

Upanishadic Origins and Philosophical Relevance of Gandhian Truth

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Abstract

The most significant feature of Gandhi's Religion of Truth is that it is essentially a Religion of Service. For him religion or spirituality is not a mere matter of knowing scriptures and engaging in philosophical discussions. True spirituality is practical application of spiritual values in actual life. As noted earlier Gandhi does not dismiss the world as mere illusion. For him miseries and sufferings of human life are realities of life. They cannot be dismissed as unrealities.

KEYWORDS: Significant feature, Religion of Truth, Scripture, Spiritual Values, Illusion, Miseries.

Introduction

Gandhi's philosophy reveals that Truth is the key concept Truth (Satya) which has its root in 'Sat' (Being). Truth is Permanent Existence. Truth alone exists while everything else is changing. Therefore, Truth Stands for Reality. Truth is the Absolute Spiritual Reality behind the relative material world. This Absolute reality or Truth is identified with God, the Creator, Sustainer and Destroyer of the universe. 'The distinguishing feature of Gandhi's thought is that the Absolute Truth, conceived as One All-inclusive Reality, explains the world, soul and God (Iswara). This stand point is Philosophical Monism. But it has to be noted that it is not Abstract monism that Gandhi teaches. Abstract monism grants reality only to Nirguna Brahman while the world and the souls are considered as empirical realities which are only partially true. But Gandhi does not agree with this view. His stand point is that Truth or God is the sum total of all that exists. He is in everything and every being. He is in stock and stone. Therefore, Gandhi sees the world of living beings as the 'Sport' (Lila) of God.

Truth Characterized as Concrete Monism

The above view may be Characterised as Concrete Monism. As we have seen Gandhi does not dismiss the world as maya in the sense of illusion. Out of the several meanings given to the term 'maya', Gandhi accepts the word 'appearance'. The whole world is an appearance of God in the sense that God pervades all that is in this universe (Isa vasyamidam sarvam) He recognises the immanence of God in all things. World is a manifestation of God. As regards the relation between God and man Gandhi's view is different from the Advaita view of non difference of self from Brahman. To an Advaitin the individual soul (jiva) is, in essence, identical with the Absolute Brahman. But we see that Gandhi believes in the absolute Oneness of God and man and therefore also of humanity. He argues that God is one, though his creations are many. He asks, "What though we have many bodies we have but one soul.

Truth or God is conceived as an Impersonal Law governing the universe. Truth is definitely the transcendental law governing the existence of things in the universe. This impersonal law is reflected in man as the "Voice of Conscience". Therefore it is imminent I also. Man has to obey the dictates of conscience for leading truthful life which alone leads to Truth realisation. For Gandhi the Voice of Conscience is the message from God. He calls it "the Inner Voice" as "the Still Small Voice within" He asserts that it should not be mistaken as hallucination or the echo of a heated imagination. One has to listen to it. This faculty of listening requires constant effort and training. This effort consists in attaining self-purification through self-discipline. This shows the emphasis laid on the necessity of ethical self-discipline for the philosophical quest.

According to Gandhi, God is 'beyond sense and reason. God realisation is a matter of faith. As we have seen, true faith is living consciousness of the presence of God within. This can come only if we unquestionably believe in the experiences and teachings of the realised souls. Their experiences show that God cannot be demonstrated or proved in the ordinary sense. God can only be realised. Like any other philosopher, Gandhi also gives certain proofs for the existence of God. But he strongly asserts that no proof can convince a person unless there is some direct experience of God.

Gandhi vividly expresses his idea of God. God who merely satisfies the intellect is no God. God must rule the heart and must effect a total transformation in his votary. He must express Himself in his every action. But this is possible only if the votary has definite realisation than mere sense experience. This is proved by the experiences of the realised souls in different parts of the world. They have felt the real presence of God within. An unshakable faith in the experiences of such rishis and prophets is what is needed for God realisation. To deny this evidence is to deny one self. This may lead us to characterise him as a mystic. But Gandhi was more a man of action.

We have analysed Gandhi's conversion of the statement from a "God is Truth" to "Truth is God." It points to his attempt to reconcile the impersonal and the personal aspects of God. The impersonal aspect of God emphasises the formless, attribute-less and relation-less Being. The personal aspect of God emphasises the form and attributes of God. That Gandhi gives primary importance to the impersonal aspect of God is evident from his statement "Truth is God". For ordinary understanding God is a personal Being endowed with all the auspicious qualities and there is the necessity of worship and other devotional practices. Gandhi recognises this too. For he believes that, "He is personal God to those who needs it is personal presence. He is embodied to those who need its touch. But he is the purest essence. He simply reveals Himself to those who have faith. Yet Gandhi reiterates, "Truth has no form. Here we note that Gandhi follows the line of thought in the Gita which emphasises both the personal and impersonal aspect of God. The Lord of Gita is the manifest form of the unmanifest Brahman of the Upanishads. It is for the sake of the struggling souls that the Gita insists on the worship of the personal God and the necessity of attaining God's Grace. In this context it may be noted that a writer like D.S Sarma refers to this line of thought in the Bhagavad Gita.

The God of the Gita is not only to be regarded as the immanent in the universe like the thread on which the pearls of creation are strung. He is our friend and saviour. He will assure that no one who does good ever treads the path of woe. He looks after the welfare of all. Thus the theistic elements in the Upanishads are also fully developed in the Gita. The grace and mercy of God are brought home to the worshippers' hearts. Though Gandhi tries to reconcile absolutism and theism, as in the Gita we see that theistic aspect of God has only a secondary importance in his philosophy. This tendency of viewing Truth as philosophy of the highest ontological Reality and identifying this ontological reality with God is something special to Gandhi's thought.

As Surendra Varma remarks, "To think of ultimate reality in terms of Truth is indeed very rare and Gandhi is one of those few thinkers who have oriented all his philosophical ideas, metaphysical around Truth. This notion of the spiritual principle, Truth, as basic reality of the world is certainly the outcome of Gandhi's intense study of the Upanishads. He says "The Upanishads whetted my appetite for exploring Vedic religion at its sources. Its bold speculations afforded keenest delight, satisfied the soul. The Upanishads spirituality form the primary source of inspiration on Gandhi's thought. His philosophy is truly the restatement of the spiritual monism of the Upanishads. The Upanishadic thinkers establish the existence of a permanent unitary Reality on the basis of the perception of a changing transitory world. The world of everyday experience is not to be treated as real for it is constantly changing.

The names and forms vary. There is multiplicity and variety everywhere. But above and beyond this multiplicity and change, the Upanishads posit a permanent, changeless Reality which they call Brahman. This Reality is Unitary in nature, for it expresses the identity between universal soul and the individual soul (Tat-tuam-asi). This unitary reality is conceived variously in Upanishads. For instance, in the Brihadaranayaka Upanishad Brahman is seen as the "Satyasya Satyam" (The Real of the Reals). The Chandogya Upanishad conceives Brahman as "Tajjalan", (that which gives rise to the world, supports it and reabsorbs it), The Reality is also considered as the subtle Essence.

Gandhi and Upanishadic Thought

In the Taittiriya Upanishad, we see the nature of Brahman conceived as "Satyam Jnanam, Anantam". The Isa Upanishad affirms that Brahman or the Lord (Isa) envelops the entire universe. Brahman resides in the universe. It is the support (adhistana) of the universe. The Upanishads point out that the ultimate Reality Brahman which is both transcendent cannot be perceived by the senses or comprehended by discursive intelligence can be definitely perception (darsana). It through and immanent cannot be but Brahman which is spiritual, it is clear that such an Absolute Brahman beyond the senses and the ordinary reason can only be negatively described. For any attempt to describe it in empirical terms surely makes it something finite and that denies its infiniteness. Therefore, Brahman is negatively described as "neti, neti" ("not this: not this") Brahman is nothing among things. It is One without a second (advaitam). It is One, all (Sarava Khaluidam Brahman).

Inclusive of It may be noted that though beyond ordinary human predication the Reality, Brahman has an essential feature (Svarupa laksana). The essential feature of Brahman is indicated by the common epithet, Saccidananda one that combines in Himself, Truth, Pure consciousness and Bliss. This way of describing Brahman implies that Brahman alone exists, it is of the nature of pure consciousness and is the source of permanent peace or bliss (ananda).

Gandhi's notion of Reality is that of the ultimate sovereign principle, Truth. Truth is all inclusive. It comprehends and explains all the different relative truths of empirical experience. This all-inclusive, all-comprehensive principle is identified with God. Thus, Truth or God is the Reality of the realities. Truth is infinite, all-pervading and all-inclusive. It is of the nature self-evident and self-revealing. It is an unseen power and defies all proof. It transcends sense and reason. But Truth can be definitely realised. We find that in the matter of God realisation, Gandhi depends on unshakable faith which transcends reason. Like the Upanishadic Truth is beyond human to describe Truth thinkers Gandhi also holds that predication and use negative terms Nevertheless, Gandhi describes Truth as Sat-Cit-Ananda showing his indebtedness to the Upanishadic teachings.

While tracing the influence of the philosophy of the Upanishads on Gandhi's thought we saw that his spiritual ideas are derived from it. The notion of Truth the basic reality sustaining the universe is definitely the outcome of his deep study of the Upanishads. Further we can see that his philosophical ideas are developed along the lines of Brahma Sutras, the systematisation of the Upanishads. For instance the first verse of the Brahma sutras 'athatho brahma jignasa' indicates that an enquiry into Brahman should be made as it leads to moksa. But the desire to attain moksa arises only when fourfold conditions are fulfilled namely

1. nitya anitya vastu, viveka,
2. ihamutrartha bhalabhoga viraga
3. Sarna damadi sadhana sampat and
4. (4) mumukshatva. The desire to know Brahman results in the realisation of Brahman (Brahamavid Brahmaivabhavati).

The second verse, janmady asya yatah" teaches that Brahman is the cause of the world investigation. Brahman through is indicated by the real text "Tapo Brahman. The rational investigation into truth alone is not sufficient. It must be accompanied by faith in the spiritual experiences of the seers. This is taught by the third verse 'sastra yonitvat'. This indicates the importance of scriptural authority in Brahman realisation. The Sastras, the Vedas and the Upanisads are the records of spiritual experiences of seers and sages.

The different scriptural statements have one purport namely knowledge of Brahman. They seem to speak of Brahman in different ways but these are only apparent differences. They are to be reconciled. The reconciliation is possible though direct vision of Brahman. This is indicated by the fourth verse "tat tu samanvyat". It is clear that Gandhi seeks to follow this line of thought in his philosophy. Like any other spiritual thinker Gandhi

accepts moksa as the only goal of human life. For him moksa means Truth realisation or seeing God face to face.

He also concedes the necessity of practicing moral and spiritual disciplines like vairagya (detachment) and abhyasa (single-minded devotion) to attain this end. He points out that besides, there should be the yearning to know Truth. This yearning to know Truth is signified by the concept of Satyagraha in his philosophy.

Satyagraha as Gandhi conceives it stands for the practical discipline for Truth realisation. Of course, it has other meanings and applications. But in the philosophical context Satyagraha, stands for persistent search for Truth through rational inquiry and steady self-discipline. In Gandhi's philosophy the true aspirant is called a 'Satyagrahi' A Satyagrahi, through steady practice of spiritual and moral discipline attains purity of mind. This purity of mind, which is purity in thought word and deed, is signified by the concept of Ahimsa. Thus Ahimsa is a state of self purification which is the direct means to Truth realisation or "seeing God face to face".

When we consider the impact of the Upanisads on Gandhi's thought, we see that the Isa Upanisad has exerted a great,est infl uence on him. The first Verse, Isavasyamidam sarvum" instills the Vedantic spirit.

Conclusion

Truth is the Ontological principle, the Absolute Sovereign Principle, the First principle of Existence. For him Truth is an integral concept. It synthesizes the manifest, and the unmanifest aspects of Reality. Truth integrates Absolute and relative Truths. Gandhi distinguishes between Absolute Truth and relative truths. The Absolute Truth is one, relative truths are many. The One Absolute Truth is inclusive of all relative truths and relative truths are different partial expressions of the Absolute Truth. Hence Gandhi's concept on of Truth integrates Absolute Reality, the world and man. Moreover, Truth is integral in another sense. We see that realisation of Truth in not merely the goal of Gandhi's spiritual inquiry. It is the end and aim of his religious and moral life. He finds that a deeply religious man alone can be spiritual and he cannot neglect a strict moral life. In fact, spirituality, religion and morality are integrated in Gandhi's philosophy and this .integration finds its culmination in Truth realisation which is for him "seeing God face to face" His conception of Truth as the Ultimate Reality is the outcome of his deep religious life of prayer and fasting and his persistent effort to be truthful and non-violent in every action. His bold statement, "Truth is God" is thus,' the expression of a comprehensive vision of Reality.

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