the discussion on *Purushartha* has been at the center of Gandhi’s thoughts regarding human nature. He believes that the principle of *Purushartha* is the basic principle for understanding the entire Indian civilization. He had made this discussion the basis of his Swaraj thinking for freedom from colonial domination. It is crucial to recognise that the foundation of the Indian knowledge tradition is the idea of *Purushartha* and *Vikar*. Indian intellectuals have a long history of using this foundation to theorise on morality, society, etc. ‘Mahabharata’ and ‘Ramayana’, for instance, are morally based on this premise. ‘Panchatantra’ and ‘Arthashastra’ are hard to comprehend without this principle. Gandhi was able to see that the idea of *Purushartha* is ingrained in Indian civilisation as a whole.

Gandhi therefore proposed that purushartha is what sets humans apart from other animals in the Discourse on the Gita. It provides us with our unique selling points. “Our only right is to *purushartha*. We can only strive and work. All human beings, and animals too, struggle. The only difference is that we believe that behind our struggle there is an intelligent purpose. That purpose seeks much more than bodily material well-being; it seeks moral and spiritual well-being as well. We seek to transcend our mere bodily condition; we strive even to surpass ourselves. We can achieve all this if we pursue our *purushartha*. Only effort aimed at the welfare of the atman can be described as *purushartha*.... All else is futile expenditure of energy.”⁷ He was even more interested in understanding how the four *purushartha*s interacted with one another: The conceptual framework of his entire political philosophy is based on his understanding of their interaction inter se.

Generally, there is a perception about the four *Purushartha*- *Artha*, *Kama*, *Dharma* and *Moksha* - that there is a kind of hierarchy among them. At the top is

Moksha, which is the most important goal of man, all the rest are below it and are ways to achieve this greatest goal but Gandhi did not believe so.⁸ According to him, these four should be kept at the same level and all of them are important for a successful life of man; there is a need to create a coordination between all of them. And that is why politics for Gandhi is not a separate discipline. It is a part of life, a part of the art of living. For Gandhi, body, mind, intellect, nature, human relations, food medicine, and almost everything is the subject of political thinking. Spirituality is a necessary condition for Gandhi's politics and the purpose of the concept of *Purushartha* is less idealistic and more analytical. It is a universal concept and not of a particular culture. This is a realistic concept to know about man, about his relationships, about the society arising out of his relationships.

Conclusion

It would not be inappropriate to believe that the reason for the ability to communicate Gandhi's thoughts was Gandhi's grasp of the philosophy and theoretical concepts present in social consciousness and public psyche. If this is true, then this ability of Gandhi needs to be established as an approach to social study and this is the reason why modern political institutions need to be reinterpreted on the basis of the principles and elements present in Indian social consciousness. Not only this, but the concept of *Purushartha* can also be used to create an alternative world of thinking like Gandhi. However, it is also true that Indian political thinking will need to consciously make a larger action plan for an alternative and creative thinking process in accordance with the principle of *Purushartha* in the modern perspective.

References

1. Raghavan, Iyer *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press (2000) Pg. **88- 89**.
2. Leslie Stevenson and David L. Hebraman, *Thirteen Theories of Human Nature*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1998.
3. Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, Taylor & Francis, 2005.
4. Rajiv Bhargava, *Individualism in Social Sciences: Forms and Limits of a Methodology*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press (2008), Pg. **29**.
5. Anthony J Parel, *Pax Gandhian: The Political Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press (2016), Pg. **18**.
6. *Ibid*, Pg. **22**.
7. *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol 32, Pg. **350- 351**.
8. *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol 79, Pg. **258**.