CHAPTER – VII: Conclusion

Various thinkers and philosophers have viewed human nature differently over the ages. Plato believed in the dual nature of human beings. For him, man embodies both the ape and the angel together. He believed that the environment plays a great role in shaping the behavior of a person. According to Aristotle man is by nature a political animal and he believed that man would be a brute without social life. The Epicureans thought that the aim of life was the achievement of individual happiness and hence they advocated the satisfaction of physical and mental desires within certain limits. Sigmund Freud believed that man’s behavior is determined by innate instincts that are largely unconscious. For him, ego, id and super-ego were the three main forces controlling the human personality and ‘libido’ was the main force working in man’s life.

Machiavelli and Hobbes did not believe in the essential goodness of man and had a low idea of human nature. For Machiavelli man was wicked and selfish and for Hobbes man is egocentric, sentient and selfish. Locke and Rousseau believed in the essential goodness of man. For Locke man is selfless, loving and good and for Rousseau man is good as long as he follows his natural instincts.
In the ancient Indian philosophical traditions, Indian thinkers believed in the spiritual nature of man and the ultimate goal of life was the liberation from the bondage of karma and suffering. All aspirants of moksha (salvation) regarded the world as an ocean of misery and suffering. Man is a puppet, the strings of which are controlled by fate. No amount of human effort by way of renunciation, yogic discipline, meditation, etc. succeeds in unchaining man from worldly bounds. So when man expresses his helplessness and prays for God’s intervention, He rescues him. Thus man attains freedom.

So far as Gandhi was concerned, basically he believed in the spiritual nature of man. Such an understanding of human nature by him is because of his belief that man is a creation of God, and that God resides within man in the form of the soul within him. He also believed that because of this presence of God within him there is unity between man and man. And as God dwells within all men, and also as all men equally belong to God by virtue of their being creations of God, there is not only unity between God and men, but also between man and man. This was the basis of Gandhi’s acceptance of basic unity and oneness of mankind.
Not only Gandhi believed in the spiritual nature of man but also that man has been endowed by God with a unique quality called consciousness. By virtue of being endowed with this special gift, man has the potential to understand what is right or wrong. It also enables the individual to perceive the divinity that is present within him. Once he understands what is right or wrong or what is true or false, and can perceive the divinity within him, it becomes a moral obligation on the part of man to follow the right path or adhere to the truth. In other words, this consciousness on the part of the individual made Gandhi further believe that spiritual or moral development of man is the purpose of human existence. This becomes essential as this is the means through which man can be at their best self, can achieve self perfection, self realization and ultimately realize the divine which is already within him.

Yet man is not perfect. Gandhi opined that man is born with brute strength but at the same time he was also born to realize God who dwells within him. Hence, man must try to overcome his brutish force through love, self-sacrifice, self-renunciation and thereby realize the true man, the divinity that dwells in him. As he said, “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."

The realization of this goal requires that man is made free. He should be provided with maximum scope for self development and to be subjected to least control by institutions of force like the state. For him, man is essentially good and with conscious efforts he can overcome the irrational aspects of his nature. In other words, he believed that man has the potential to change himself consciously and that too for the better. All these further mean that Gandhi had faith in the worth and dignity of man. He gave utmost emphasis on the worth and dignity of man. Man, in himself, was a sacred entity for him. Therefore, throughout his life, he was concerned with the promotion of their moral/spiritual development, protection of their honor and dignity, etc., and helped his fellow beings realize their best self. This further means that the individual occupies a central position in his scheme of things, and his interests are of utmost importance. Yet, as believed in the unity of not only between man and God but also between man and man, man can best serve his true interests only by serving his fellow beings at large. All these ideas in his understanding of human nature had a profound influence on each and every aspect of his philosophy including that of his
concern with satyagraha, non-violence, equality, freedom and decentralization of power.

The concept of Satyagraha which he conceived in South Africa was born in the mind of Gandhi out of his deep understanding of human nature and how it could be trained and moulded. The idea behind Satyagraha is to convert the wrongdoer and to awaken the sense of justice in him by appealing to his good self via love and reasoning. In Satyagraha, the Satyagrahi always tries to overcome evil by good, anger by love, untruth by truth and violence by non-violence. The opponent is not an enemy to be destroyed or defeated. He is a person who has the right to co-exist with the Satyagrahi. In case the opponent cannot be won over through reason, he is to undertake self-suffering instead of inflicting suffering on his opponent. All these ideas related with Gandhi's concept of Satyagraha would not have been there had it not been for the way he understood human nature. For him, man is essentially good. He has the spark of the divine in him, and as such the potential to see the reason, the right, the good and the just. It was his firm belief that even the brute will positively respond the overtures of love. Not only this, he also credited man as capable of accepting sufferance and that man is bound to be moved by the sufferings of others in such a manner that
will purify his own acts which have resulted in the suffering of other people. Without these beliefs, he would have thought neither man as capable of practicing neither Satyagraha nor Satyagraha of being meaningful for both the wrong doer and the wronged. Thus, his understanding of human nature is the basic foundation on which his concept of Satyagraha was built up by Gandhi.

His emphasis on non-violence is also a corollary of his understanding of human nature. He always believed in the worth and dignity of man and inviolability of the human self. He also has accepted man as naturally responsive to the overtures of love, and that even the brute responds positively to love. He also understood use of violence as against the interests of moral development of man. Hence, the emphasis on non-violence. Besides, Gandhi also believed that if God exists within us all, inflicting violence to man in any of its forms will ultimately amount to committing violence to that God within him. So how can we injure one another?

His idea on equality of man is also built upon his understanding of human nature. Gandhi accepted equality of man not on the basis of physical, racial or religious considerations. It was also not men’s national, linguistic,
geographical or caste affiliations which makes them equal. If one goes by physical considerations, then one is a man or a woman, big or small, tall or short, etc. Similarly, one is a white or a yellow or a black man if one goes by racial considerations; a Hindu or a Muslim or a Christian, etc. if one goes by religious considerations; and an Indian or English or American, etc. if one goes by one’s national affiliations. So these considerations cannot be the real basis for claiming equality of man. For Gandhi man has always been a spiritual being. He always believed in the spiritual nature of man. For him, man has never been a mere physical or biological organism. This acceptance of the spiritual nature of man is because of his belief that man is a creation of God; that, as such, all men equally belong to God; and that God is present in man in the form the soul within him. And it is this attribute of man, i.e., his spiritual nature and being a part of God himself that makes all men equal. For him, equality of man was inherent in this nature of the human self. Thus, there is a basic correlation between his understanding of human nature and his acceptance of equality of man.

Gandhi’s concept of freedom is a comprehensive one. To him, freedom is a whole. National freedom as emancipation from the bondage of alien rulers and exploiters, moral freedom as emancipation from slavery to
passions, and spiritual freedom as emancipation from subservience to the demands of the physical nature and realization of God as truth are all different aspects of freedom. For a person whose life was permeated by the belief in the presence of a higher spiritual reality, any compromise with evil, lust and slavery is wrong. Hence, freedom has to be realized at all levels. Gandhi, yet again, derived his concept of freedom from his deep understanding of human nature. He believed that man is a mixture of the divine and the brute. There is a constant struggle between the divine and the brute forces within every individual. If the brute force within him is subdued, the individual can make moral progress which is the basis of a stable society. Since, man is God's creation, he possesses the spark of God within him in the form of his soul which is a part of the Permanent or God. Hence, Gandhi distinguished man from other animals by saying that man possesses a spark of the divine and is conscious of it while other animals do not possess it. Freedom, therefore, means acting according to one's divine consciousness. Man as a political animal has a unique capacity to govern himself and since he has the capacity to govern himself, he must have the right to govern himself, politically or otherwise. Therefore, self government or freedom is natural to man. That is why Gandhi was against any form of
foreign domination or rule, and viewed alien rule as against the nature of man. Gandhi also believed moral or spiritual development as the main purpose of human existence. This requires maximum scope for self development on the part of the individual. Therefore, he always laid great emphasis on individual freedom so that man can develop his moral or spiritual self through voluntary and conscious performance of good deeds. Gandhi also believed in the basic unity and oneness of mankind. As such, for him no individual or nation is truly free as long as any people or country remains under the domination of others. Therefore, he always supported the rights and liberties, and freedom of all colonial people. Thus, his concept of freedom is also closely related with his ideas of human nature.

Gandhi’s emphasis on decentralization of power was also borne out of his understanding of human nature. He advocated it because he believed that man can be at his best self when he is subjected to the least control. The considerations of the moral development of the individual and that of the society also meant that man has to be free from coercive influences. Besides, when centralization of power, political, economic or social, takes place the interests of individual freedom stands seriously jeopardized. Because it will lead to inequality inside the society and hierarchical gradation of man will
also be there. This is in turn will block the path of the individual towards his
moral development as morality cannot flourish in the midst of inequality,
discrimination and exploitation. And spiritual or moral development of
man was something which has always been a primary purpose of human
existence for Gandhi. Besides, he always believed in the worth and dignity
of man and as such he stood for the protection of the dignity of the
individual human self. That is why he was always against centralization of
political and economic centralization of power lest it leads to the
exploitation of man by man. For the same reason he was dead against the
practice of untouchability and caste system. All these obviously meant that
Gandhi had the best interests of the individual in his mind when he
advocated decentralization of power. Evidently, he won’t have been in favor
of decentralization of power and giving maximum scope to the individual for
self development if he did not believe in the basic goodness of man and their
potential to change themselves consciously for the better. He advocated it as
he believed that the true interests of man demanded it.

Gandhi’s understanding of human nature has great relevance in
modern times. His idea that man has got the innate potential to change
himself consciously, and that too, for the better, gives us hope about the
perfectibility of human beings. He also gave a grand vision about the possibility of the realization of the basic unity and oneness of mankind. By accepting the spiritual nature of man, he emphasized the spiritual unity of man and man which is the only consideration on the basis of which one can accept the basic unity and oneness of mankind.

His understanding of human nature also provides a solid foundation on which one can hope to build up a human rights culture. The promotion of respect and observance of human rights requires acceptance of the inviolability of the honor and dignity of man. And this is what Gandhi always emphasized. At present, as mankind enters a new millennium, the United Nations have committed itself to the development of a culture of peace and non-violence. Gandhi’s ideas on human nature with its emphasis on the worth and dignity of man, unity of mankind, spiritual purpose of human existence, man’s obligation towards the uplift of not only themselves but also that of the society at large, selfless service to others as the means to best serve ones own true interests, developing ones moral self through service to the downtrodden, etc. and also his idea that the realization of the true interests of the individual is inevitably connected with the realization of
the true interests of mankind as a whole, will go a long way in evolving that
culture of peace and non-violence.