

Gandhian Perspectives on Ethics

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Gandhi had emphasised that the very essence of our civilisation is that we give permanent place to ethics, truth, non-violence, tolerance, justice and integrity and morality in all our efforts—public or private. The ethical and moral standard he set for himself reveals his commitment and devotion to eternal principles.

“I t is the duty of all leading men, whatever their persuasion or party, to safeguard the dignity of India”, said Gandhi, a month before his assassination (The Hindu, 16/12/1947.

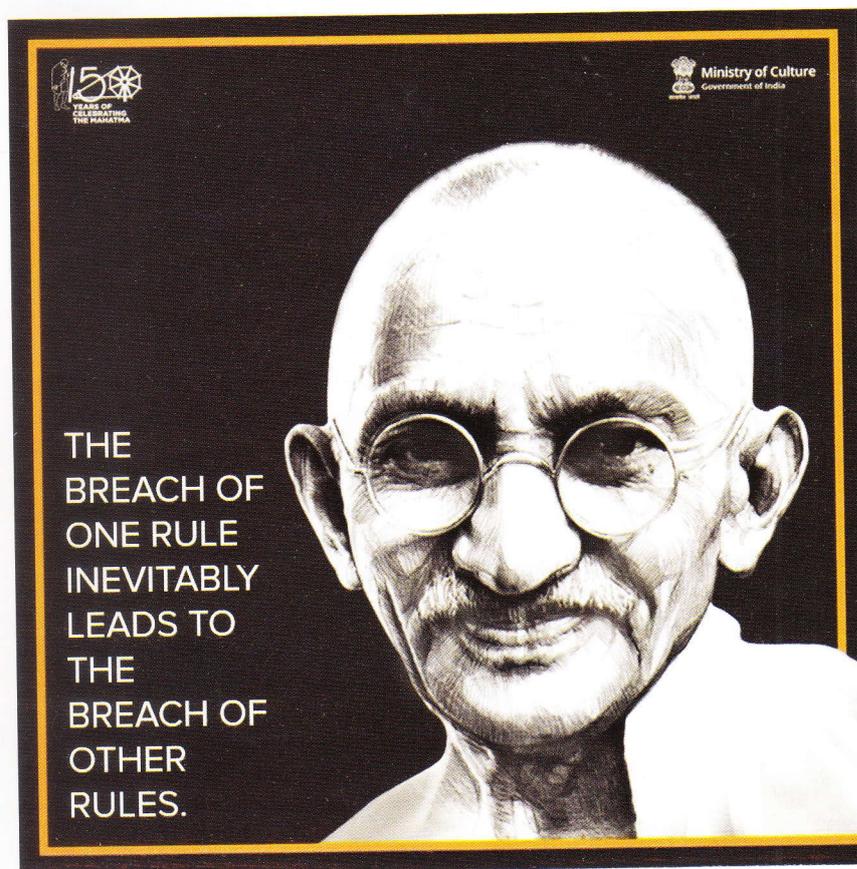
It goes to the credit of Gandhi that he evolved a philosophy and lifestyle which was permeated with ethical, moral, spiritual insights and scientific truth. He did not see any difference in them and what he asserted in his autobiography, *‘What I want to achieve—what I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years—is self-realisation, to see God face to face, to attain Moksha’*, (page 10 of Gandhi’s autobiography) reveals the ethical, moral and spiritual foundations of his striving all through.

Gandhi’s twenty one years of work in South Africa and thirty-two years of campaigns subsequently in India for mass awareness and political freedom authentically restated the profound relationship between the spiritual and the material, the ethical and moral texture of our civilisation.

Science and Technology vs Moral and Ethical Fiber of the Individual

Gandhi continues to challenge many postulations and keeps on

reminding humanity that there is a ‘truth’ beyond all what we perceive and hold to be ‘truth’. By making truth as the axis of all his endeavors, Gandhi was seeking the spirituality



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of truth itself which is the very basis of science. He thereby convincingly challenges those who espouse the notion that spirituality and science need to be at war with each other.

Here, Gandhi outgrows the condescending position of a social scientist and revolutionary thinker and social activist that was assigned to him by commentators and historians. If science is 'truth-seeking', by making his life "Experiments with Truth", Gandhi went far beyond the traditional parameters of classifications. Gandhi who initially held the view that 'God is Truth' reversed it later as, 'Truth is God' thereby asserting the supremacy of truth over everything. He reminds us here of Einstein's statement that imagination is greater than knowledge.

This also implies that there is a greater power within every human being in his/her consciousness. The outer world has been effectively influenced by changing what is within us. The inner world constitutes a vast reservoir of untapped energy which, if used diligently, has the power to take on the material world. The courage to make every crisis into an opportunity and every obstacle into a possibility springs from the inner and spiritual fiber of the individual. Newton's Law of Motion, if taken in its metaphorical sense, illustrates this argument further, "*Every object in the universe attracts every other object with a force directly proportionate to the product of their masses and inwardly proportional to the square of the distance between their centers*".

Just like science and scientists, who believe that there is nothing impossible in life, Gandhi held on to truth like a baby clinging to its mother. When he emphasised the power of love, compassion, truth, non-violence, even many of his close friends raised their eyebrows. His plans to take on non-violently the mightiest of the Empires of the day, many doubted his wisdom. His claim that India could win the freedom without resorting to



violence and war, it looked laughable. His ideas were described impractical, naïve, or even dubbed as '*A Mid-Summer Night's Dream*'.

Undisturbed by these barbs, Gandhi pursued his 'Experiments with Truth' with the precision and devotion of a scientist. He was guided by the teachings of Gita and the assertion of Thoreau who wrote, "*I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life through conscious endeavor*".

What is important is the ability of every human being to nurture their spirit and inner resources and allow to transcending the walls and fences that hold them captive. Whoever is able to assert their mental and spiritual freedom will eventually emerge as liberated souls. John Milton's words corroborate this, "*The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, and a hell of heaven*".

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Spiritual, Moral Insights & Scientific Truth

Gandhi was not interested in the argument whether religion is forerunner of science or science has always been nurturing religion or religion and spirituality are older to science. He could see how science outgrew the importance of religion in the life of individuals as more and more intelligent men of science and technology devoted their time in unraveling and developing scientific truth and capability. The champions and custodians of the spiritual domain relapsed into just meditative and contemplative lifestyles thereby becoming status quoits. Science and technology with its manifold focus and application came into the daily life of people with surprising and hither to unbelievable results. The primacy of religion steadily eroded while science forged ahead with unstoppable speed and energy.

Satyagraha: Blending of Ethical, Moral, Political, Social and Religious Concerns

Gandhi's seminal contribution lies in the area of blending science and spirituality as revealed in the philosophy and practice of Satyagraha. The Satyagraha as enunciated by Gandhi seeks to integrate spiritual



values, community organisation and self-reliance with a view to empower individuals, families, group, villages, towns and cities. Robert Payne in his perceptive study of Gandhi remarks, "*Gandhi was continually experimenting with truth and inventing new forms of force. And just as Satyagraha was never "truth force", so it was never "non-violence" or "passive resistance", although it included them in its ever-widening orbit.*"

It may be remembered that:

1. Satyagraha was never used by Gandhi to score political points.
2. Gandhi's Satyagraha movement was principle-centered and spiritually guided.
3. Gandhi's Satyagraha was never aimed as a coercive tactic.
4. Gandhi's language, body language and activities were dignified and always left room for dialogue and reconciliation.
5. Gandhi's Satyagraha always highlighted moral principles.
6. Gandhi had the courage to withdraw his movement when he realised that unprincipled elements would infiltrate and would use the base for selfish or opportunistic goals.

Gandhi, as is known fairly now, also tried to infuse the fresh air of spiritualism in every domain of human endeavor, including politics. He earned the name of a saint trying to spiritualise politics. His mantra was to wipe away tears from every eye.

Such a world of peace demands an attitudinal change. In such a world, the strong will not exploit the weak, the rich will not harm the poor, and the privileged will not ignore the underprivileged.

The ancient Vedic philosophy of "Sarva Dharma Samabhav" or "Respect for all religions" formed the basis of Gandhiji's religious humanism which was rooted in ethical, moral and spiritual considerations.

Spiritual living is responsible living. Gandhi said, "*I am responsible not only for myself but for all of you just as all of you are responsible for*

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me. When we live truly selfless life, we never think in terms of personal profit or pleasure but always in terms of global prosperity and world peace. For even these grand goals ultimately depend not on government but on selfless efforts of little people like you and me of the long run, friendly persuasion is the only effective teacher. Human beings can always grow". If the man gains spirituality, Gandhi said, "the whole world gains with him".

The casteless and classless society he was striving to establish aims at the realisation of both material and spiritual moorings. He described the society that he was aiming as *Ram Rajya- a Divine Rajya; the Kingdom of God*. His Ram is the Almighty God which guides him to noble action and whose presence can be felt everywhere. The Ram Rajya he was advocating was an ideal social order where an ideal King rules over his subjects without any distinction whatsoever. Truth, dharma and justice to be the dominant characteristics of such a society. The poorest of the poor to have equal say in the governance. Nobody will be discriminated against anybody.

There was much in common if one can stretch it between Plato's ideal Republic and Gandhi's "Ram Rajya" though Tolstoy's influence on Gandhi could be discernible in formulating his vision of a new society. The major difference between the approaches of Gandhi and Plato is that while Plato is philosophical, Gandhi is pragmatic and down-to-earth, a realist.

For Gandhi rights and duties are complementary and a citizen who is not conscious of his duties has no right to think of his rights. Similarly, Gandhi believed, "*There can be no Ram Raj in the present state of iniquitous inequalities in which only a few roll in riches, while the masses do not get even enough to eat.*"

The ruler, in the modern context like Lord Ram, Gandhi's, ideal

King is Custodian of not only the physical domain of the people but also an inspirer of his people to higher realms of spiritual, moral and ethical attainments.

Relevance of Gandhi's Talisman

It may be of use here to remember in this context the advice Gandhi gave to the new rulers of India, which is now known as *Gandhi's Talisman*. Gandhi said in his advice:

"I will give you a talisman, whenever you are in doubt or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test:

Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him, Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to Swaraj for the hungry and spiritually starving millions?"

Deepening Moral Disintegration and Throwing Ethics to Winds

Sarvodaya was Gandhi's vision of a just, egalitarian, morally and spiritually strong citadel of individual liberty. Gandhi's ideal society envisages a non-violent, decentralised, people-oriented, sustainable and flourishing social order. The Sarvodaya Samaj dreamt by Gandhi still remains a far cry despite the heroic efforts of Acharya

Vinoba Bhave, Jayaprakash Narayan and other dedicated Sarvodaya leaders. Social justice and equality to all were the cornerstones of the Sarvodaya social order. The Sarvodaya Samaj would have effectively prevented and eliminated any form of corruption, and general decay of moral, ethical and spiritual values, both in public and private life.

Seven Sins according to Gandhi

1. Wealth without work
2. Pleasure without conscience
3. Knowledge without character
4. Commerce without morality
5. Science without humanity
6. Religion without sacrifice, and
7. Politics without principle

Let us read this, keeping in mind Gandhi's much misunderstood assessment of the emerging scenario in his small classic "Hind Swaraj" (1909). In it, Gandhi condemns the contemporary civilisation, mechanisation, the extending tentacles of immorality, scant regard for spiritual roots. The book was described seditious by the British and they banned it. Several of Gandhi's close associates also found the book revolting and they advised Gandhi to withdraw the book.

A careful reading of the book will offer any diligent reader the impression that Gandhi was prophetic in his vision and assessments. When he described the emerging

civilisation as 'soulless' and 'satanic', he was criticised. The warning he issued through '*Hind Swaraj*' was unjustifiably dismissed by the advocates of unlimited growth and champions of industrial domination and market-driven economy even without proper discussions.

Let us also remember that the several symbols and concepts Gandhi used in his long public career in both South Africa and India in his efforts to usher in a new era of clean politics and orderly development also revealed his commitment and devotion to ethical values and moral principles which will eventually characterise the texture of civilisation.

There was no pretension or hypocrisy about him. He never asked others to do anything which he did not do. It is history how he conducted his affairs. He never treated even his own children in any special manner from other children. In the Ashram settlements they also grew up along with the other children, sharing same kind of food and other facilities and attending the same school. When a scholarship was offered to him for one of his sons to be sent to England for higher education, instead of giving it to his own children, Gandhi gave it to some other boy. Of course, he invited strong resentment from two of his sons and there are many critics who believe that Gandhi neglected his own children and he was not an ideal father. The voluntary abdication of his highly attractive income from his legal profession and taking to a simple life and his profound conviction of equality of all men and women show the essential Gandhi who grew into a Mahatma.

The ethical and moral standard he set for himself reveals his commitment and devotion to eternal principles and only someone like him who regulated his life and action in conformity with the universal vision of human brotherhood could describe his life, 'My Life is My Message'. □

