



## NON-VIOLENCE AND TRUTH: IN THE LIGHTS OF GANDHI'S PHILOSOPHY

**Krishna Paswan**

Assistant Professor  
Department of Philosophy  
Siliguri College, Darjeeling

Non-violence and truth are the inevitable parts of Gandhi's life and his philosophy. He led his whole life for the sake of truth. The concept of non-violence gets its present import due to the teachings and movement of M. K. Gandhi, also known as the father of the Indian nation. In a narrow sense, Gandhi's non-violent movement can be seen as a strategic war against the British rule which reigned over India for two hundred years. However, Gandhi's non-violence is something more than this. Non-violence, for Gandhi, is the ethical principal that should guide a human being in all aspects of his or her life. Political freedom is only one of the many implications of non-violence. Instead, it may also be seen that non-violence can never be considered as a mere means for reaching some ulterior goal; non-violence is an end in itself.

In his experiment with the use of non-violence, Gandhi was trying to evolve a new methodology. To quote Gandhi, "*Ahimsâ* is one of the world's great principles which no power on earth can wipe out. Thousands like myself may die to vindicate the ideal but *Ahimsâ* will never die. And the gospel of *Ahimsâ* can be spread only through believers dying for the cause. Let those who believe in non-violence as the only method of achieving real freedom, keep the lamp of non-violence burning bright in the midst of the present impenetrable gloom. The truth of the few will count; the untruth of millions will vanish like chaff before a whiff of wind."<sup>1</sup>

Mahatma Gandhi was an apostle of non-violence. His concept of non-violence is intimately related with his other notions like, love, truth, God and Satyagraha. All of these notions are closely associated with non-violence.

Throughout his life Gandhi remained a seeker of truth. Since his childhood, he had a strong conviction that morality is the basis of things and that truth is the substance of all morality. For him, truth is the sovereign principle for executing morality. This truth is not only truthfulness in word, but truthfulness in thought also, and not only relative truth in our conception but the Absolute Truth, the eternal principle that is God. So Gandhi uses the term truth in two ways, namely Truth as Absolute and truth as relative. While the significance of Gandhi's uses the term Truth reflects the importance of the term in many Indian philosophical and religious traditions, the relation between Absolute Truth and relative truths is more sufficiently described through the Buddhist paradigm of truth.

Generally speaking, the Buddhist understanding of truth differentiates between the Absolute Truth that is the transcendental truth and the conditional truth that relies



on the Absolute Truth. Both of these forms of truth include factual and scientific truths; however, Gandhi's understanding and application of truth in formulating his philosophy of primarily concerned with morality and social relations.

Absolute Truth is characterised by its fixed and unalterable nature. For Gandhi Absolute Truth (hereafter truth) is the only fundamental truth. He uses the term interchangeably with God and maintains beyond truths there is one Absolute Truth which is total and all embracing. But it is indescribable because it is God. Gandhi did not simply use the term God for the pragmatic purposes. His faith and devotion to his religion, together with the religious he studied informed his interpretation of Truth to an overwhelming degree. God becomes an embodiment of the idea of Truth. If God is accepted as an external force, with an omniscient role in the entire cosmos, the use of the title is effective. If however, God is understood in a physical form or even as the divine creator of destinies, the descriptor does not capture that which is attempting to illustrate.

Yet, God is not the only characteristic Gandhi assigns to Truth. Gandhi also equates Love to Truth. Truth and Love intertwined describe Truth as an emotion, an expression, and an act, yet also leaves much to interpretation. Love is also understood as Truth itself.

Hence, Gandhi established Truth as a guiding principle in our existence as it provides principles to spiritual, emotional and active elements of "this-worldly" life. Truths all embracing nature is best articulated though an understanding of the use of Truth in Indian languages. The word 'Satya' (Truth) comes from *Sat*, which means 'to be' or 'to exist'. To live through Truth is 'to be' or 'to exist' in wholeness.

Gandhi's Truth is the search for Universal/Absolute. Such definition of God has in it a belief about spiritual unity that Divine permeates everything in this universe. God's names and forms may vary, but same divinity is in all. The oneness towards all creeds in all tends comes natural to Gandhi. His spiritual quest for the Universal/Absolute in this sense comes close to the Vedantic notion of *Brahman* which points that everything in the universe originates from *Brahman* (Absolute), exist in *Brahman* and upholds through it, and ultimately dissolves in *Brahman*.

Apart from the Absolute Truth, there is also relative truth. The inattainability of Truth does not diminish its importance. Instead, Gandhi stresses the need for the use of relative truths to strive for Truth. Relative truths are those definitive ideas that provide guidance to our thoughts and actions, yet are not static. They change and morph to provide guidance in versatile situations. These truths maintain as their guiding principle the idea of Absolute Truth and therefore, *ahimsâ*.

Relative truths are describable and definable. It is the relationship of relative truths to Absolute Truth that is at the core of Gandhi's argument. Relative truth becomes the form of truth that is attainable in the human condition or the temporal world. In



Gandhi's words: "But as long as I have not realized this Absolute Truth, so long must I hold by the relative truth as I have conceived it. That relative truth must, meanwhile, be my beacon, my shield and buckler. Though this path is straight and narrow and sharp as the razor's edge, for me it has been the quickest and easiest. Even my Himalayan blunders have seemed trifling to me because I have kept strictly to this path. For the path has saved me from coming to grief, and I have gone forward according to my light."<sup>22</sup> Relative truth is that which is defined by Absolute Truth: it is this relationship that will acquire *moksa*. Truth characterised by God, Love and *Ahimsâ* must be manifested through action in order to attain *moksa*.

The discussion of Absolute Truth and relative truth can also be seen as a discussion of means and ends insofar as relative truth is the means and Absolute Truth is the end. This logic, however, confronts yet another form of dichotomy whereby a mean cannot be an end in itself. Gandhi insists that this is not the case. The relationship of means and ends in Gandhi's thought is most apparent through his insistence on characterising Absolute Truth rather than defining it. His characterisation is a means to the achievement of the end and an end in itself.

Hence to make reference to means and ends as two distinct entities is somewhat incorrect. Truth understood solely as a means or as end leaves the breadth of Gandhi's *ahimsâ* at the surface. The benefit of acting through *ahimsâ* is retained for oneself. The existence of a better society/community and the realisation of *moksa* are not engaged. That is to say, one's social responsibility is denied if Truth is treated as a means only. Truth understood as a means and as end implies that Truth is the means to defining relative truths and is also the ultimate end. Using the end as a guide for the means without diminishing its role as the ultimate end is the truest expression of *ahimsâ*. As a means and an end, Truth engages the individual and the community insofar as it defines the individual and the community as a whole: it is that which allows one to see his/her community as an extension of his/herself.

Furthermore, it is no mere coincidence that Gandhi uses the same word, namely, truth. Gandhi's two uses of the term truth express both means and ends exclusively, and means and ends conterminously. *Ahimsâ* is the means and Truth is the end. *Ahimsâ* and truth are intertwined that is practically impossible to disentangle. Means and ends work together in Gandhi's paradigm for the realisation of Truth.

Gandhi considered truth as his life's only ambition and means to achieve this goal was non-violence. In enunciating his principle of non-violence, Gandhi was influenced by the teachings of different religious seers. His understanding of non-violence is based on a unique philosophy of means and ends wherein he gave importance to both. Gandhi also stipulated a number of conditions in order to practise non-violence, which in turn, enables him to attain truth.

Gandhi was not an academic philosopher, nor did he exhibit any interest in logical and epistemological problems. However, his *Autobiography, The Story of*



*My Experiment with Truth* shows that he considers himself as a seeker of truth and is ready to share his experiences with others but claiming no finality for his own conclusions.

Truth and non-violence are the basic principles for the understanding of Gandhi's ideal. These are two sides of the same coin. Gandhi abhorred the idea of comparing truth and non-violence. This is because of Gandhi himself said, "*Ahimsâ* and Truth are my two lungs. I cannot live without them."<sup>3</sup>

*Ahimsâ* is not the goal, Truth is the goal. But we have no means of realizing Truth in human relationship except through the practice of *ahimsâ*. A steadfast pursuit of *ahimsâ* is inevitably bound to truth-not so violence. Truth comes naturally and *ahimsâ* required after a struggle. Gandhi says: "*Ahimsâ* is my God, and Truth is my God. When I look for *ahimsâ* Truth says 'Find it out through me'. When I look for Truth *ahimsâ* says 'Find it out through me'".<sup>4</sup> According to Gandhi, *ahimsâ* is a necessity for seeking as well as, for finding truth. He calls Truth and *Ahimsâ* two sides of a smooth unstamped metallic disc'. Gandhi said in his Autobiography, "It seems to me that I understand the ideal of truth better than that of *Ahimsâ*, and my experience tells me that, if I let go my hold of truth, I shall never be able to solve the riddle of *Ahimsâ*. The ideal of truth requires that vows taken should be fulfilled in the spirit-that as well as in the latter."<sup>5</sup> Gandhi's non-violence was not a weapon of the weak and cowardly. It was meant for the fearless and the brave.

When Gandhi went to Pretoria, he faced a difficult situation. He was thrown out from by first class compartment because he was an Indian and he had no right to travel in the first class compartment and he thought himself: "Should I fight for my rights or go back to India, or should I go on to Pretoria without minding the insults, and return to India after finishing the case? It would be cowardice to run back to India without fulfilling my obligation. The hardship to which I was subjected was superficial only a symptom of the deep disease of colour prejudice. I should try, if possible, to root out the disease and suffer hardships in the process. Redress for wrongs I should seek only to the extent that would be necessary for the removal of the colour prejudice."<sup>6</sup> So Gandhi followed bravery and in his whole life-struggle. One cannot be non-violent unless he sticks to truth and discards falsehood. These words have wide connotations and do not refer to same metaphysical concepts. Exploitation, unfair practices, misuses of authority etc. are all manifestations of untruth and cannot be preserved, defended and retained; except by methods which are not in social interests. So also non-activity and surrender to and compromise with what is untruth as explained above is violence in terms of Gandhi.

Truth and non-violence are generally considered to be the two key ingredients of Gandhian thought. But when we go through his *Autobiography*, in the last chapter, we do not find that non-violence is the sole means of attaining truth. Gandhi wrote: ".....if every page of this chapters do not proclaim to the reader that the only means for the realization of Truth is *Ahimsâ*, I shall deem all my labour, in writing these



chapters, to have been in vain”.<sup>7</sup> Truth is an integral and fundamental concept of metaphysics and ethics, and has an inclusive connotation. *Ahimsâ* on the other hand, is only a moral concept and a technique evolved by man and is applicable, appropriate and suitable, only to the human and not the cosmic realm. Nobody blames the fire or lightning for the violence it may cause. But fire and lightning are also aspects of truths in the sense they are or have existence (*Sat*). Furthermore, nobody talks of the misuse of violence in the intra-human realm. The serpent and the tiger are not condemned for being violent. Thus non-violence has limited applicability. But truth, as an all pervasive, all-inhabiting, real substance cannot exclude any stratum, more or aspects of reality from its comprehension and sway. It is infinite, all-exclusive and immanent. There must, therefore, be several paths for its realization. Hence, logically we do not see that non-violence is the only means for the realization of truth as God. Truth is too momentous a substance to be grasped and recognized solely by *ahimsâ*, although the moral concept of *Ahimsâ* is an important means for the realization of truth. According to the *Prithivi Sukta* of the *Atharvaveda*, truth regarded as a factor that upholds the earth. Truth as an entity or being is timeless, speechless, and immense. But the evolution of man is a phenomenon about two million years old. Hence, any moral concepts, proposition or ideal evolved by man who has appeared so late on the stage of the universe cannot comprehend the immeasurable propositions of timeless truth. Furthermore, the theory of non-violence is based on acceptance of a spiritual teleology and may not appear realistic to a sceptic or to an agnostic or to a materialist.

Ordinarily we understand Truth simply as that as far as possible we ought not to resort to tell a lie. That is to say that Truth not merely asserts the saying “Honesty is the best policy”. It also implies that if it is not the best policy we may depart from it. Here it is conceived that we have to rule our life by this Law of Truth at any cost. In order to clarify this saying, Gandhi has drawn upon the celebrated, illustration of the life of Prahlad. For the sake of Truth, Prahlad dared to oppose his own father. He defended himself, by paying his father back in his own coin not by retaliation but in defence of Truth as he knew it. He was prepared to die without caring to return the blow that he received from his father or from those who were instructed to carry out his orders. He would not even parry the blows. On the contrary, with a smile on his lips, he underwent the innumerable tortures to which he was subjected. At least Truth rose triumphant. Prahlad suffered the tortures because he knew that some day or other in his life time he would be able to demonstrate the infallibility of the law of Truth. This is the kind of Truth Gandhi would like to follow.

Gandhi uses Truth in unique sense which is different from its traditional and customary sense. But Gandhi emphasises certain implications of Truth which has not been given importance by another believer in Truth. Although similar to its usual sense, an account of such emphasis, there has emerges a Gandhian sense of the word which has some unique features of its own.

Truth, for Gandhi, is a concrete principle, the one reality. It is concrete because



the one reality is not an abstract principle negating completely the reality of the many, but it is a concrete whole comprehending the many within its fold. In other words, there is unity with the reality. There is unity with transcendental Truth and this is something to be experienced and realized within one's own inner being, especially with its manifestation in the form of living beings and man. The reality could be experienced through love, which is another name for the experience for the identity, identity of being and identity of interest. Identity can be expressed only in terms of relationship with living beings and with man on the basis of love. The least that a man in search of Truth can and ought to do is to abstain in thought, speech and action-*mansa vacha karmana* from injury to his fellow beings. This is where Gandhi finds a plane of existence where the transcendental implications of the term Truth can be given a non-metaphysical and even a mundane manifestation.

The transcendental aspect of reality is a Truth of inner experience. But its realization in every day experience is immediate and paramount importance to him. The individual had no other way of realizing the Truth of totality of reality (Transcendental cum immanent) except through social life and relationship with others. Thus the terms God (Reality) and Truth does not mean two different entities. Here both these expressions are being used rather interchangeably. Truth, for Gandhi is inseparably connected with God (reality). In metaphysical context a distinction between Truth (God) and reality is maintained. For Gandhi even such a distinction is unnecessary.

Even so, Gandhi does make a mention of such exclusively religious practices as prayer, surrender to God's will by subordinating one's body and mind to the call of truth, self-sacrifice, renunciation, love and tolerance etc. Truth is the ideal of life. It is the goal towards which we must strive. But what would be the nature of this striving? How should we approach the truth? According to Gandhi, *ahimsa* is the means; we cannot attain truth by any other way.

REFERENCES:

- > Prof. J. S. Mathur, *Contemporary Society: A Gandhian Appraisal*, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, 2010, p.166-67, as it is found, *Harijan*: 19.5.1946, and Quoted by Gopi Nath Dhawan in *Political Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi*, p.345.
- > M. K. Gandhi, Trans. Mahadev Desai, *The Story of My Experiment with Truth*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmadabad, 1927, Introduction, p. xi.
- > Joy Kachappilly, *Gandhi and Truth: An Approach to the Theology of Religions*, Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, 2000, p.113.
- > U. S. Mohan Rao (compiled and ed.), *The Message of Mahatma Gandhi*, Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt of India, 1968, p.9 as it is found *Young India*, 4.6.1925.
- > *The Story of My Experiment of Truth*, p.345.
- > Ibid. P.82.
- > V.P. Varma *The Political Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi and Sarvodaya*, Bharati



---

Bhawan. , Patna, 1994, p.14.

---

1. Prof. J. S. Mathur, *Contemporary Society: A Gandhian Appraisal*, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, 2010, p.166-67, as it is found, *Harijan*: 19.5.1946, and Quoted by Gopi Nath Dhawan in *Political Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi*, p.345.

<sup>2</sup> M. K. Gandhi, Trans. Mahadev Desai, *The Story of My Experiment with Truth*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmadabad, 1927, Introduction, p. xi.

3 Joy Kachappilly, *Gandhi and Truth: An Approach to the Theology of Religions*, Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, 2000, p.113.

<sup>4</sup> U. S. Mohan Rao (compiled and ed.), *The Message of Mahatma Gandhi*, Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt of India, 1968, p.9 as it is found *Young India*, 4.6.1925.

<sup>5</sup> . *The Story of My Experiment of Truth*, p.345.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. P.82.

<sup>7</sup> V.P. Varma *The Political Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi and Sarvodaya*, Bharati Bhawan. , Patna, 1994, p.14.