



## GANDHI AND POLITICS: RETHINKING NEWER AVENUES OF RESTORING MORAL VALUES THROUGH RELIGION

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Religion is the soul of Indian life and the prosperity of our nation, to a great extent, depend upon the extent to which the people cling to these ideals. Our country has a rich tradition in religion. This has been the tradition that has come down to us from our ancestors. We welcomed all religions and not only tolerated other religions but also appreciated them. We considerably borrowed from all religions and so religion and spirituality are rooted in the minds of Indian people. One can see the traces of religion throughout their life. To an Indian, religion is one great sustaining force pertaining to all the spheres of their lives and decline of our nation is due to its retreat from religion. India is great for her philosophy and religion and this made Max Muller to state that the study of religion is incomplete unless it is studied with reference to India. In this paper we are trying to bring out the relevance of Gandhian political outlook which was influenced by the spirit of religion and morality in the modern scenario.

Today the entire humanity is facing a crisis. The world has become too materialistic resulting in a loss of spiritual values. Everyone is lost in the mad race for money power and politics. A reign of terror, chaos, confusion, oppression and exploitation surrounds. Thus, we are living in a period of disintegration of faith and growing disillusionment about the traditional values which have come down to us. These are values which are embodied in the spirit of India and helped our country to survive to this day. These are the values which came to us through the great religions and our culture is a mixture of all these cults. It is this religion that we require in the contemporary situation. Mahatma Gandhi understood the mind of Indian people in which religion is a sustaining force pertaining to all the spheres of their lives. Hence he expressed his social, political, and economic ideas in religious terms. He said "Man without religion is man without roots. Religion is the basis on which life structure has to be erected if life is to be real."<sup>1</sup> He held that public, social, political and economic life would be much purer if we do it in the spirit of religion.

Gandhi gave a practical color to the lofty principles of religion not only in the individual life but in the social plane also. "For Gandhi, religion is not only limited up to the concept and essence of God but it is a day-to-day practice. Our entire daily works, whether it is economics, politics, religion or all our deeds, are supposed to achieve the same distinctions. They are intermingled. They are interlinked or interdependent. Separately, they do not have any importance and relevance."<sup>2</sup> Truth and Ahimsa were



regarded as the highest values from the Vedic times, but these were not always applied in the practical life. They were given the highest place and practical shape by Mahatma Gandhi. He considered them as a means of achieving political, social and economic ends and there by as means of social reconstruction. Here our attempt is to recapitulate how Gandhiji had used Truth and Ahimsa in his nation-building work and how religion and morality played an important part in every sphere of his activity.

### **Truth and Ahimsa:-**

Ahimsa and Truth are the guiding principles of Gandhian philosophy and religion. Ahimsa according to him is the practical expression of Truth. There is no religion higher than Truth. Gandhiji held that Truth is the ideal of life and all his activities whether social, political or humanitarian were directed to the end of the search of Truth.

Gandhiji's assertion that Truth is God carries with it a great value in our religious life. He insisted that religion is based on Truth. The object of devotion should be Truth. This can help to create a sort of universal brotherhood in respect of religion because worship of Truth can unify persons belonging to different castes, creeds and religions. He was of opinion that all persons including the atheist can be brought under the religion of Truth. Again, reason could reject any thing but not Truth. This led him to say that "if it is at all possible for the human tongue to give the fullest description of God...then we must say that God is Truth ...But I went a step further and said Truth is God..."<sup>3</sup> Thus Truth provides common platform for all and it is the only factor which is completely universal and comprehensive. This, more than anything else lead Gandhiji to assert the primacy of Truth.

According to Gandhi, if Truth is God, Non-violence or Ahimsa is the way of realizing Him. It is the practical expression of Truth. It was a part of the spiritual discipline in Indian thought. It was Gandhi who transferred the ethics of Ahimsa from the individual to the social plane. Gandhiji always held that "In the course of the search for Truth, non-violence came to me. Its spread is my life mission. I have no interest in living except for the prosecution of that mission."<sup>4</sup> Thus an account of Gandhi's theory Truth necessarily takes us to the consideration of his views on the nature of non-violence.

According to Gandhi, Ahimsa is natural to man and once the spiritual side of man is awakened, his non-violent nature becomes apparent. Ahimsa in its positive aspect is nothing but love and love according to Gandhi is that energy that cleanses one's inner life and uplifts him. Ahimsa demands a sincere effort to free mind from feelings like anger, malice hatred, revenge, jealousy etc because these create obstacles in the way of love. Thus for Gandhi we see that the positive aspects of Ahimsa are more basic than its negative aspects since it represents an essential quality of mankind.

The practice of ahimsa requires an inner strength, which can only be generated



by a living faith in God. The love of God would turn into a love of humanity because a sincere faith in God will make man see that all human beings are fellow beings and essentially one. Gandhi thus showed that the realization of man's essential oneness with the entire creation and beyond that, with Supreme Reality or the Truth, is the fulfillment of human life. Hence we see that the method of reconstructing a non-violent society is based on the principles of Truth and Non-violence. The details to be followed show how Gandhi put his religious principles based on this Truth and Non-violence into practice in the field of politics.

### **Religious Philosophy of Gandhi:-**

Mahatma Gandhi cannot be regarded as originating any new system of philosophy. He only tried to assimilate in his own way the teachings that appealed to him. He tried to apply these teachings not only in his personal life but also to social, political and economic problems. He told that the whole gamut of man's activities constituted an indivisible whole and we cannot divide it into social, economic, political and purely religious work into watertight compartments. He remarked that a man who is trying to discover and follow the will of God cannot possibly leave a single field of life untouched. Religion provides a moral basis to all other activities which would otherwise lack reducing life into a maze of 'sound and fury signifying nothing'. This is the essence of Gandhism. It was this imperative which led Gandhi to spiritualize politics. Thus he wanted religion to be the life force or the guiding factor of all human activities.

Mahatma Gandhi's view of religion is highly practical as he believed that one could reach God only by service to man. He could not find God apart from humanity. His mission was not only to humanize religion but also to moralize it. He would reject any religious doctrine that was in conflict with morality. As it was stated by Gandhi "Let me explain what I mean by religion. It is not the Hindu religion...but the religion which transcends Hinduism...which changes one's very nature, which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and which ever purifier."<sup>5</sup> True religion and true morality are inseparably bound with each other. If religion in the sense of spiritual realization along with social advancement and freedom is the end; morality is the means. For Gandhi, "God is Truth, love, ethics and morality"<sup>6</sup>. He regarded non-violence as the means to morality. He held it as the supreme virtue and the guiding factor of all affairs of life. It is also the means to attain Truth which is another name of God.

### **Religion and Politics:-**

It is commonly believed that politics has nothing to do with religion, morality and spirituality. These are assumed to be the subject of personal and private life. Gandhi proved himself as a revolutionary political thinker and activist by asserting that they cannot be divorced from politics and other corporate forms of our life. "Gandhi's approach was deductive empirical and pragmatic. He deduced certain conclusions from his basic assumptions- metaphysical and ethical. Metaphysics, Ethics Economics,



Sociology and Politics were intertwined. He was for, in Toynbee's language, 'etherialisation', that is, spiritualization, of politics. Spiritualizing meant for Gandhi moralizing."<sup>7</sup> Thus his politics can rightly be called religious politics.

As Gandhiji was a politician with unshakable religious convictions he was of opinion that politics cannot be separated from religion. According to him, both had the same ideal of service to mankind. By introducing religion into politics Gandhiji wanted to introduce morality into politics. He said, "...that is why my devotion to Truth has drawn me into the field of politics; and I can say without the slightest hesitation and yet in all humility, that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means".<sup>8</sup> He clung to the moral and religious considerations even in the fields of politics. And he did not hesitate to say that "my politics and all other activities of mine are derived from my religion."<sup>9</sup> Thus Gandhiji clearly points out that his political outlook was influenced by the spirit of religion.

### **Current Challenges in Indian Politics:-**

Indian political situation is currently passing through a difficult phase. The entire political set up has been experiencing streams, break-ups and changes. The political situation today is such that no party in single or alliance with another party or parties has the strength to emerge as a dominant party. There is no guarantee that a government formed by any political party with the help of its allies would last for the full term. Political instability in turn gives rise to manipulative politics. All that has happened during the last few years explodes the myth of the success of the party system and India's claim being the largest functioning democracy in the world.

The constitution can provide only the organs of the state such as the Legislature, the Executive and the Judiciary. The factors on which the workings of these organs of the State depend are the people and political parties they set up as their instruments to carry out their wishes and their policies. Unfortunately, the political parties and political leaders belied the expectations of the frames of the Constitution and became the fountains of evil practices. Moreover, in our present system the voters have only negative role. That is to say, the voters can throw the government and parties out of power periodically but they are helpless in ensuring that those who are brought to power strictly adhere to moral and constitutional values and abide by the commitments made in the election manifestoes. Again, politicians all over the world are accustomed to a double speak. But the politicians in India excel in this. They always speak one thing and mean quite opposite. They also apply double standards to everything and profess what they do not practice. The politicians not only devalued democratic institutions like judiciary and the Parliament, but also the post of the Speaker. In India, the Speakers, both in the Parliament and the State Assemblies, are forced to function as the agents of party they represent.

Politics of modern civilization is nothing more than a game of deception, exploitation, coercion, and suppression which tend to foment quarrels, division and



fighters. This was stated by H. A. Gani, when he wrote “Morality is the *sine qua non* for the effective functioning of any political system. But it is a matter of great pity that political climate in our country has been devoid of moral values. It is full of deceit, dishonesty and all types of corrupt practices. The conspicuous absence of adherence to basic moral tenets is one of the main reasons for our present day political degeneration. Today, politics has become so unprincipled and opportunistic as at no time in the history of our country. As far as morality is concerned, no political party is clean. The difference is only one of degree.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, it is a symbol of power politics and is little concerned with duty and service of human kind which should be the goal of real politics.

The value of political parties should be judged by their principles and programs and not by their success in votes catching. Proper forms of government should also aim at the achievement of the human values. So political parties should find place for moral values which in turn leads to spiritual development.

Gandhiji’s message of love, search for truth and passion for non-violence serve as a beaconing light to show humanity the right direction. Perhaps no other personality in modern India has proved so much appraisal as did Gandhi. He may be regarded as a symbolic expression of an epoch characterized by moral and ethical values cutting each other. Standing firmly in the industrially and scientifically advanced society, he sought heroically to establish in society loyalty to humanistic values, which he himself deemed to eternal. He always stressed the importance of making use of the achievements of science and technology only for human betterment. For this, he found that it was necessary to combine politics with religious or moral values. He insisted that ethics or religion should be the guide and foundation of politics.

#### **Spiritualization of Politics by Gandhi:-**

The principles of Truth and Non-violence which forms the pivot of Gandhi’s political activity are basically religious principles. He brought down these principles from the heights of spiritualization to the day to day life of common man. By this he wanted to show that there is nothing bad about politics if it was guided by moral and religious principles. Hence he stated that, “...for me there is no politics devoid of religion. ...politics bereft of religion is a death trap because it kills the soul”<sup>11</sup> He firmly held that success in politics should be achieved only by truthful means. Thus Gandhiji revolutionized politics by introducing the maxims of ethics and religion.

Gandhi basically believed in the unity of religion and politics. Politics divorced from religion, according to him becomes debasing and is like a corpse only fit to be buried. He is firm in his opinion that the degeneration of modern civilization and particularly politics is only because it has been divorced from religion. Politics and religion are often seen degenerated because we are attempting to separate them.

As we have seen earlier, the basic concepts of both religion and morality in Gandhian scheme of thought are truth and non-violence. Gandhi held that the foundation



of every religion is morality and there is no difference between sects regarding their moral foundations. As stated by Upasana Pandey, "Religion is one which can flourish an individual's moral and ethical nature. According to Gandhi, the essence of religion lies in morality and humanity. For a true morality religion plays a similar role as water plays for seed within clay".<sup>12</sup> Gandhi held Gokhale as his political guru. He saw in his politics, the politics of selfless service. To him Gokhale stood for spiritualizing the political life and the political institutions. This kind of politics can only possible when truth, fearlessness and non-violence are dominant factors and only when a person can devote himself unselfishly to the service of the nation. Thus, for Gandhi, there is no politics devoid of religion and morality. Gandhi both by his principle and conduct advocated the religious politics to be adopted by the humanity.

The implication of religious politics of Gandhi can be seen in his different techniques of solving the political problems and framing the blue print of a non-violent or Sarvodaya order of society. The positive concepts of Gandhian politics like Sarvodaya, swadeshi, satyagraha, communal harmony, social justice, grama swaraj, decentralized polity and economy, and the concept of a state, Trusteeship are all based on his concept of truth and non-violence and hence they may legitimately be called the manifestation of his religious politics. Last but not the least, his concept of non-violent state is in itself the embodiment of religion in politics. Gandhi not only lived and died with religious politics but also institutionalized politics with the essence of religion. This religious politics of Mahatma Gandhi is hundred percent relevant in the modern scenario when the world is facing the different manifestations of violence.

Satyagraha was introduced by Gandhi into politics as a technique of Truth and Ahimsa. From the very word it follows that it is 'agraha' of 'satya' and thus it means holding fast to truth. As a means it implies sticking to the truth while endeavoring to procure the end through such non-violent methods as non-co-operation and fasting. It was in the political field that Gandhi made successful use of this means.

In fact, Satyagraha appears to Gandhi almost as a religious pursuit. It rests on a religious belief that there is one God behind everything and being, and as such the same God resides in every one of us. Gandhiji describes it as a force against violence based on love. Thus Satyagraha is based on the conviction that through love, ahimsa and conscious suffering, the forces of evil can be neutralized because this is the Divine way, the way of Truth. Gandhi believed that this technique is universal in its applications. It is the most powerful weapon to resist violence and secure social, economic or political emancipation.

Thus Gandhi tries to introduce morality in politics and this he does by presupposing that even political activity is an aspect of the spiritual pattern that guides the world. He works out his political ideas strictly in accordance with his religious beliefs. All men are essentially one, there is an element of essential goodness in every man and therefore even in politics distrust, hatred immorality etc should not have any



place . So in politics he made experiments and successfully worked on the conviction that hate and violence could be conquered by love and suffering.

**.Concluding Remarks:-**

To conclude, we can say the greatest contribution of Gandhi lies in transforming religion from a system of ritual into a practical code of conduct. This was the new interpretation that he gave to religion. This trend of socializing religion started in India during the time of Sri Ramakrishna and was further advanced by Swami Vivekananda and culminated in Mahatma Gandhi. He himself gave a religious color to every field of action. The political system that is guided by the forces of religion can withstand the most difficult circumstances.

In the realm of reality which he expressed as ‘Truth’ he maintained that reality is neither wholly material nor wholly spiritual but a combination of both. We can also say that in the religious stand point Gandhi successfully synthesized theism and atheism when he declared reality as ‘Truth’ . In the field of morality and values Gandhi sought to bring about a synthesis between ends and means.

From the above account it is clear that if leaders of today are influenced by similar virtues of religion, it will go a long way in reducing the present crisis in India. Political life as we find today stands blind to all religious values. Our age needs politicians who are not merely motivated by the considerations of power and economic gains but by human considerations. As it is said in the last chapter of the Bhagavad-Gita Gandhi wanted the spiritual vision and social service to go together .Here he indicated the double purpose of human life i.e., personal perfection and social efficiency. Gandhiji tried to emphasize this particular point to bring about a peaceful condition of human existence. It is expected that this Gandhian technique will bring about a revolution in the near future, if not immediately.

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