CHAPTER TWO:

Gandhi on Fundamental ethics of Hinduism:

Gandhi regards Hindu religion as a Dharma, a way of life. Dharma is the law that governs all our actions. Dharma is the path of righteousness and living one's life according to the codes of conduct as described by the Hindu scriptures. Dharma is the moral law combined with spiritual discipline that guides one's life. Hindus considers dharma the very foundation of life. It means "that which hold" the people of this world and the whole creation. Dharma is the law of being without which things cannot exist. According to Gandhi Hindu religion gives the votary the largest scope for self-expression. Its freedom from dogma makes a forcible appeal to him. Not being an exclusive religion, it enables the followers of that faith not merely to respect all the other religions, but it also enables them to admire and assimilate whatever maybe good in the other faiths.

Gandhi holds that Non-violence is common to all religions, but it has found the highest expression and application in Hinduism. For Hinduism believes in the oneness not merely of all human life but in the oneness of all that lives. In his

---

1 It might be noted here that Gandhi do not regard Jainism or Buddhism separate from Hinduism. M.K. Gandhi, Truth is God, Navajivan Publishing house, 1955.,pp-70.
opinion, its worship of the cow is its unique contribution to the evolution of humanitarianism. The cow to him means the entire sub-human world. Man through the cow is enjoined to realize his identity with all that lives. It is the practical application of the belief in the oneness and therefore, sacredness of all life.

Gandhi was proud to belong to that Hinduism which is all-inclusive and which stood for tolerance. Hinduism pay equal homage to the best of Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Judaism. He call himself a Sanatani Hindu because he believe in the Vedas, Upanishads, the Puranas and the writings left by holy reformers. This belief does not require him to accept as authentic everything that passes as Shastras, nor this belief required him to accept the interpretations of the pundits. For he rejects everything that contradicts the fundamental principles of morality. He believe in the Hindu abhorism that no one truly knows the Shastras who has not attained perfection in Innocence(Ahimsa), Truth(Satya), and Self-control(Brahmacharya) and one who has not renounced all acquisition or possession of wealth. According to him, a Hindu is one who believes in God, immortality of the soul, transmigration, the law of Karma and Moksha, and who tries to practise Truth and Ahimsa in daily life, and tries to act according to the law of Varnashrama. Ahimsa to him is the chief glory of Hinduism but unfortunately it has been sought to be explained away by us as being meant only for Sannyasis. He do not share this view. He holds that Ahimsa is the way of life. The chief value, Gandhi argues, of Hinduism lies in holding the actual belief that all life is one. i.e, not only human beings, but all sentient beings is one; all life coming from the one universal source, call it Allah, God or Parameshwara.

\[2\] M.k Gandhi, In search of the supreme vol-III.pp-95
This unity of all life is a peculiarity of Hinduism which confines salvation not to human beings alone but for all God’s creatures. In it there is room for worship of all prophets of the world. Hinduism tell everyone to worship God according to his own faith or Dharma, and so it lives at peace with all religions.

Gandhi recognized the need for living symbols embodying human ideals. He was impressed by the ethical and spiritual outlook of Hinduism. He holds that he do not disbelieve in idol-worship. Idol-worship is part of human nature. We hanker after symbolism. Images are an aid to worship. No Hindu considers an image to be God. Therefore, he do not consider idol-worship to be a sin. Gandhi disputes the description that Hindus believe in many Gods and are idolaters. They say there are many Gods, but they also declare unmistakably that there is one God, the God of Gods, Devadhideva. It is therefore, not proper to suggest that Hindus believe in many Gods. He said it is not the stone we worship but it is God we worship in images of stone or metal, however rude they may be.

That being his conception of Hinduism, he has never been able to reconcile himself to Untouchability. He was against untouchability, the greatest plague of the Hindu society. Untouchability is repugnant to reason and to the instinct of mercy, or love. It has no sanction in the shastras. It is against the Shastras. For God cannot have created one man high and another low.³ He argues that it is against the fundamental principles of humanity, it is against the dictates of reason that a man by mere reason of birth, should be forever regarded an

³M.K Gandhi., Harijan, “Acid test of Hinduism”, 1933, pp-7
untouchable, even unapproachable and unseeable. The tragedy of all these is that millions of Hindus believe in this institution as if it was enjoined by the Hindu religion. He believe that it is our duty to make a ceaseless effort to bring about a change of heart among millions of Hindus. But no one can be forced to do so, as Religion and force, to Gandhi, are incompatible. The whole of Hinduism has to be purified. The superior Hindu heart has to melt. If Hinduism is to live, then untouchability has got to go.

Gandhi argues that according to Hinduism, Truth is the ultimate end of life and Ahimsa is its means. Gandhi sees clearly that according to Hinduism, to realize God, to realize liberation (Moksha) is essentially the same as to realize ethical perfection, and pursuit of non-violence, which he believes, is the root of all morality (dharma), is its means. According to the theory of Purusharathas of Hinduism, pursuits of wealth (Artha) and pleasure (Kama) within the limits of morality is necessary not only for the pursuit of moksha but also for development of prosperities in society. A liberated life (Jivanmukta) is a perfect ethical life of universal love which is intrinsically a life of happiness of the highest kind (see for example, the Bhagawadgita 6.20-23, 5.20-28). Any human being through conscious effort can pursue liberation and progress towards it from evil to good life, from

---

4 M. K. Gandhi, “acid test of Hinduism”, Harijan, 1933, pp-7
5 M. K. Gandhi. “True inwardness”, Harijan, 1933, pp-4
good life to unselfish desireless good life and from it to liberated life (see for example, The Bhagavadgita 9.32-33, 18.45 etc). But What does living virtuously mean to Hindus according to Gandhi ?. It is following the natural and essential guidelines of dharma and the 5 yamas and 5 niyamas - ancient scriptural injunctions for all aspects of human thought, attitude and behavior.

Pursuit of morality essentially involves pursuit of universal ethical values (SadharanaDharmas) as well as special ethical values(Varnasharmadharmas). The Sadharanadharmas and the Varnashramadharmas together constitute the morality of the Hindus, i.e., morality as represented in a code of external acts and requiring outward conformity. Manu distinguishes between relative duties (Varnashramadharmas)i.e; duties relative to one’s station in life, and common duties (Sadharanadharmas), i.e., duties of universal scope and validity. The relative duties are the specific duties relating to one’s station in life, i.e., one’s station as determined by one’s varna or caste and one’s asrama or particular stage of life. These relative duties however do not constitute the entire field of the moral life. Besides these, there is also a code of common duties or Sadharanadharmas which every man must observe whatever his social position or individual capacity. The common duties or the universal duties are the duties irrespective of one’s age, individual capacity, social status, nationality, caste or creed, i.e., duties obligatory on man as man and not as a member of a particular community or social class or as being at a particular stage or period of life.

Hinduism lays great emphasis on ethical discipline. Yama (self-restraint)
and Niyama (religious observances or canons) are the foundations of Yoga and Vedanta. They constitute the core of the Universal virtues (Sadharana dharmas). Yamas and Niyamas constitute the highest ethics. Yamas, the cardinal virtues according to Yogashastra are:

1) Ahimsa (Non-violence),
2) Satya (Truth),
3) Asteya (Non-stealing),
4) Bhrahmacharya (Celibacy), and
5) Aparigraha (Non-possession); and

The Niyamas or the casual virtues are, according to the same authority,

1) Shaucha (bodily purity),
2) Santosha (contentment),
3) Tapas (forbearance),
4) Swadhyaya (study of scriptures), and
5) Ishwara Pranidhana (resignation to the will of God).

The Yamas are thus the duties of self-restraint, even veracity implying restraint in this sense, i.e., restraint of the self’s tendency to exaggeration and misrepresentation in the interest of momentary self-advantage. The Niyamas on the contrary are rules of self-realisation, i.e., the realisation of the self’s true essence.
as Spirits. Thus while the Yamas are negative and restrictive, the Niyamas are positive and objective rules of self-expansion and development. These yamas are not limited by class, country, time, or situation. Hence they are called the universal great vows. The inner science of yama and niyama is that they are the means to control the ‘vitarkas,’ i.e., the evil or negative mental thoughts. When acted upon, these thoughts result in injury to others, untruthfulness hoarding, discontent, indolence or selfishness. By each vitarka, we can create its opposite through yama and niyama, and make our life successful. The restraints and their corresponding practices are necessary to maintain bliss consciousness, as well as all of the good feelings toward oneself and others attainable in any incarnation. These restraints and practices build character for Character is the foundation for spiritual unfoldment.

The mark of Dharma is Achara or good conduct. Man attains prosperity and fame through the practice of Dharma. Good conduct is the highest Dharma. It is the root of all Tapas or austerities. Righteousness, truth and good works, power and prosperity - all originate from conduct.

The above discussion shows that all the duties have reference to the attainment of the individual’s own perfection. Therefore it follows that Hindu morality primarily aimed at the autonomy of the individual, i.e., at making him self-sufficient and self-dependent and free from all external bonds, physical and social. According to Gandhi, the above list, is the ethical rule of life, and it is the same for all religions, i.e., the ethical rule of life is the same for all, viz; inoffensiveness, truth, Sexual purity, Patience, non-theiving, freedom from wrath and greed, Compassion,

---

6 Sushil Kumar Maitra, The ethics of the Hindus, Asian publication services, New Delhi, India. First published-1925, First APS Reprint-1978, pp-8
moderate diet, etc. According to Hindu idea, no man can help another in the attainment of his end; just as he cannot reap what another has sown so also he cannot help another to his fruition. The Sadharanadharmas are the duties of universal scope and validity and are to be distinguished from the merely relative duties. The idea underlying this classification is that, two kinds of service are obligatory on every individual for the protection and help spiritual as well as material accorded to him by his fellow beings. In the first place it is necessary that he should pay off his debt to his particular community in a specific way according to his capacity for the special advantages and opportunities of life it provides for. And besides his community, he is also indebted to mankind in general, by whose culture and experience through the trials of life he profits in his career through the world. It is therefore necessary that he should pay off this larger debt by assisting the cause of humanity in general and seeking the common good as distinguished from the good of his own community. This is the inner significance of the scheme of Sadharanadharmas which is thus a check to communal egoism seeking as it does an equitable adjustment of the relative claims of communities in a larger ethics of humanity.  

It is clear from above that the Sadharanadharmas constitute the foundation of the Varnashramadharms. The Brahmin, for example, in performing his religious sacrifice must not appropriate another’s property for the purpose, non-appropriation being one of the common and universal duties. In this way he serves his own community as well as the cause of humanity as a whole.

---

7 Ibid, pp- 3
The duties of Varna and Ashrama together constitute the code of relative duties, the
duties of station of life, the duties obligatory on the individual in consequence of
social status, temperament, specific power and capacities. Gandhi holds that
Hinduism is another name for varnashramadharma. Varnashramadharmas are not
directed merely to the good of humanity, they also subserve the purpose of the
common good of humanity. Therefore the individual of a specific community who
observes the duties of his class does not serve his own community merely, but also
and in the same process, all other communities according to their deserts and needs
and in this way the whole of community itself. The Dharma (religion or law) that
Hindus have professed to observe is varnashramadharma. Hinduism is nothing
without the law of varna and Ashrama. Hinduism lays down four Ashramas or
stages- the life of a Brahmachari (continent student), the life of Grihastha
(householder), the life of vanprastha(who has retired) and the life of a Sannyasi
(renunciator)- through which every Hindu has to pass to fulfil his purpose in life.
These four stages represents a ladder of growth and are interdependent. Gandhi
though opines that all these today are observed in name but not in spirit. For
example the life of householders of today is one of indulgence. In doing so we
fulfil the law of the flesh and not of the spirit. Same is the case with the fourth stage.
Today it is observed merely in name to a small extent. Gandhi suggest that it can be
revived only if the law of varna with which it is intimately interlinked is revived.8

Gandhi argues that the law of varna today can certainly said to exist,
though in a distorted form. There are four varnas but today, it is divided into
countless castes. He would define the law of varna means that everyone should

8 M.K Gandhi, in search of the supreme, vol.III., pp-124-125
follow as a matter of Dharma-duty, so far as it is not inconsistent with fundamental ethics. Varna is intimately connected with birth, and the observance of the law of varna means the following on the part of us all the hereditary and traditional calling of our forefathers in a spirit of duty. Though the law of varna is a special discovery of some Hindu seer, it has universal application. It is not only for the Hindu but for the whole of humanity. Every religion has some distinguishing characteristic, but if it expresses a principle or law, it ought to have universal application. That is how he look at the law of Varna. The four Varnas have been compared in the Vedas to the four members of the body to indicate that all of them are equally important and there is no superiority and inferiority. In his opinion, Varnashrama is inherent in human nature. Not to abide by one’s varna is to disregard the law of heredity. He do not believe that inter-dining or even enter-marriage necessarily deprives a man of his status that his birth has given him. The four divisions define a man’s calling, they do not restrict or regulate social intercourse. The divisions define duties and they do not confer privileges. He holds that it is against the genius of Hinduism to claim to oneself a higher status or assign to another a lower status. All are born to serve God’s creation, a Brahmana with his knowledge, a kshatriya with his power of protection, a Vaishya with his commercial ability and a shudra with bodily labour. However this does not that a Brahmana is absolved from bodily labour, or the duty of protecting himself and others. His birth makes a Brahmana predominantly a man of knowledge, the fittest by heredity and training to impart it

---

9 Ibid., pp-125
to others. Again likewise, there is nothing to prevent the Shudra from acquiring all the knowledge he wishes. Only that he will best serve with his body and need not envy others their special qualities for service.

He believes in Varna which is based on hereditary occupations. Varnashrama is nothing, as noted above, but a division of labour or duty. Varnas are four to mark four universal occupations— one is the repository of knowledge or imparting knowledge, the other is that of power or defending the defenceless, the third is that of wealth or carrying on agriculture and commerce, and the fourth is that of service or performing service through physical labour. These occupations are common to all mankind, but Hinduism having recognised them as the law of our being, has made use of it in regulating social relations and conduct. All these four labours are regarded as duties to be discharged by everyone of them for the protection and advancement of Dharma, and everyone who performs his duty to the best of his knowledge and ability gains equal merit with the rest. The merit, therefore, consists not in being one or the other, but in the performance of the duty assigned to it. According to him, there is no superiority and inferiority in the original conception of Varnadharma, and this is considered to be the essence of Varnadharma. For him it is not a system of water tight compartments. A Brahmana is not only a teacher, he is only predominantly that. A Brahmana who refuses to labour will be voted down as an idiot. A Brahmana is one who knows God. Divine

---

10 Ibid, pp- 151
knowledge is not borrowed from books. It has to be realized in oneself. Books are just an aid. A learned Brahmana had to learn divine wisdom from a God-fearing butcher. The Rishis of old who lived in the forests, cut and fetched wood, tended cattle and even fought. But their pursuit in life was pre-eminently search after Truth. Similarly a Rajput without learning was good for nothing, no matter how well he wielded the sword. Same goes for the Vaishya without divine knowledge sufficient for his own growth will be a veritable monster eating into the vitals of society. It is not Occupation but Character that determines the man. The law of Varna is the law of one's being which one has to fulfil. The fulfilment should be spontaneous and no matter of honour or shame. Varna is determined by birth, but can be retained only by observing its obligations. One who is born of Brahmana parents cannot be called a Brahmana, if his life fails to reveal the attributes of a Brahmana. On the other hand, one who is born not a Brahmana but reveals in his conduct the attributes of a Brahmana, i.e., one who imparts knowledge in a spirit of service, with no superior airs, will be true servants of society and will be regarded as a Brahmana. Varna thus conceived is no man-made institution but the law of life universally governing the human family. Fulfilment of the law makes life livable, spreads peace and content, end all clashes and conflicts. Its due observance, if done in a spirit of duty and service, will end the conflicting inequalities and give place to an equality in diversity. Varnashrama in Gandhi's understanding, satisfies the religious, social and economic needs of a community. Observance of the law removes social evils and entirely prevents the killing economic competition. He opines that if it is regarded as a law, their duties, and not the right or the privileges of a community governed by it, it ensures the fairest possible distribution of wealth, though it may not be an ideal, i.e., strictly equal distribution. Therefore, when people in disregard of the law
mistake duties for privileges and try to pick and choose occupations for self-advancement, it leads to confusion of Varna and ultimate disruption of society. According to his conception of Varna, all inequality is ruled out of life. Inequality of intellect or in material possessions ought not to mean inequality of social status. And since the primary wants of all are the same, all labour should carry the same value. The four divisions are not a vertical section, but a horizontal plane on which all stand on a footing of equality doing the services respectively assigned to them. A life of religion is not a life of privileges but of duty. For privileges may come from a due fulfilment of duty.

Unfortunately today, in Gandhi’s opinion, Varna is not a real Varna in modern Hinduism. The present ideas of cow-worship and Varnashrama are a caricature of what the originals are. However the central fact of Hinduism is cow protection. This concept of cow worship and cow protection today is one of the greatly misunderstood concepts, not only to the followers of Hinduism, but largely to the people of other religious faiths as well. To him, cow protection is one of the most wonderful phenomena in human evolution. It takes human being beyond his species. As I’ve mentioned earlier above in the starting point of this chapter, the cow to him means the entire sub-human world. Man through the cow is enjoined to realize his identity with all that lives. Cow protection is the gift of Hinduism to the world. It is a denial of Hinduism and Ahimsa to kill a human being to protect a cow. Hindus are enjoined to protect the cow by their tapasya, by self-purification, by self-
sacrifice. By every act of cruelty to our cattle, we disown God and Hinduism. He holds that Hindus will not be judged by their tilaks (caste mark used on fore-head), not by the correct chanting of mantras (verses in religious text/vedic hymn or sacred prayer), not by their pilgrimages, not by their most punctilious observance of caste rules, but by their ability to protect the cow.\textsuperscript{11}

Today in modern Hinduism varna is said to be in its most distorted form. In an age where competition is held to be the law of life, and possession in the largest measure of the world’s goods the summum bonum, and when everyone counts oneself free to follow any calling one likes, this attempt to hold up Varna as the law of life may be regarded as an idle dream, and an attempt to revive it as childish folly. He admits that this Varnashramadhrama is not being observed in its purity. There is an utter confusion of Varna. We have to understand its real purpose and revive it. Today Varna means gradations of high and low. It is hideous travesty of the original.\textsuperscript{12} Its abuse of varna resulted in innumerable caste with unnecessary and harmful restrictions as to inter-marriage and inter-dining. Whereas the law of Varna has nothing to do with these restrictions. People of different Varnas may inter-marry and inter-dine. These restrictions may be necessary in the interest of chastity and hygiene. A Brahmana who marries a Shudra girl or vice versa commits no offence against the law of Varna. He sees no objection to such unions. Hinduism is in danger of losing its substance if it resolves itself into a matter of elaborate rules as to what and with whom to eat.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid, p-119

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, pp- 126
According to him a man eating meat but living in the fear of God is nearer his freedom than a man religiously abstaining from meat and many other things but blaspheming God in every one of his acts. He wants to make clear that abstainion from intoxicating drinks and drugs, and from kinds of foods, especially meat is no doubt a great aid to the evolution of the spirit, but it is by no means an end in itself. He does not believe that inter-dining or even inter-marriage necessarily deprives a man of his status that his birth has given him. But one thing to be noted is that he does not for a moment suggests that there should be no restrictions about food and drinks or about marital relations. Strict restraint is the law of life and should therefore govern these relations. He does not regard himself it a duty to eat whatever is offered and in whatever company one should chance to be, and he regard it as nothing short of indulgence to marry according to one’s fancy. For Hinduism rules out indulgence and multiplication of wants as these hamper one’s growth to the ultimate identity with the universal self. And man is not an omnivorous animal, nor he may pick up his mate where ever he likes. But restrictions on marital or social relations have nothing to do with Varnadharma, which is a different thing altogether. In ancient times there were no watertight compartments between Varnas, so far as marital and social relations went. The four divisions define a man’s calling, they do not restrict or regulate social intercourse. This law (law of Varna), as he understand it, is not and never has been a mere ceremonial rule regulating the restrictions on eating and marrying. We have done a grave harm to Hinduism in making Varna a mere matter of restrictions about food, drink and marriage. What is essential, therefore, is that one must seek one’s livelihood from following the vocation to which one is born. It is his conviction that obedience to that law alone can save the perishing world. Its

\[
\text{Thy life}
\]
conscious recognition means contentment and consequent freeing of human energy for the moral uplift. Its disregard spells unhealthy discontent, greed, cut-throat competition and moral stagnation ending in spiritual suicide.