Every philosophy, every religion, every political system, represents at bottom a theory of the nature of man. This is the primary and main question in philosophy. Political theory which does not start from a theory of human nature tends to become either pretentious or trivial. Political and social philosophy involves a search for "a definition of man". The philosophers and political thinkers differ in their answers to the question 'What is Man?': one school may try to approach it in an abstract manner, another may view the question, 'What is Man? to mean 'What can man become?': that is, whether or not man can control his own destiny, can 'make himself', can create a life for himself. This difference in approach is basically related to one's world view. But what is common to all the philosophies is that this question finds its due recognition in respective systems of thought. And Gandhi's political philosophy is no exception to this general pattern of philosophic thought.

Gandhi's sociological views on civilization and more particularly his theory of ethics - the basis of his political philosophy - were largely based upon his assumptions regarding human nature and human perfectibility. His theory of individual reformation and conversion can only be understood in the light of his concept of human nature.

Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence aimed at reconstructing, re-wiring and re-conditioning man has generally evoked sceptic derision. Even sympathetic reviewers of his philosophy have pointed out that Gandhi expected the impossible from human nature and took an over-optimistic view of man and of his ability to achieve the good. 1 Critics hold that his philosophy, at its best, may remain an idealist's cream. One gets the impression from the critics' views that the practical, political Gandhi yielded place to the saint Gandhi. On the other hand, Gandhi claimed himself to be not a visionary but a practical idealist. 2 One may or may not agree with his concept of human nature but it is admitted by all that he had a keen sense
end profound grasp of human psychology. The strategy he outlined and the tactics he followed throughout his long and eventful public career testify to this.

Now let us proceed to see the psychological assumptions of his social and political philosophy.

Gandhi's views about human nature were bound up indissolubly with his metaphysical assumptions and ethical principles he considered to be fundamental. Man was for him not a physico-chemical aggregation but a spiritual entity. He was not only concerned with man's being, but also with his becoming. From 'being' to 'becoming' is a fundamental philosophical issue and as such such understanding of the problem varies. We are not concerned here to discuss that wider philosophical issue but to make a probe into how Gandhi understood the problem.

Gandhi inherited the ancient Indian traditions but he did not accept the traditions blindly; what was characteristic of him was that he infused a new dynamic element in the traditional passive attitude of our people by utilizing "the new positive ideas of modern India by assimilating them in thought, living them in his life, and giving them social and political shapes." 3 Prof. Dhirendra Mohan Dutta correctly observes: "This entire concrete process, and experience gave birth to his own philosophy of man and life. ..." 4 Gandhi's philosophy of man has to be viewed in this background.

For thousands of years both in the East and in the West a view of human nature prevailed which represents man as possessing a two-fold nature, part angel, part beast. Gandhi believed that "In our present state, we are partly men and partly beasts. ..." 5 "Every one of us is a mixture of good and evil. Is there not plenty of evil in us? There is enough in me ... and I always pray to God to purge me of it. The difference that there is between human beings is the difference of degree." 6

Man and The Brute

Gandhi admitted man's animal ancestry. "We were, perhaps, all originally brutes. I am prepared to believe that we have become men by a slow process of evolution from
Again, "Man must choose either of the two courses, the upward or the downward, but as he has the brute in him, he will more easily choose the downward course than the upward, especially when the downward course is presented to him in a beautiful garb ... the downward instinct is embodied in them (men) ..." 8

Is man's nature all evil? Gandhi emphatically asserted: "Man's nature is not essentially evil. Brute nature has been known to yield to the influence of love. You must never despair of human nature." 9 And "Human nature will only find itself when it fully realizes that to be human it has to cease to be beastly or brutal. Though we have the human form, without the attainment of the virtues of virtue of non-violence we still share the qualities of our remote reputed ancestor the orang-outang." 10

Gandhi did not look upon man merely as a brute. He regarded man as above all as the soul. He believed that "the dignity of man requires obedience to a higher law - to the strength of the spirit." 11 What distinguishes man from the brute? In his words: "We were born with brute strength, but we were born in order to realize God who dwells in us. That indeed is the privilege of man and it distinguishes him from the brute creation." 12 The essential difference between man and brute, according to Gandhi, is that the former can respond to the call of the spirit in him, can rise superior to the passions that he owns in common with the brute and, therefore, superior to selfishness and violence, which belong to the brute nature and not to the immortal spirit of man. Gandhi understood that to be the fundamental conception of Hinduism. 13

Man and God:

We have observed earlier that Gandhi's view of human nature were derived from his metaphysical notions. His views on the nature of soul and its limitless potentiality for progress lead to some of his important conclusions about human nature. (For his concept of soul, See ch. on Metaphysical Outlook, Sec. Concept of Soul, pp. 111-112). He repeatedly said that it was more natural for man to be good than to be evil, though apparently descent might seem easier than ascent. 14 He believed that
"the divine powers within us are infinite." Because of this divine element in man, it was his firm faith that man is by nature going higher. He spoke of man as the part (anrsha) of God or of the Divine power. Sometimes again, he looked upon every man as the incarnation of God (Jiv-matra ishvarke avatar hai). He was fond of quoting the Mohammedan saying: "Man is not God, but neither is he different from the light (or spark) of God - adam khuda nahin; lekin khudake naree adam juda nahin." Dr. D. M. Datta after quoting this fond citation of Gandhi observes: "Here again we find his preference for some type of identity-indifference relation which is differently maintained by the Vaishnava Vedantists and in recent times by Tagore. The Shankarites are advocates of rigid identity. Gandhi tries to keep his conception of man and God mobile and dynamic by thinking of God as force, as life, etc., as if to make him admit divergent lines of a manifestation, incarnation and inspiration." 15

The Oneness of Man

Fundamentally, Gandhi believed in, as we have seen in Ch. III, what he called the "absolute oneness of God and therefore also of humanity." "What though we have many bodies? We have but one soul. The rays of the sun are many through refraction. But they have the same source."16 His belief in "the essential unity of God and man and for that matter all that lives" 17 has been compared by one commentator as similar to the Stoic idea of the universe as a divine whole and of mankind as an essential unity in which the individual could realize himself. 18

The implications of the doctrine of man's oneness with God and humanity have been touched upon, however briefly, in our discussion on Gandhi's metaphysical outlook. It does not bear repetition here. For a summary enumeration of these implications one may refer to a recent study by N. Raghavan Iyer. 19

Man and His Environment

We have seen in chap. III(p. 127) that Gandhi while admitting that man actually lives by habit laid stress on the exercise of will. 20 Self-direction, for Gandhi, involves passing judgement on one's own behaviour, justifying or condemning it. He
recognized that inspite of the greatest effort to be detached, no man can altogether uncoat the effect of his environment or his upbringing. But he did not consider man to be merely a creature of circumstance. One may or may not agree with his views about re-moulding human destiny but there is no reason why one should fail to appreciate his philosophy of activism and his intense regard for Purushakara. This element of dynamism and regard for man's own self-direction could enable him to say that "it is man's privilege to overcome circumstances." 21

Self-restraint is a positive factor, Gandhi believed, in man's life for overcoming the adverse circumstances. As he said in his Autobiography: "The brute by nature knows no self-restraint. Man is man because he is capable of, and only in so far as he exercises, self-restraint." Self-restraint implies control of the baser tendencies like hatred and selfishness and informing life with with good-will and love.

Gandhi recognised the influence of environment on a man's character and that is why he was for changing the environment as such. It is because the rulers, if they are bad, are so, not necessarily or wholly by reason of birth, but largely because of their environment, that I have hopes of their altering their course. ... If they are dominated by their environment, they do not surely deserve to be killed, but should be changed by a change of environment." 22

Faith in Human Nature

Gandhi declared himself to be an irrepressible optimist. His optimism rested on his belief in the infinite possibilities of the individual to develop non-violence. In his words, "The more you develop it in your own being, the more infectious it becomes, till it overwhels your surroundings and by and by might oversweep the world." 23 The very basis of the philosophy of non-violence is grounded on the belief of the efficacy of conversion as a method of winning the opponent. It was one of his fundamental beliefs. In 1920 he said: "I refuse to suspect human nature. It will, is bound to respond to any noble and friendly action." 24 In 1926 (Young India, 26, 12, 26) he wrote: "The most practical, the most dignified way of going on in the world is to take people at their word, when you have no positive reason to the con-
contrary. I refuse to believe that the tendency of the human nature is always downward. A few months hence (Young India, 3-2-27) he declared: "Men like me cling to their faith in human nature...all appearances to the contrary notwithstanding."

Gandhi placed man above institutions. He categorically stated: "Man and his deed are two distinct things. It is quite proper to resist and attack a system, but to resist and attack its author is tantamount to resisting and attacking oneself. For we are all tarred with the same brush, and are children of the one and the same Creator, and as such the divine powers within us are infinite. To slight a human being is to slight those divine powers, and thus to harm not only that being but with him the whole world." 25 or "I have discovered, that man is superior to the system he propounded. And so I feel, that Englishmen, as individuals, are infinitely better than the system they have evolved as a corporation." 26

Human perfectibility

Gandhi did not expect the complete realization of the ideal. Though "Human life is a series of compromises and it is not always easy to achieve in practice what one had found to be true in theory," Gandhi exhorted not to lower the ideal of human development. "Let us be sure of our ideal. We shall ever fail to realize it, but shall never cease to realize it." 28 He believed that "satisfaction lies in the effort, not in the attainment. Full effort is full victory." 29 An idealist like Gandhi could proclaim: "The virtue of an ideal consists in its boundlessness. But although religious ideals must thus from their very nature remain unattainable by imperfect human beings, although by virtue of their boundlessness they may seem ever to recede farther and farther away from us, the nearer we go to them, still they are closer to us than our very hands and feet because we are more certain of their reality and truth than even our own physical being. This faith in ideal constitutes real life, in fact, it is man's all in all." 30

"Man", according to Gandhi, "will ever remain imperfect, and it will always be his part to try to be perfect." 31 He knew that man at the present stage of his being is not perfect but that does not negate the theoretical possibility of further

* cf. "Not the possession of truth, but the effort in struggling to attain it, brings joy to the seardier." - G. E. Lessing.
development which amounts to his perfectibility. This idea of human perfectibility is a key point of the philosophy of non-violence. This belief in human perfectibility logically leads to the conclusion of conversion and re-making of man. In his words: "In the application of the method of non-violence, one must believe in the possibility of every person, however depraved, being reformed under humane and skilled treatment." Or as he poetically put it: "When I was a little child, there used to be two blind performers in Rajkot. One of them was a musician. When he played on his instrument, his fingers swept the strings with an unerring instinct and everybody listened spell-bound to his playing. Similarly there are chords in every human heart. If we only know how to strike the right chord, we bring out the music." The rationality of human nature is the pre-condition of his theoretical perfectibility.

A believer in rebirth (See p. 124) that he was, he could believe that moral progress made in this life would be of avail to us in the after life. Thus his faith in human perfectibility was not merely a moral conviction, but was ultimately based upon his metaphysical assumptions.

**Conclusion**

The brief outline given above of Gandhi's concept of human nature reveals that *atman* - man as the subjective entity - was the methodological postulate of his social and political philosophy. That explains why he on all occasions laid stress on the regeneration of man. The Greek philosophers put the primacy on *polis* and the Roman thinkers stressed the *cilicia*; the Renaissance philosophers upheld the ideal of *l'uomo universale* - "an all-sided man" or the autonomous man who had no inner connection with God. Gandhi, true to the traditions of Indian Philosophy, recognised the primacy of spirit over matter. The philosophical background being so it was but natural that the subjectivist and moral note would pervade Gandhi's writings.

Gandhi adhered to the concept of religious remaking of human nature as the antecedent to social and political transformation. But from this it would be too much of an oversimplification to conclude that he was not interested in institutional
changes or that his interest in socio-political transformation was only marginal. His unbroken record of struggle stretching over fifty odd years belies this sort of understanding, or better perverted understanding. His whole life symbolised the spirit of struggle-non-violent undoubtedly - against all sorts of oppression and inequality be it of race, colour, caste and class. He laid down concrete programmes as he saw his light. This active campaigning testify that he wanted a structural change of the iniquitous social order and political set-up. His approach was indeed individual-moral as he believed that the human heart held the key to all social and political dynamics but then again the individual - a morally regenerated individual - of his conception was not someone living in isolation from the society or a conceptual category abstracted from the organic whole i.e. the society. What is more important to note that in a static society like India - "a community of obedience" as it was called - where life appeared as a fatalistically-determined phenomenon, he by his repudiation of the theory of permanent inelasticity of human nature introduced a new element of dynamism in the field of human action. While no credit is due him for any novelty of the concept of dynamic and active human nature (he did not in fact claim any originality for himself) but the re-affirmation of this thinking was itself of much significance. Criticisms may be made of his views about human nature from rationalist and materialist points of view and one may hold that the concrete man as an ensemble of social relations has received inadequate attention as compared to his stress on ideal man but that should not blind one's vision to grasp the point of departure of his philosophy - the individual fearless, self-restrained and self-conscious. This insistence on the regeneration of the individual may be interpreted to introduce the bourgeois concept of the sovereignty of the individual (in that case it is to be understood in a deep sociological sense and in no other sense) but it may be presumed that it served a necessary function to awaken the slumbering people of India from their semi-comatose condition. Without a band of idealistically-inspired individuals no movement of political emancipation or of social reform could take its s-ride. The ascetic rigour and the puritan ethical discipline that a satyagrahi was
obliged to undergo was necessary for such a purpose. It was a psychologi- 
cally necessary basis for action. P. Spratt is right when he observes: "those to whom puri-
tanism is entirely hateful and despicable should consider it in relation to the 
sleepy society it was designed to awaken." The spiritual and the ethical note 
have to be related to the concrete social context for a better appreciation of his 
views.

Another point. Concept of the nature of man stands at the root of any and every 
humanism. Gandhi's humanism was essentially a spiritual humanism (of this more 
later) and this humanism was rooted in the traditions of this country. As an eminent 
Indian sociologist put it: "The Indian renaissances have never turned the mind and 
achievements of Man away from the Absolute, Personal or Impersonal." This cul-
tural background has to be taken account of in any study of Gandhi's concept of hu-
nan nature. Whether the theo-centric Asiatic type of humanism or the man-centred 
humanism of Marxist socialism will prevail is a matter of judgment which involves 
one's understanding of the process of history and man's role as the maker of history 
as well as of himself.
NOTES


4. Ibid.

5. Young India, 9-3-20, in Young India, 1919-22 (S. Ganesan, Madras, 1922), p. 266.


7. Harijan, 2-4-38, p. 65.


11. Young India, 11-8-20 in Young India (S. Ganesan, Madras, 1922), p. 261.


15. Bhirendra Mohan Datta, op. cit, p. 64.


17. Young India, 4-12-24, p. 398.


24. Young India, 4-8-20, Quoted in Nirmal Kumar Bose, Selections From Gandhi (Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1937), 100, p. 26.


26. Young India, 13-7-21, p. 321.

27. D. G. Tendulkar, Mahatma (The Publications Division, GOI, 1961), vol. IV, p. 89.


29. Young India, 9-3-22, p. 141.


32. Harijan, 22-2-42, p. 49.


