

NON-POSSESSION

THE GANDHIAN THOUGHT

A happy working of the human machine depends upon the harmonious activity of the various component parts. Gandhiji's sustainable and minimalist lifestyle was based on self-discipline. Possession implies provision for the future. If each retained possession only of what he needed, no one would be in want, and all would live in contentment.

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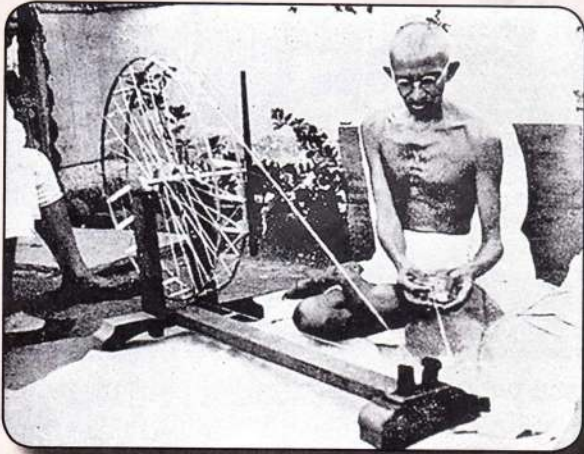
When Gandhiji was in the Yerawada Central Prison in 1930, his *Ashramites* were missing his daily discourses after the prayer. On their request, he wrote weekly letters to the Satyagraha Ashram. They contained a cursory examination of the principal Ashram observances, popularly known as the Eleven Vows. They encapsulate Gandhian thought and philosophy. They are: Truth, Ahimsa-Non-Violence, Brahmacharya-Chastity, Control of the Palate, Non-Stealing, Non-Possession, Fearlessness, Removal of Untouchability, Bread Labour, Tolerance-Equality of Religions, and Swadeshi.

According to Gandhiji, "A vow means unflinching determination, it helps us against temptation. Determination is worth nothing if it bends before discomfort." Just as non-violence can be observed only by a strong person, not by a coward, vows are also a sign of strength, not weakness. Gandhiji lived by these vows. As a matter of fact, he arrived at each one by experimenting on himself. That is why his autobiography is known as 'My Experiments with Truth'. His life is a journey from truth to truth.

Gandhiji belonged to a well-to-do family in Porbandar, Gujarat province. He went to England in 1888 and obtained the degree of barrister. He enrolled himself in the British Bar but, on the very next day, sailed for India. On his return, he went to Bombay, applied for enrolment in the High Court as a barrister, tried to practise but did not succeed.

He lacked self-confidence. On the advice of an elderly relative, he decided to go to South Africa to translate Gujarati legal documents into English and the English ones into Gujarati for one Sheth Abdulla. Mohandas noticed that Sheth Abdulla was fighting the case against his own cousin, and both of them had spent a lot of money and time on this long-drawn case. Mohandas managed to settle the matter out-of-court. Dialogue and negotiation were his ways of establishing peace. During his stay, he was disturbed to notice discriminatory treatment by the English towards local Indians. He himself had faced a lot of humiliation. The turning point in his life was an incident at the Pietermaritzburg railway station, where he was thrown out of the First-Class compartment in spite of having a valid ticket for the First Class. The reason was, he was not a white man! This humiliation hurt him. He spent the night in severe cold, debating in his mind whether he should continue with the journey or return to India.

That was the night of Mohandas's metamorphosis. His sense of responsibility prevailed, he underwent a couple of more humiliating incidents, but mustered courage. Over a period of time, he was able to bring local Indians together, and on 22 August 1894 founded Natal Indian Congress to fight against colour prejudice. In 1901, he returned to India. While leaving, he assured to return to South Africa if his services were needed.



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They called him back. He returned in November 1902. In October 1904, he took the responsibility of the *Indian Opinion*, a weekly newspaper. It was initially published in English, Gujarati, Hindi, and Tamil. The paper and the press were moved to Phoenix and in 1904 the Phoenix Settlement was founded. This was the beginning of community living.

In the *Indian Opinion*, Mohandas wrote a few articles under the heading *Guide to Health*. They were written in Gujarati and were based on his concern for those around him. This was around 1906. These articles were later published in a book form. He mentioned in these articles that all human activity is carried on by means of the mind aided by the ten senses. These are five senses of action and five of perception. A happy working of the human machine depends upon the harmonious activity of the various component parts. His question therefore was, "What is the use of human body?" Everything in the world can be used and abused. This is an eternal truth. Body should be treated as the temple of God.

Gandhiji was an ever-ready nurse and doctor. He did tell his parents that he should have been sent to England to become a doctor and not a barrister. The answer that he got was that to become a doctor, he would have to dissect animals and even human beings! Family values were against it. His passion to take care of the sick was through nature-cure and diet. He also believed that man's mental and spiritual well-being cannot be ignored. In Gandhiji's lifestyle, interconnectedness of the body, mind, and spirit were well maintained. Here comes the observance of eleven vows in daily life. During one of his speeches on vegetarianism in England, he said that "A man was not born a carnivorous



animal, but born to live on the fruits and herbs that the earth grows. He had limited his own diet to five articles only. A person's food intake should be according to one's physical work. One person's over eating not only spoils his/her digestive system but also deprives those who need that food."

The control of the palate is one of the eleven vows. The body is injured every time one overeats. In common kitchen, only such food is cooked that keeps the body a fit instrument for service. The observance of non-stealing is not limited to stealing someone's thing. It goes even farther. "It is theft for me to eat any fruit that I do not need, or to take it in a larger quantity than is necessary. We are not always aware of our real needs, and most of us multiply our wants, and thus unconsciously make thieves of ourselves."

I came across an interesting incident narrated by Vijayaben Pancholi when she was in Sevagram. It was mango season during the summer. Young Vijaya used to squeeze out juice from two local mangoes in a small bowl for Gandhiji every day. One day, it so happened that the bowl did not fill up so Vijaya took one more mango and poured the juice into a bigger bowl. While serving that bowl to Bapu, Vijaya did tell him softly that the bowl was a little bigger and she went to the kitchen. Bapu was busy talking to his friend Hermann Kallenbach. He did not hear what Vijaya had said. After finishing his meal, he picked up the bowl and found it bigger. He called Vijaya and asked her why was the bowl bigger. Vijaya explained. Bapu had taken a vow that no food would be left in his plate. There should be no wastage and no overeating either. He said that his stomach was not a garbage bin. That extra food not required by the body would not get digested.



Gandhiji's sustainable and minimalist lifestyle was based on self-discipline. Once a gentleman who had just obtained his MA LLB degree went to Gandhiji's Ashram and told him he would be happy to help in ashram affairs. Gandhiji was cleaning wheat. He said, "Please come. Join in cleaning this wheat." That gentleman was in his lawyer's dress, collar, tie, pant, etc. It was difficult for him to sit on the floor. However, he sat and cleaned wheat for half an hour. He sweated a lot. He took Gandhiji's leave and left. During his address, after the evening prayer, Gandhiji narrated that incident and said that he does not blame that gentleman. New education does not teach the importance of using hands for daily work.

In the year 1928, Gandhiji formulated certain rules for the ashram. They were:

1. All ashramites should attend the morning prayer at 4 am.
2. All should eat at the community kitchen.
3. Should spin 160 threads on a daily basis.
4. No servant or labour should be hired for house-work.
5. All adult men should engage themselves in night vigilance.
6. All young and adults should take turn in cleaning toilets.
7. Each person living in the ashram should do the work for the ashram at least for 8 hours daily.
8. One should maintain daily diary and note all the work done during the day.

This was significant training for all living in the ashram. Gandhiji himself was always present during the cleaning of kitchen and cutting vegetables.

He started maintaining a daily diary from that day onwards. His rules for himself and others were never different.

Non-Possession was allied to Non-Stealing. Possession implies provision for the future. If each retained possession only of what he needed, no one would be in want, and all would live in contentment.

Once at the river bank, Gandhiji filled up his *lota* - a small metal pot, with water. His close associate standing nearby asked him, "Bapu, why only this much?" Gandhiji replied, "This river does not belong to me alone." While using things, they can be food, clothes, water, furniture, etc., one should use only what is required. That leads to simplification of one's life. Non-Possession is a principle applicable to thoughts as well. Why should a man fill his brain with useless knowledge? Habit of acquiring what is not needed becomes a burden on the mind and also in the environment.

The Eleven Vows of Gandhiji, as mentioned in the beginning of this article, are the best formula for living a simple and happy life. You live and let others also live. □

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