CHAPTER V
METAPHYSICAL FOUNDATIONS OF GANDHI'S WORLD-VIEW - III

THE ULTIMATE GOAL: SELF-REALIZATION

The upshot of the preceding discussion shows that Gandhi considered the human individual to be the manifestation of God. His concept of self identifies a lower and a Higher Self. The Higher Self which according to Gandhi is the Real Self is non-dual with the Ultimate Reality i.e., Truth or God. Yet there is apparently a gulf between man and God because the soul is immersed in ignorance or avidya as it is called in Vedanta philosophy (1). Getting rid of this gulf and realization of the Ultimate Reality is the purpose and goal of life and Gandhi calls this Self-realization, the Summum Bonum of life.

V. 0. 1. Self-realization, a comprehensive concept

In the introduction to his Autobiography Gandhi writes:

What I want to achieve and what I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years is self-realization, to see God face to face to attain Moksha (literally freedom from birth and death. The nearest English equivalent is Salvation). I live and move and have my being in pursuit of this goal. All that I do by way of speaking and writing, and all my ventures in the political field are directed to this same end (2).

He further says: "Man's ultimate aim is the realization of God and all his activities, social, political, religious have to be guided by the ultimate aim of the vision of God" (3). Thus as Gandhi postulates self-realization as the ultimate goal of life towards which all his activities should lead man, it is indisputable that it is the central and seminal point of his world-view. Therefore, a brief discussion of his ideas of self-realization is called for here.

It is necessary to point out at the outset itself that Gandhi uses the terms self-realization, God-realization, moksha, salvation, liberation and freedom synonymously and alternatively.

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As is well-known, in the choice and use of words, as in all other matters relating to life, Gandhi was meticulous to the core. So it is clear that Gandhi used these words alternatively with a purpose. The word salvation is more religious than philosophical, the philosophical terminology being liberation or freedom. In the Western or Semitic context the connotation of the word salvation is theological. All these nuances are incorporated in the Sanskrit term *Moksha* (4). Thus we can infer with a fair degree of accuracy that it was to highlight the comprehensive and complex nature of the concept of self-realization that Gandhi used these words alternatively.

Self-realization or salvation is the ideal of all great religions.

The divinizing of the life of man in the individual and the races is the dream of the great religions. It is the *moksha* of the Hindus, the *nirvana* of the Buddhists, the Kingdom of Heaven of the Christians... It is the realization of one's native form, the restoration of one's integrity of being (5).

As Gandhi's indebtedness to Hindu thought in this respect is quite obvious a short exposition of the Hindu idea of *moksha* would facilitate a better understanding of Gandhi's vision of self-realization.

V. 0. 2. The Hindu view of moksha

a) The *purusharthas*: the Hindu goals of life.

In Hindu social philosophy human values or aspirations—*purusharthas*—are classified into *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha*. *Moksha* is referred to as the *parama purushartha*, the supreme human value or goal. It is the highest ideal and thus it occupies a cardinal place in the scheme. It is considered the end (intrinsic) value where as *dharma*, *artha* and *kama* are means (instrumental) values (6). For the realization of the ultimate value, the empirical values of *artha* which connotes the normal economic and material necessities and activities of human life
and kama which includes all normal human desires ranging from instinctive desires, sentiments and emotions to the aesthetic yearning of the spirit for beauty have to be properly nourished with the value of dharma playing a regulative and restrictive role on the exercise of the other two means values. The realization of the ultimate requires the instrumentality of the lower ones and thus they are integrated into a unified system.

b) The nature of self-realization: an overview

Although there is near unanimity among different religions that the ideal of self-realization is the Summum Bonum of life, there are divergent views regarding the nature of the ideal and the means to achieve it (7). Is it possible to achieve self-realization in this life itself? Is it not an eschatological ideal which rests on mere speculation and dogma and, therefore, unacceptable on philosophical grounds? As a detailed investigation of such questions is beyond the scope of the present discussion, we will restrict ourselves to a concise statement of the general conception of moksha in Hindu thought.

According to the Upanishads man is caught in the trammels of mundane existence in which he is beset with the consciousness of plurality and individuality (8). But from the absolute point of view,

Soul is identical with God. There is in us something uncreated, something higher than all our highest faculties, something untouched by sin or suffering. The real "I" is "That". But in actuality we find the soul subject to upadhis (natural limitations) which prevent it from realising its identity. All our sin and suffering are due to the false notion of a separate self. Therefore, our salvation consists in overcoming this separateness by righteousness, by love and spiritual insight. A man has to go out of himself and feel the oneness of all being in God. And this feeling should become not a mere passing emotion, but an abiding passion. Then the scales fall from his eyes, the vision of God comes to him and he realises the truth of the mahavakyas of the sruti. This is his moksha or liberation. As it is an eternal state, it is not something that is strictly speaking, attained, but something that is only realized. It is the awakening of the soul into the divine life.
and coming into its own. The Upanishad says: he who knows the truly Supreme Brahman becomes Brahman (9).

Dr. Radhakrishnan elegantly summarises the Hindu position on moksha thus:

Moksha is spiritual realization. The Hindu Dharma says, man does not live by bread alone. nor by his works, capital, ambition or power or relations to external nature. He lives or must live by his life of spirit. Moksha is self-emancipation, the fulfilment of the spirit in us in the heart of the eternal. This is what gives ultimate satisfaction and all other activities are directed to the realization of this end (10).

Concerning the question of the possibility of achieving self-realization in this life itself, it has been pointed out that thanks to the presence of positive approach in Hindu thought the moksha ideal is brought within the sphere of experience and empirical verification as jivan mukti or deliverance during life (11). There is nothing to prevent a man from reaching this state even in this life. A man who has reached this state in this life is called jivan mukta... A jivan mukta acts in this world... but he is absolutely free (12). There is also the concept of videhamukti i.e., liberation from the body which is considered by the Jains to be actual liberation (13). Sankara's position vis-a-vis moksha is held to be different from the above views. He conceives salvation as sasvata-muktā which means breaking the bondage of samsara i.e., mundane existence and release from the chain of birth and death through unitary consciousness variously called Brahmājnana, Brhama-sakshatkara, Brhama-anubhava etc. (14).

But there is a different view about Sankara's hypothesis that he does not say that absorption of the individual in the eternal Brahman is possible only when release is attained. There are passages in Sankara "which indicate that while the released Soul attains at the very moment of release a universality of spirit, it yet retains its individuality as a centre of action as
long as the cosmic process continues" (15). Commenting on Sankara's position Dr. Radhakrishnan continues:

The freed soul, so long as the cosmic process continues, participates in it and returns to embodied existence not for its own sake but for the sake of the whole. He has the feeling of kinship with all (sarvatma dhava). He identifies himself with the universal movement and follows its course (16).

The loss of individuality or perfect emancipation or eternal salvation - sasvata muktı - happens only when the world is redeemed, when the multiple values figured out in it are achieved, when all individuals gain life eternal (17). Although it is difficult to conceive of such perfection, Hindu thought visualises a time "when all individuals will become sons of God and be received into the glory of immortality. . . . Earth and Heaven would be no more, the timeless and the transcendent alone remains" (18).

c) Paths to liberation

As to the methods of attaining freedom or salvation, the Hindu thinker, according to Dr. Radhakrishnan, adopted a very catholic attitude (19). Thus there are three different paths to liberation viz., path of action or service (karma yoga), path of devotion (bhaktı yoga), and path of knowledge (jnana yoga) (20).

In the path of action the emphasis is on action, on work (21). "All action is karma", says Swami Vivekananda (22). By action is meant all the daily activities pertaining to one's state of life (23). Vinoba says that in karma yoga the emphasis is on the performance of 'svadharma' (one's own dharma or duties) because it comes to us naturally, "as we ar born svadharma is also born with us" (24). Vinoba explains svadharma thus: "if there is one strong support for man's life it is the performance of svadharma. All the superstructure has to be built on svadharma. The strength of the superstructure depends on the strength of the foundation" (25). The secret of karma yoga is that one must
perform one's duties in a spirit of detachment, renouncing the fruits of action, as the Gita puts it. This is the most easy of the three paths leading to salvation. "Ease in practice distinguishes karma yoga from sanyasa. . . . for the seeker karma yoga is easy" (26).

Path of devotion or bhakti yoga, according to Vivekananda, is "a real, genuine search after the Lord, a search beginning continuing and ending in love . . . . Bhakti is intense love of God" (27). Because of this intense love born out of an unflinching faith in God, a devotee surrenders himself totally before God. Depending upon the spiritual accomplishments of the devotee, there are various levels or degrees of devotion. Vinoba speaks of (1) sakama bhakta, i.e., one who prays for some reward, (2) the disinterested but partial bhakta, and (3) the jnani, the seer or the perfect bhakta (28). But Vinoba also asserts that all the three types of devotion are the branches and twigs of the tree of devotion, and will certainly lead the concerned to God-realization (29). "Devotion to the Lord, bhakti, is a wonderful means for attaining him" (30).

The third path is that of knowledge or jnana-yoga and it consists in acquiring and following the greatest knowledge, knowledge of the eternal reality, Brahma vidya as the means of achieving what the Gita calls Brahma-nirvana i.e., liberation into the Ultimate (31). And the core of this knowledge is 'Tat tvam asi', 'you are indeed the Self' (32). This truth that you are not the body, you are the Supreme Self is all one need to know.

Generally the Sanskrit word jnana is taken to mean 'to know' But in jnana yoga, its meaning is more complex and comprehensive. Vinoba's words convey the ideas forcefully:

But to know with the mind is not jnana, true knowledge. To stuff one's mouth with food is not the same as eating. The food in the mouth should be
musticated, passed through the gullet into the stomach, digested, converted into blood, and circulated throughout the body to nourish it. Only then will it become real food. In the same way, mere knowledge of the mind is unavailing. That knowledge should pervade all one's life and flow through the hands and feet, the eyes and every other member. One should attain a state when all organs of perception and action work from knowledge (33).

The path of knowledge is the most difficult of the three paths because the capacity to see everything in its essence, setting aside the gross covering it is not given to all human beings. As things stand, it is, indeed, a gift of the few. But if humanity as a whole is to move towards the ultimate goal, one and all have to grow into this awareness. And so Hindu thought insists on giving proper training to the eye, the mind and the heart with this end in view. Dr. Radhakrishnan brings out the integral nature of the three ways to moksha thus:

The three are not exclusive, but emphasise the dominant aspects. Wisdom (jñana) does not mean intellectual acumen or dialectical power. Jñana is realized experience. We are saved from sin only when we live in the presence of God. If we have true insight, right action will take care of itself. Truth cannot but act rightly. The way of devotion is the most popular one. Sinners as well as saints, ignorant as well as learned, foolish as well as wise find it easy. Prayer and petition, fasting and sacrifice, communion and self-examination, all are included in the life of devotion. In its highest flights bhakti coincides with jñana, and both these issue in right karma or virtuous life (34).

V. O. 3. Gandhi’s views on self-realization

As the preceding discussion shows self-realization is a complex ideal and its metaphysical implications are not easy to comprehend. What worries philosophers chiefly is the final form of salvation. Is it jivan mukti (liberation in this life) or videha mukti (liberation from the body)? What happens to the liberated soul? Does it return and merge with the Universal Soul, its source? When does the soul get final deliverance from the wheel of births and deaths? Gandhi does not deal with such complex metaphysical aspects of the ideal except to hint by a
skillful use of suggestive words that he is quite aware of these complexities. He does not take up such questions because like the Buddha, he is more concerned with the existential problems that beset man in his day-to-day living and their solutions than with metaphysical conundrums that delight the learned men. So Gandhi "tacitly believes in the Hindu idea of salvation" (35); but he accepts them only mutatis mutandis. The general trend of his comments on moksha concerns 'he quest of moksha' rather than any speculation as to what the attainment of it would be like (36).

a) Self-realization, the ultimate goal.

Moksha occupies a pivotal place in Gandhi's world-view. He has reiterated that the ultimate aim of mankind is moksha and what he wants to achieve is nothing short of this. But he is, at the same time, conscious of the difficulties in attaining the grand ideal and mentions them whenever he speaks about moksha. So while studying Gandhi's ideal of moksha, we must take note of the sense of realism he reveals while espousing an absolute ideal. He emphasises the gap between the ideal and its realization: "between the ideal and practice there must always be an unbridgeable gulf. The ideal will cease to be one if it becomes possible to realise it" (37). Bound by the limitations of the body, what man can do is only to strive after the ideal. That is why he says: "Being necessarily limited by the bonds of flesh, we can attain perfection only after the dissolution of the body" (38). But he also reminds us, even at the risk of sounding apparently contradictory, that "I am impatient to realise myself, to attain Moksha, in this very existence" (39). Thus, it becomes clear that single-minded devotion to the ideal and uncompromising commitment to its realization becomes the essence of spiritual aspiration in Gandhi's weltanschauung. It is important to note here that what Gandhi considers impossible
of achievement in this life is perfection which he occasionally equates with self-realization. "Life is an aspiration. Its mission is to strive after perfection which is self-realization" (40).

We are to infer that what he means by perfection is the same as sasvata mukti that advaita thought underlines as the ultimate form of salvation. As this is impossible of realization in this life, Gandhi introduces the idea of fitness for moksha (41). Gandhi believes that even in this life one can attain what in Hindu thought is called jivan-mukti, and thus be fit for moksha. 'I have come to the conclusion that no one can be called a mukta while he is still alive, one may be said at the most to have become fit for moksha. . . ." (42).

b). Self-realization, a corporate goal

Gandhi's next important postulate is that as we are all children of God, all individuals are destined to gain this fitness for life eternal in this life itself. For him, self-realization is not the privilege or prerogative of a chosen and enlightened few. As he believed in 'the absolute oneness of humanity' he holds also that what is possible for one man is possible for all (43). "The soul is one in all, its possibilities are, therefore, the same for every one" (44). As a corollary to this Gandhi adds that no individual can hope to achieve complete salvation unless and until the rest of humanity also reach this level of fitness. So salvation in the Gandhian perspective is not individualistic but corporate. "I am a part and parcel of the whole and I cannot find Him apart from the rest of humanity", says Gandhi (45). It follows, therefore, that every liberated individual has an added responsibility to help others to attain fitness for moksha. Thus Gandhi is in complete agreement with the Hindu position that "to be saved is not to be moved from the world. Salvation is not escape from
life. ... If the saved individuals escape literally from the
cosmic process, the world would be for ever unredeemed" (46). To be
liberated is to be more creatively involved in the cosmic process of moving towards the state of spiritualised harmony.

\[\text{c) Self-realization as freedom from violence.}\]

Another original idea in Gandhi's concept of moksha is that he conceives the salvation of the individual as freedom from the deadly coil of violence. Gandhi identified violence to be one of the major obstacles in the realization of the ideal of salvation and therefore, considered the freedom from violence essential for realising Truth (47). That is why Gandhi says: "ahimsa means moksha and moksha is the realization of Truth" (48). Thus, the ideas of Truth, non-violence and moksha get integrated in the Gandhian world-view.

\[\text{V. 0. 4. Way to self-realization}\]

Though traditional Hindu thought prescribes three major paths to salvation, the individuals are advised to follow any one of them depending on their capacity, accomplishments or inclination. One can follow the path of action while another can follow the path of devotion and yet another the path of knowledge. Properly traversed, all paths lead to liberation. The vision of self-realization and the means to that ultimate end, of course, must have been originally integral, but in actual practice it got split up and the consequences were unhealthy and detrimental to the achievement of the objective. It was in fact, a self-defeating exercise that each path either overlooked or bypassed the other paths. While the pundit or the man of knowledge refused to perform any service, considering it a bondage to lift even a lota (49), popular bhakti became mere chanting and singing and telling of beads, disdaining to do even a living service (50), and karma got lost in the meshes of
binding activities and works.

a) The synthesis of the Gita

The Gita is a great attempt at synthesis of the various paths to moksha. As Sri. Aurobindo puts it, "The Gita ... builds another harmony at synthesis of the three great means and powers, Love, Knowledge, Works through which the soul of man can directly approach and cast itself into the Eternal" (51). Gandhi has also recorded his understanding of this great synthesis achieved by the Gita. "The Gita contains the gospel of Karma or work, the gospel of Bhakti or devotion and the gospel of Jnana or knowledge. Life should be a harmonious whole of these three" (52). Thus it can be said on the authority of Gandhi's own testimony that the way to salvation that he prescribes for humanity is essentially the way propounded by the Gita. "Self-realization is the subject of the Gita ... The object of the Gita appears to me to be that of showing the most excellent way to attain self-realization" (53).

b) The anasakti yoga of Gandhi

Gandhi says that it is only "by desireless action, by renouncing the fruits of action, by dedicating all activities to God i.e., by surrendering oneself to Him body and soul" (54) that one can attain self-realization. Gandhi continues:

But desirelessness or renunciation does not come for the mere talking about it. It is not attained by intellectual feat. It is attainable only by constant heart-churn. Right knowledge is necessary for attaining renunciation. ... In order that knowledge may not run riot, the author of the Gita has insisted on devotion accompanying it and has given it the first place. Knowledge without devotion is like a misfire. Therefore, says the Gita, 'Have devotion, and knowledge will follow'. This devotion is not mere lip worship. ... the devotion required by the Gita is not soft hearted effusiveness ... He is a devotee ... who is a fount of mercy ... who is selfless ... whose resolutions are firm, who has dedicated mind and soul to God ... who is pure, who is versed in action and yet remains unaffected by it, who renounces all fruit good and bad ... But such knowledge and devotion, to be true have to stand the test of renunciation of fruits of action. Mere
knowledge of right and wrong will not make one fit for salvation ... the Gita says: No one has attained his goal without action ... while on the one hand it is beyond dispute that all action binds, on the other hand it is equally true that all living beings have to work, whether they will or no. Here all activity, whether mental or physical, is to be included in the term action. Then how is one to be free from the bondage of action, even though he may be acting? The Gita says: Do your allotted work but renounce its fruits - be detached and work - have no desire for reward and work (55).

c) God in His creations

It is clear from the long quote above that Gandhi's position is manifestly influenced by the Gita's partiality for the man of action who is a mystic seen in its repeated exhortations: "be thou therefore a yogin", 'Therefore at all times remember me and fight on' (56). That is why Gandhi is called a karma-yogi par excellence. "He was a karma-yogi par excellence. He was a bhakti-yogi more than a jnana yogi, but he was a karma-yogi more that either" (57).

And in Gandhi's karma yoga, utter humility and selfless service are the mainstay. "To see the universal and all pervading spirit of Truth face to face one must be able to love the meanest of His creation as oneself" (58). The idea is so vital that it recurs very often in his writings. "I must reduce myself to zero. So long as man does not of his own free will put himself last among his fellow creatures, there is no salvation for him" (59). Emphasising the aspect of service Gandhi says: "I had made the religion of service my own, as I felt that God could be realized only through service" (60). He further adds: "I am endeavouring to see God through service of humanity for I know that God is neither in heaven nor down below, but in everyone. ..." (61). "For me the road to salvation lies through incessant toil in the service of my country and therethrough of humanity. I want to identify myself with everything that lives" (62). A number of such passages can be...
quoted in support of the fact that Gandhi's way of salvation lies in reducing oneself to a cypher through total devotion to God and identifying oneself with all creation and surviving all especially the last, the lowest and the least, and serving them in a spirit of self-dedication. This, in essence, is Gandhian karma yoga, the Gandhian path to self-realization.

V. O. 5. Self-realization, the pivot of Gandhi's world-view.

Truth and its realization through anasakti-yoga, thus constitutes the core of Gandhi's weltanschauung. This in fact, is the pivot on which the whole system revolves. In fact, Gandhi's idea of self-realization connects the theoretical part of his world-view with the practical. It is the link between theory and praxis. Gandhi sets self-realization or moksha, as the ultimate aim of life and he postulates that all human actions and activities (63) should be directed towards this end. Thus it is clear that it is this ideal that serves as the beacon light in all spheres of Gandhi's life. In order, therefore, to understand and appreciate fully the significance of his ideas and activities in any field, social, religious, political or economic, we must bear this important point in mind (64). It is also most important to remember that unless viewed in the light of this ultimate ideal, the significance of most of his ideas and utterances is likely to be missed and the unifying thread that underlies the entire Gandhian thought corpus is sure to be lost sight of.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

6. S. Gopal, Hindu Social Philosophy, New Delhi. 1979, p. 63. This is not to forget that there is another school of thinkers who reject the notion of *parama purushartha* and consider all the *purusharthas* as complementary and of equal value.


16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid., p. 245.


20. There is also the path of meditation or concentration (*Raja yoga*) But generally this path is considered to be a part of and included in the path of Knowledge, as true knowledge is attained only through concentrated meditation – *dhyana*.

21. The word *Karma* is derived from the Sanskrit *Kri* which means 'to do'.


25. Ibid., p. 144.

26. Ibid., p. 54.

27. Ibid., p. 31.

28. Ibid., p. 74.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid., p. 77.

33. Ibid., p. 158.
37. Harijan, October 14, 1939.
38. Ibid., April 17, 1937.
39. Young India, April 3, 1924.
43. Autobiography, p. X.
44. Harijan, May 18, 1940.
47. Mahatma, Vol. 8, p. 157
50. Ibid., p. 131.
52. Young India, November 3, 1927, p. 71.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid., pp. 129 – 131.
56. Ibid., p. 120.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid., p. 118.
61. Young India. August 4, 1927.

62. Ibid., April 3, 1924.

63. For a lively and enlightening discussion on the difference between action and acitivity see Vinoba's Talks on the Gita Op. cit., p. 222.