

Gandhian Values as A Way of Life

Ashu Pasricha

Assistant Professor, Department of Gandhian and Peace Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh, India

Abstract

Gandhi was not a philosopher or a theoretician who developed his theories and evolved a system which would give a rational explanation of life and its different facets and, if possible, its ultimate goal. If one wants to understand Gandhi's life and work, one must try to understand his spiritual ideas and ideals in the light of which he conducted his struggles against group injustice and tyranny and carried out his reform programmes. Gandhi's ideas grew and developed as he had to face practical situations and find solutions to problems, which confronted him throughout his life.

His philosophy is best suited for the present day situation and needs to be epitomized among the youth. The Gandhian perspective of a healthy and pious lifestyle may apparently look very mundane but in reality it is very effective and lasting in the long run. The young may instinctively be repulsive to such values but elders, teachers and, above all, parents need to help the youth to imbibe these values.

KEYWORDS: Gandhian values, religious values, way of life, non-possession, truth, non-violence, ends and means

Gandhi was primarily a karmayogi (man of activity), his activity was firmly established on a firm perspective. This perspective, grew in Gandhi's young psyche as an energy for truth, gradually developed into a forceful tree retaining supplements from the best religio-philosophical frameworks on the planet. Grounded on the Advaita-Vedanta Philosophy of unity of such exists, he distinguished a definitive reality with God. Nature, in this manner, isn't an item to be abused, yet it resembles our own body or our own mother that should be dealt with. Human beings, regardless of their race, caste, colour, or gender, are all God's temples, and therefore, deserve equal respect. His social objective was Sarvodaya (the development of all in all facets of life), which is the ascent of all.

The Gandhian maxim of "means are more important than the end" implies that one needs to focus on the means, not merely the achievement of an end at any cost. To reiterate the practice of honest means for the desired end, we need to reinforce the fact that the use of drug or alcohol destroys the very core of our social institution and does not help to lead a successful life. A short cut to achieve pleasure and material gain and escape from the vagaries of life by use of addictives (both addictive substances or digital gadgets) cannot be good means for achieving good ends. To address the malady, Gandhiji suggested, the youth should take into consideration various dimensions of their conduct such as the social, cultural, and religious and they should also make sure that they are meaningfully engaged with the welfare of society. The youth is very vibrant and energetic, dynamic and capable of achieving, provided that they remain on the right track. Hence it is essential for them to use their energies in a positive manner to attain long-term happiness in their life and also contribute to the overall well-being of society.

There can be little doubt that in his personal life Gandhi was a very "God-fearing" and religious man, and implicitly accepted the basic texts of the Hindus like the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita (although true to the Hindu tradition, he regarded the scriptures of other religions like the Bible and the Koran also revealed and sacred texts). He also accepted the law of karma, transmigration of the soul and reincarnation, and even the *varnashrama dharma* or four-fold division of society into the Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. He believed in idol worship of the cow (which he regarded as a symbolic expression of the respect of the Hindu for the principle of life). In fact, he prided himself as a *sanatani* (orthodox) Hindu. He regarded Hinduism as the most tolerant, most non-exclusive, most non-dogmatic and free religion of the world, and religion that offered the greatest scope for individual self-expression. He even went to the extent of saying once: "What of substance is contained in any other religion is always to be found in Hinduism. And what is not contained in it is insubstantial or unnecessary."

Gandhiji has not only forewarned about the consequences of the phenomenon, he has also given alternatives to take care of such a situation. He pleaded for the voluntary reduction of our wants to a genuine level. He said that we should set a limit to our indulgence. According to Gandhiji, material wants dehumanize the individual, who puts a premium on body comforts to acquire all luxuries of life that money can buy and fails miserably in doing so. This is due to man's insatiable greed for earthly material possessions. Gandhiji often said that one has to renounce his cravings and desire the contentment from within. It is said to be *Samthistha* or *Sthitiprajana* that can only help one to dissociate from materialism or hedonism; according to Gandhiji, to accumulate more than is required would be a sort of theft. The youth need to be endowed with values of Samthistha.

In order to satisfy the intellectual aspirations of his time, Gandhi also offered and exposition of religion which he thought was entirely rational. The logic equivalent of supralogical God, the mundane manifestation of the supra-mundane deity, he found in truth. Truth is God, he declared. Truth is Rama, Narayana, Ishwara, Khuda, Allah and God. And since the quest for God is the essence of religion, even the atheism of the sincere atheist is in fact a form of religion. Gandhi claimed that he had disarmed some important critics and "many a young man" with this definition of God. He frequently quoted with favour the Sanskrit proverb, *satyat nasti paro dharma*, that is "there is no religion higher than truth".

Thus truth, referred to by Gandhi as the eternal principle, is the first principle of religion, as explained by him so far as his impersonal (non-autobiographical) thought is concerned. The pursuit of truth, the attempt to realise truth in one's thought and action, is the substance of the religion of man. "Devotion to truth," says Gandhi, "is the sole justification for our existence."

When Gandhi spoke of religion, he was more concerned with religious values than with religious beliefs with the fundamental ethics that he believed to be common to all religions, rather than the formal allegiance to received dogmas that becomes a barrier to religious experience. Religion does not mean sectarianism. It means a belief in "the ordered moral government of the universe." He referred to "the religion which transcends Hinduism, which changes one's very nature, which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and whichever purifies. It is the permanent element in human nature which counts no cost too great in order to find full expression and which leaves the soul utterly restless until it has found itself" It sustains a person as nothing else does. It is

"rock-bottom fundamental morality." When morality incarnates itself in a living man it becomes religion, because it binds, it holds, it sustains him in the hour of trial.

Gandhi was wholly against state religion, even if a country had only one religion. Sectarian, he felt, is a purely personal matter and has no place in politics. A society or a group, which he depends partly or wholly on state aid for existence of religion does not deserve or have any religion worth the name. In reality, there are "as many religions as there are individuals."

Gandhi thought that the saint and the revolutionary are not compatible, although the former is more concerned with his inward integrity and the latter with his outward effectiveness. The saint must not become a self-deceiving escapist who refuses to act, while the revolutionary politician must not become a self-seeking opportunist who is ever ready to sacrifice his declared principles. The true saint must be effective in society, while the true revolutionary must be possessed of the deepest integrity; in the end, the two categories merge into each other. In this way Gandhi upheld what Archbishop Temple called "the error of medieval monasticism." The belief that it is possible to live in society that is altogether at variance with its prevalent moral standards.

Gandhi was, in fact, following in the footsteps of the Buddha in showing the connection between the service of suffering humanity and the process self-purification. He rejected the distinction between the mundane and the ultramundane, the natural and the supernatural. Neither *artha* (politics) nor *moksha* (salvation) could be separated from *dharma* (social and personal morality). He did not merely contend that *artha* must be subordinated to *dharma* in the case of conflict but went further and, as in the Dharmasutra literature, regarded politics as a branch of ethics; did not therefore take his stand on the concept of *rajadharma* (royal duty) in ancient Indian religious literature. Politics is also a means of enforcing and promoting morality, although to be "pure" politics was regarded in classical Hindu political thought as significant only in *satya Yuga*, the Golden Age; in *Kali Yuga* the use of *danda* or legitimate coercion was regarded as unavoidable and could be justified in terms of the recognised obligation of the ruler to preserve the social system and uphold the citizen's performance of his traditional *dharma*.

The interplay of power and moral values is at the center of the problem of politics, but is usually understood solely in terms of moralizing the conduct of the State. Gandhi was, however, far more interested in challenging the conventional view of the nature and domain of politics, in widening the concept of power, and above all, in destroying the dichotomies between private and public morals, religious values and political norms, ethical principles and political expediency. In a materialistic civilization this requires nothing less than an assault on deeply rooted and widely held notions of realism and self-interest, narrowly defined, that flow from the segregation of true religion and power politics.

Gandhiji has talked at length regarding *satwik* food, which definitely takes care of obesity and allied maladies among youth. Though sometimes Gandhiji ate goat meat when he was young, he did not relish it at all and left it for good. He was also averse to cow or buffalo milk so he started goat milk with doctor's advice. Frugal eating behaviour was illustrated throughout his writings and discourses. It was not that he could not afford it, but his purposeful self-denial of a non-vegetarian diet, different hard and soft beverages, was to keep him morally clean and upright. Though the youth of today's generation may not be as austere as Gandhiji used to be, they can

definitely emulate him on many counts regarding habits. Inculcation of Gandhian food habits can protect them from obesity and related ailments.

An economy exists because of two basic facts. Firstly, human wants are unlimited. Although differing degrees of acquisitiveness have been exhibited in different civilizations, it appears indisputable that human wants can be regarded as insatiable. At no time in our society has our economic system had sufficient resources to produce all that would be needed to satisfy everyone. Wants, have been and remain greater than the quantity of goods, available for the satisfaction of these wants. Secondly, means to satisfy wants are limited. The resources of a society consist not only of the free gifts of nature, such as land, forests and minerals, but also of human resources, both mental and physical, and of all sorts of man-made aids to further production, such as tools, machinery and buildings. If the resources like wants were unlimited, no economic problem would have arisen because in that case all wants could have been satisfied and there would have been no problem of choosing between the wants and allocating the resources between them.

Because our wants are unlimited and means to satisfy them are scarce, we can not satisfy our all the wants. We may be able to satisfy one want for all times or all the wants for one time but we cannot satisfy all the wants for all the times. We must decide some way of selecting those wants which are to be satisfied. Thus a society is faced with the question of choice-choice among vast array of wants that are to be satisfied. We know that the resources have alternative uses. If it is decided to use more resources in one line of production, then resources must be withdrawn from the production of some other goods. Because of the scarcity of resources, we are confronted with the problem of choosing among the different channels of production to which resources are to be devoted. In other words, we have the problem of allocating scarce resources so as to achieve the greatest possible satisfaction.

Thus because of the unlimited wants and limited resources human beings strive to get maximum satisfaction from what so ever they have.

However, there is a paradoxical twist in Gandhian method of solving this economic problem of unlimited wants and limited resources. It almost amounts to putting the energy in reverse gears instead of satisfying the maximum wants with limited resources. Gandhi advocated wantlessness. He was of the opinion that wants are the sources of pain. Instead of adding to the sum total of human happiness, wants subtracts from it a good deal. In fact, he thinks that maximization of satisfaction is rather completely inconsistent with the maximization of human wants. A want is a painful experience. This is evident from the fact that we wish to satisfy it and want rid of it as soon as possible. We would not have bothered to remove or satisfy it had it not been painful. So, the removal of a want means removal of pain and procurement of pleasure. And this pleasure is the same thing as satisfaction or utility. If one wants to get maximum pleasure one should see to it that all pain is removed and no fresh pain is experienced in future. At least this is the ideal for anyone who wants to achieve maximum pleasure from his limited resources (Galbraith 1958).

The absolute removal of pain by eliminating wants, seems impossible on the surface. But it is really not as impossible as thought by several scholars. This, of course is true that for a man who has a large number of wants to satisfy and, therefore, a large amount of pain to remove, the task of removing all pain becomes more difficult than for one who has less wants and hence a smaller amount of pain to be rid of. But this does not imply that complete removal of pain is necessarily impossible in each

case. It rather implies a more hopeful state of affairs, that it becomes increasingly possible to remove all pain provided the wants and hence the pain corresponding to them decrease in their number and amount. The less wants we have, the less our pain, and hence the easier task of removing that pain and achieving maximum satisfaction. If therefore, maximum satisfaction is the object behind the behaviour of human being while he makes his choices for satisfying his wants, it would be more fully achieved if his wants are few rather than if they are many. And thus, we are led to the objective of controlling or simplifying wants for the purpose of attaining maximum satisfaction through human behaviour. Now since Economics studies human behaviour as concerned with the maximisation of satisfaction and since maximization of satisfaction is better achieved when wants are at the minimum rather than when they are not. This led Professor J.K. Mehta to define Economics as the study of human behaviour as concerned with the wantlessness. (Mehta 1962: 67)

Professor Mehta further elaborates his thesis that to satisfy a want is to yield to it, as it were. When we satisfy a want we obey the commanding voice of the wanting mind. When we go on satisfying wants as and when they arise all that we do is to pamper the wanting mind. One who yields to such a mind becomes virtually its slave. To remove the pain caused by the presence of wants by satisfying them is, therefore, an undignified way of getting pleasure. Instead of obeying the orders of a want we can ourselves order the want to quit. When we satisfy a want we make it quiet for the time being. When we order it to quit we do not merely make it quiet, we kill it as it were.

The process of killing wants has been called elimination of wants. But wants can be killed only by wants. Hence stronger wants must be employed to kill the weaker and inferior wants. And when such a battle is fought all the inferior wants get ultimately killed and one is left with superior wants only. The better among these can, in their turn be employed to kill the other wants. In this way we can ultimately reach a stage in which only one, the most superior want would be left. It is only when this stage is reached that we can with impunity satisfy the wants. Once satisfied such want never recurs, the pleasure then obtained lasts as it were, forever. The state of happiness is reached—the state in which the mind remains absolutely free from the tormenting pressure of wants. The one final want, the satisfaction of which frees us from all wants, can be called the want of being wantless. By the process of killing or eliminating wants we thus ultimately reach the state of wantlessness—a state in which perfect happiness is experienced. (Gandhi 1962)

Gandhi approached the problem of wantlessness from another angle also. "We should not receive any single thing that we do not need," he wrote in "From Yervada Mandir." We are not always aware of our real needs, and most of us improperly multiply our wants, and thus unconsciously make thieves of ourselves. If we devote some thought to the subject, we shall find that *we* can get rid of quite a number of our wants. One who follows the observance of non-stealing will bring about a progressive reduction of his own wants. Much of the distressing poverty in this world has arisen out of breaches of the principle of non-stealing. He further clarified that the profound truth upon which this observance is based is that God never creates more than what is strictly needed for the moment. Therefore, whoever appropriates more than the minimum, that is really necessary for him, is guilty of theft. (Harijan, November 1948: 271). The propensity to accumulate commodities cramps the soul and degenerates into the morbid desire to make a fetish of external goods of life. The luxury of the ascendant classes, therefore, makes them morally deprived. The monopolization of the things needed by all, by a few men at the top, is unjust. Moreover, accumulation

is condemnable because it is not possible to be practiced by all. Accumulation by a few amounts to the dispossession of the many. Thus, the alternative lies in renunciation. To him, renunciation is life. Accumulation spells death. But he clarified. "This does not mean that, if one has wealth, it should be thrown away and his wife and children should be turned out of doors. It simply means that one must give up attachment to these things and dedicate one's all to God and make use of His gifts to serve Him only" (Ibid., April 1946:111) He advised the moneyed men to earn their crores (honestly only, of course) but asked them to dedicate themselves to the service of all. For those who wish to follow this way, "The best and most effective mantra is" (Enjoy thy wealth by renouncing it). Expanded it means: Earn your crores by all means. But understand that your wealth is not yours; it belongs to the people. Take what you require for your legitimate needs, and use the remainder for society. (Ibid., February 1942: 20)

Thus, it is clear that he offered his doctrine of non-possession as an indictment of one of the most powerful drives in modern economic society; the drive for multiplication of wants, fuelled by an insatiable propensity for superfluous or conspicuous consumption. One may justify such consumption as an essential prerequisite for economic growth. This argument is, of course, based purely on economic grounds. To Gandhi, it was an economic issue as well as a moral issue. To him, Ethics and Economics are inseparable. "I must confess that I do not draw a sharp or any distinction between Ethics and Economics. The Economics that hurt the moral well-being of an individual or nation are immoral and, therefore, sinful." (Young India, October 1921: 325) But he realised that the perfect idea of wantlessness is unattainable because it demands total renunciation. His pragmatic mind would accept something short of perfect realization of the ideal; namely a movement towards it through the process of gradual reduction of wants minimization of consumption.

The doctrine of non-possession, if it implied only voluntary reduction of wants, could be construed as a totally negative doctrine. But Gandhi expounded it as a positive doctrine. According to him, the doctrine of non-possession would teach that even one should limit his own wants and spend the rest for the welfare of others. He considered this as a desirable non-violent method of reducing inequality of income distribution and mal-distribution of wealth. In his own words: "Now let us consider how equal distribution can be brought about through non-violence. The first step towards it, is for him who has made this ideal part of his being to bring about the necessary changes in his personal life. He would reduce his wants to a minimum bearing in mind the poverty of India" (Ibid., August 1940: 260).

He was aware of other means of dealing with these problems of inequality of income distribution and mal-distribution of wealth but he discounted this because of his fear that other methods may include the coercive power of the state. Thus, Gandhi put utmost reliance on the individual and his moral awakening to bring these radical changes in the distribution of income and wealth in the society through wantlessness.

Gandhi's insistence on minimizing wants has been attacked on several ground; 'Necessity is the mother of invention' is an old proverb often heard. It describes the way in which men's wants have brought into existence new wants and then these new wants have created fresh activities and wants, and these in turn have produced more new wants. All the discoveries of new lands, of new material, of new variety of food, clothing and houses, of new machinery, etc. are due to the working out of this proverb. And if the doctrine of wantlessness is followed then all progress will stop leading to

economic stagnation and reversing the circle of human progress.

Again, more than two-third countries of the world are underdeveloped or developing. Majority of people in these countries are living on bare necessities. Their daily needs are hardly fulfilled. And to preach further reduction of wants to these persons is a sin. Their wants are already minimum. For a country like India where nearly 40% of the population is living below poverty line, the doctrine of wantlessness have no meaning. It is rather a mockery to teach them to reduce their wants.

Further, this doctrine may not take the form of Escapism: That we know that all our wants cannot be satisfied. Instead of doing efforts to satisfy those wants, we may not take the shelter of wantlessness. This is against 'The Theory of Karma'. Which teaches us to work tirelessly. Then, the doctrine may be philosophically sound but it is almost impossible to practise it. If attempted to do, it will create several problems.

Thus, it is not necessary to go fully with Gandhi in reducing wants to follow a godly path. But it also remains true that anyone who wants to pursue serious interests in life, apart even from spiritual ends, finds it essential to regulate his wants severely: he chooses to forego many of his wishes. It is also patently wrong to say that human wants are insatiable.

Gandhi left many valuable sayings for the modern man to fight for goodness in society in a non-violent way. "Good" Gandhi said "travels at a snail's pace." "Non-violence" Gandhi said "is a tree of slow growth. It grows imperceptibly but surely." And then "Mere goodness is not of much use." Gandhi stated. "Goodness must be joined with knowledge, courage and conviction. One must cultivate the fine discriminating quality which goes with spiritual courage and character." The modern man can also take great wisdom from what Gandhi said the seven social sins: Politics without principles; Wealth without work; Commerce without morality; Education without character; Pleasure without conscience; Science without humanity; Worship without sacrifice. Gandhi objected when people called him "a saint trying to be a politician." He said he would rather be "a politician trying to be a saint." Gandhi was not a Saint. He was a common man, but a common man in modern world in the footsteps of Buddha and Jesus. He said, "I have nothing new to teach the world. Truth and Non-violence are as old as the hills". It may be said that, after the great Buddha and Jesus, Gandhi once again demonstrated that non-violence could also be an effective instrument of social change in modern times. Gandhi successfully demonstrated to a world, weary with wars and continuing destruction that adherence to Truth and Non-violence is not meant for individual behaviour alone but can be applied in global affairs too.

Gandhian framework has to be viewed objectively to view it in a balanced perspective. It is rather important to mention that the Gandhian ideology is an interesting amalgam of Western liberalism and the Indian classical ethos. The contradictions appear when the interaction of the Eastern and Western influences on him are viewed in the light of the viewer's own preconceptions and value-preferences of ideological commitments. Gandhi tried to reconstruct the present on the model of the ancient but he was by no means a revivalist, in the pejorative sense of the term, but one imbued with a Renaissance spirit.

However, it would be very difficult to identify Gandhi either with the new or old society, although his symbolism was traditional and his approach was modern.

Some of these concepts like non-violence, asceticism, compromise and conservatism are as liable to fatalistic and otherworldly interpretations as to an activist and a worldly one. The validity of these interpretations depends upon the meaning with which they are infused and the purposes to which they are put. Hence to arrive at any definite and substantive conclusion of Gandhi is a formidable and challenging task.

An attempt at a deeper analysis of Gandhi-positive and negative will require transcending the realms of both the traditional religious and the modern scientific paradigms that are, anyway, being found to be inadequate for understanding and living in the world of today. The Gandhian thinking aimed at evolving a comprehensive conceptual framework by absorbing the valid and the utilitarian aspects of the thematic concepts of tradition and modernity. Whether Gandhi succeeded or not is a million dollar question, which even if put up again and again will still be surrounded by doubt and controversy. Nevertheless, Gandhi, like any other normal human being, had his share of sins, but he certainly did make a beginning of inestimable value and remains a sort of historic landmark for the future generations embarking on the road to achieve lofty ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity.

Gandhian values as a way of life has even more relevance, and Gandhi will inspire generations of individuals fighting for goodness of the society. If today we find that Gandhian values is in severe test in countries like India, it is not because there is certain inherent weakness in Gandhian values, but it is because we have not seen in India strong leaders with the required courage and conviction to fight the evils in society. We may borrow Gandhi's own words on Ahimsa, and say that Gandhian values is only for the courageous people.

We should follow three mantra from our Gandhian way of life. First, do away with platitudes. Language, communication and discussion have become a labyrinth of context, nuances and sophistication. A society based on truth and non-violence affirms a belief in God. Second, Gandhiji gave importance to right values. He was a plain-speaking person without artifice; never mincing his words. Sarvodaya, or universal uplift, trusteeship and principled leadership formed his vision for taking India forward.

Gandhiji hoped that the ideals of his vision would be like the tiny spring that gushes forth from the Gangotri glacier and that flows down as the mighty Ganga, nurturing, serving and sharing in the lives of the people. He believed in a decent standard of life, unlike the concept of standard of living that is a material quotient. Standard of life suggests a flowering of spiritual, cultural and material values so that one is not afflicted by the seven deadly sins: wealth without work, pleasure without conscience, knowledge without character, commerce (business) without morality (ethics), science without humanity, religion without sacrifice, and politics without principle. Third, Gandhiji believed everyone ought to share and care. Trusteeship, serving people, sacrificing for them and, thus, contributing to the standard of life was advocated by Gandhiji, who would say, "A person cannot do right in one department whilst attempting to do wrong in another department. Life is one indivisible whole."

Notes and References:

1. Bandyopadhyaya Jayantanuja, Social and Political Thought of Gandhi, Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1969.
2. Bepin Behari, Gandhian Economic Philosophy, Bombay: Vora & Co., 1963.
3. Bhatia, A.C., The Gandhian Economy. In What Gandhiji has done for India,

- Lahore: Ilami Markay, 1946.
4. Bhattacharya, Bhabani, Gandhi the Writer, New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1969.
 5. Bhattacharyya Buddhadeva, Evolution of Political Philosophy of Gandhi, Calcutta: Calcutta Book House, 1969.
 6. Fischer, Louis: The Life of Mahatma Gandhi, Stuggart: Tauchlity, 1953.
 7. Fundamentals of Marxism and Leninism, Moscow: F.L.P.M., 1975.
 8. Gandhi, M.K., An Autobiography or the Story of My Experiments with Truth, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1983.