Chapter II

THE GANDHIAN CONCEPT OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

The Mahatma, Mohan Das Karamchand Gandhi certainly rank as one among the first of the great personalities history has ever produced. The greatness of the Mahatma is drastically different from the greatness of many others. It is the overwhelming greatness of the great son of a great nation with glorious cultural heritage and history.

Our nation has an endless list of great sons from Maharshi Manu to Rishi Aurobindo, the Gautama Buddha of Kapilavastu and the Jagadguru Adi Sankara of Kaladi. Indeed, the world had witnessed and stood bewildered at their range and character. Others might have been great on some or other particular account, but Gandhi is great as a man. That is why he is the Mahātma — a terminology most befitting him. The Indian Union treats him as the “Father of the Nation”.

The Mahatma was essentially a spiritual person, a spirituality that he inherited directly from the Indian
heritage, that enabled him to experience the concept "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam", the whole world as one family. As a Vedantin, he could easily transcend the religious barriers on the knowledge that "Ekam Sat; Vipra Bahundā Vadanti" which means that there is only one Truth, though scholars see the truth differently.

With this strong background and heritage, the Mahatma established his own ways of understanding and interpretation. Let us see how the Mahatma understands spirituality and religion. He says, "By religion, I do not mean a formal religion or a customary religion, but that religion which underlies All religions, which brings us face to face with our Maker."¹

Evidently, the Mahatma’s concept of religion is that of a universal nature. For him all religions are one and the same in essence. There is a golden thread running through all religions that makes them all ‘one’ in essence. The differences are negligibly insignificant. The Mahatma explicates this point.

"Religion should pervade every one of our actions. Here religion does not mean sectarianism. It means a belief in ordered, moral government of the Universe. It is not less real because it is unseen. This religion transcends
Hinduism, Islam, Christianity etc. It does not *supercede* them. It harmonises them and gives them reality."^2

Here the universality and essentiality of the religions is made explicit by the Mahatma. He cautions that religion must never be *sectarianism*, as people often misunderstand. The religion, in Mahatma's perception transcends all world religions. But this transcendence is not *denying* any religion. On the contrary, the transcendence is only by *affirming* all of them. The Mahatma perceives the essentiality and universality with religions as a harmonising and unifying principle. He says, "Let me explain what I mean by religion. It is which changes one's nature, which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and which ever purifies. It is the permanent element in human nature which counts no cost too great in order to find full expression and which leaves the soul utterly restless until it has found itself, known it's Maker and appreciated the true correspondence between the Maker and itself."^3

Here the Mahatma once again makes himself very clear. He doesn't want religions to be sectarianistic and also does not want to attribute – *superiority* of any religion over any other. For him all religions are equal, irrespective of richness in philosophy, age in time, and vastness in terms of numbers of followers or numbers of attached
institutions. What the Mahatma says is, that a religion changes one's very nature which binds one to truth, which continuously and constantly purifies. It is the permanent element in human nature that strives for the fuller expression of man. In short, Religion establishes the relationship between the Creator and the Creation, and offers a path to the Creation to know and to reach the Creator.

The Mahatma is confident that it is impossible for one to be an Atheist in the real sense of the term. He says, "No man can live without religion. There are some who in the egotism of their reason, declare that they have nothing to do with religion. But it is like a man saying that he breathes but he has no nose. The rankest agnostic or atheist of the highest rank does acknowledge the need of a moral principle, and associates something good with its observance and something bad with its non-observance. Bradlaugh, whose atheism is well known, always insisted on proclaiming his innermost conviction. He had to suffer a lot for thus speaking the truth, but he delighted in it and said that truth is its own reward. Not that he was quite insensible to the joy resulting from the observance of truth. This joy however is not at all worldly, but springs out of communion with the Divine. Even a man who disowns religion cannot and does not live without religion."
Gandhi agrees with Vivekananda at his concept of religion and the role of religion in man's life.

We can note that the Mahatma argues that it is impossible not to be related to the Divine in one way or the other. For this, he brings in the question of Moral Principle as Immanuel Kant—as Kant talks about “the Starry sky above and the Moral Law within.” However, the Mahatma is very ambitious here when he says that no one can escape religion.

Religion and Morality go hand in hand as far as the Mahatma’s thought goes. He says, “I reject any religious doctrine that does not appeal to reason and is in conflict with morality. I tolerate unreasonable religious sentiments when it is not immoral.”

For him, religion is the binding force with morality. It is very sympathetic of him to feel that so long as it is moral, he could tolerate even irrationality with religion.

Again, he points out “As soon as we lose the moral basis, we cease to be religious. There is no such thing as religion over-riding morality. Man, for instance, cannot be untruthful, cruel and inconsistent and claim to have God on
his side.⁶ This statement brings out the inevitable relationship between religion and morality.

We find the Mahatma to be a simple but ardently-spiritual person. Following the Indian Spirit very authentically, he could very easily transcend the boundaries of religion. We must here make a distinction between religion and religiosity that is real faith in God and spirituality as contrasted with superfluous religious dogmatism. Religious conflicts and antagonism based on religion arises from religiosity, that is blind and irrational dogmatism with religious teachings, often misinterpreted and misrepresented by fetishism or fanaticism. On the contrary, to be religious is a phenomenon that is totally different, that goes with the impeccable faith in the supernatural, principles of morality, good living and above all, love. Therefore, it is natural for a religious man to respect the faith of another religion with the same ardence that of his own faith. No matter what religion one is following, all religious persons are the same, and there cannot be any antagonistic relations among them. Irrespective of different religious beliefs they are of one and the same breed, people of the same mental wave length.

It is with this background of spirituality that we must approach the Mahatma, whose thoughts and actions
constantly carried the bearing of such powerful spiritual strength.

The Mahatma says that with all its drawbacks, an Indian has no escape from Religion. That is the Indian psyche. This being the case, any attempt to social change or mobilisation must start with refining religion. One may recall how Jesus refined the Mosaic Law; the Ten Commandments. Similarly, correcting and perfecting Hindu religion becomes the first step towards Social Transformation in Indian Society.

We can note that the Mahatma gives full credits to the Arya Samaj for the social transformation.

It cannot be said that The Mahatma had rightly identified that social transformation must originate in Hinduism. At the same time, he had understood Hinduism in its right spirit of universality and immense tolerance.

The pioneering work of Max Muller in the Nineteenth century on comparative mythology has raised the expectations of a scientific study of religion. But there is a serious draw back as the discipline of religion is still groping for a methodology of its own. Upon the work of
Max Muller, let us call a scientific study of religion a “religion swissenschaft” as Max Muller himself called it.

Now to discuss the concept of the sacred, we ought to discuss the concept of sacred of man as such. It shall be here, since there is no one. All theologies are narrowly conditioned religiously, socially and culturally. Religion is a human phenomenon and the question relevant here shall be; what does sacred mean to the human mode of being? Such religion must respond to the central question of what is it to mean that one is human? What is specific to the human mode of being is a typical human mode of consciousness. Such human mode of consciousness is fundamentally intentional in a two-fold sense: First, it is the consciousness of the human subject that belongs to human being in so far as one is a human being. Second is a consciousness that is modified by the cognitive world, by the objects that one comes in to contact with, which is something that is given in experience. This fundamental human consciousness is the ultimate reality that goes by the name of “sacred.”

The total man is not merely a contemplating spirit. He is not inert or passive. He interacts constantly with the world around him, searching for comprehension or looking for meaning. This human mode of being present in the
world calls for a hermeneutics. Of course, every scientific enterprise is a process of deciphering meaning structures and a hermeneutics. Thus, an experience of the sacred right away calls for a hermeneutics. Now, how does the hermeneutics of the sacred proceed? Given the working of human consciousness and going along in that line, we know that every contact with reality is a three pronged enterprise. (1) A Discovery of the real, (2) the Real as the true and then its (3) Meaning or Relevance to the experience. Every act of human consciousness is the revealing of an ontogeny that becomes a “gnosis” to a knowing spirit. This in turn becomes a structure – a meaning structure to human life. It begins with an ontos, proceeds to a contemplation of it as truth, and ends as a meaning configuration to one’s life. The same goes to the experience of the sacred; it must ultimately end as a meaning configuration to human life. Thus the epistemic enterprise is deeply associated with religious enterprise, in so far as it turns out to be hermeneutics of the sacred. Ontogeny and gnosis, thus progressively leading to sacrogeny. Thus, the discovery of the meaning of the sacred in his consciousness is to lead man reflexively to a discovery of himself and all that is specific to his nature.

It is that we must look at the rise of positivistic sciences in the Nineteenth century. Let us keep no
reservations in admitting that the positivism did considerable service to religion in estimating the study of religion from paradoxes that philosophy had landed it into. By the latter half of the 20th century, the colonial spirit of the Western man of expanding the horizons of his known universe made him at least aware of the fact of religious pluralism. There are religions other than that of his own; that too, religions very different from what he had ever known. So, any study of religion ought to be a study of religions. Positivism thus discovered the history of religions of mankind. What is more, through the mode of western education made available, the colonial man began to assert himself more and more as an agent of history rather than a passive product of it. They began an active role in shaping their own destinies – socio economical as well as political. He could rediscover his own rich ancient heritage that inspired him with a confidence that had been lacking for a really long time. He owes this to the liberal spirit of the rest: the positivistic spirit pervaded not merely his social political and economic sphere of activity, it had a profound influence on his outlook on religion as well.

With the advent of Positivism, a new era in the study of religion got inaugurated. On the one hand, it retrieved religion from the abstractions of philosophers, and on the other, positivists “metalised” the study of religion by
bestowing its historicity to religion. This inaugurated a new era in the study of religion. At once, religion becomes the favourite subject matter of investigations to the ethnologists, anthropologists, sociologists, historians, political scientists and even economists. Thus, these social scientists collected codified, edited and published voluminous material on the religious experience of mankind. Cumulatively, all their efforts did unreveal the cultural dramention of religion. This brought one thing to light: that no *culture* can be properly understood without a proper study of *religion*. No insight into a given culture is ever possible if the religious moorings of that culture is not laid bare and comprehended as a first step. Development and degeneration of culture has to be understood in its specific aspects, this has to be done at first. Naturally, a study of religion man became extended to every aspect of human behaviour, ranging from what he does in his loneliness bearing on meditations, rituals and obsessions to his collective social actions bearing on his economy, society and polity.

Discovery of religion as a *cultural item* has left an indelible mark on the study of religion. Thanks to the work of social scientists and positivists, religion had become a cultural phenomenon. But then, culture itself is deeply “informed” by its religious moorings. Thus, if every
culture, irrespective of its relations to the kind of civilisation it associates itself with, either primitive or highly advanced, has its deep rooted religious moorings. A philosophy of culture at once shall be a study of religion as well, in its manifold aspects. Religion in itself includes almost all the known cultural forms. Such cultural forms are included in the so called secular institutions (eg. a coat of arms, emblems, insignias, a national flag, inscriptions on a currency, a salute, a birthday celebration, an honour for gallantry etc) as well as specifically religious institutions (eg. an initiation or a ritual). There should be no misunderstanding that the scope of religion is restricted to such cultural elements of the so called "civil religion"9 in modern polity or of the protest reform movements within a revolutionary society or of even the seemingly counter culture youth movements but also extend it to those of the "modern" secular institutions (eg. films, songs, art, new legislation, the rise of a political party etc.). Behind the façade of the process of secularisation, there are deep-rooted religious forms that constantly keep informing the activities and aspirations of modern (secular) man.

So much for the contributions by positivistic and social sciences to religion. if not balanced threatens to swallow religion itself. A merely positivistic study of religion amounts to their reductionistic approach to
religious data. Religion is the fundamental in-former of our cultural patterns, and not merely one among the many cultural items. Every known cultural form has its deep rooted religious moorings, and this is so, because every cosmogony is at once a sacrogeny. The commerce between ontogeny and gnosis on the one hand and sacrogeny on the other cannot ever be snapped. The fundamental inter nationality of the human consciousness towards the sacred cannot be negated without negating the total man. Human nature must not be reduced to the merely political, or psychological, or the economical, or the ethnological, or the sociological man. Reducing the total man this way would be desecrations of man; and a total desecrations would indeed amount to be ceasing to be human.

A study of religion is humanistic. It is humanistic because the sacred, whose hermeneutics the study of religion claims to be, is the structure of human consciousness. Every reductionistic treatment of the religious data would implicitly take them to be insufficient in themselves, partial and less than real. But when the sacred is the structure of human consciousness, its hermeneutics, or a scientific study of religion necessarily gives insight into “total man”. Naturally this becomes a humanistic discipline par excellence. One pre requisite here
is it needs those religious creations must be treated as autonomous.

This does not undermine the importance of culture. Undoubtedly religion surely has a cultural function, but it transcends mere culture since it has a direct bearing on our essential nature. Religion transcends culture by cutting across all cultural and temporal barriers, and reaches the depth of human spirit to touch here a human cord in his essential predicament. The sacred is an essential and integral element of the human consciousness, hence this cannot be otherwise.

A study of culture is a study of religion at the deeper level. It is the search for meaning by the human spirit impelled by its inter nationality to the sacred. From this it can be concluded that an understanding of the meaning of religious creations ends up with an understanding of the typical human mode of being present to the world.

Religious creations are not of any significance to the human spirit, Therefore, once they are deciphered, they will be equally meaningful to "modern" man as well as the "primitive" man, to a modern business magnet, a political activist and a hermit. A deeper insight into the fundamental human situations contributes directly to our understanding
of human nature itself. Given this, an academic enterprise with religion is bound to be humanistic. A hermeneutics of the sacred, with exclusive concerns with man and his value system at the deepest level, shall indeed serve as an instrument for the inner transformation of man and his society, thus opening new vistas for a revolution of humanism never witnessed in human history.

Mahatma Gandhi was great to have comprehended this striking chord in human nature. He was no philosopher, but only a Karma Yogi at the most. But irrespective of all these, the Mahatma knew only too well that transformation ought to begin first from within. What best can any one aspire for other than a transformation through the hermeneutics of the sacred first from within, and then obviously from without. The Mahatma was not a philosopher. He had no formal training in philosophy. So was Rama Krishna Paramahamsa, Swami Vivekananda who constructed a deep and striking philosophy out of RamaKrishna, and in the same manner one has to constitute philosophy out of the Mahatma.

The nonviolent principles of the Mahatma, for which he acquired much fame in the world is quite consistent with his religiosity, both theoretically and practically. A social movement by such an Indian can’t be out anything other
than a non violent movement. Naturally for the Mahatma, non-violence became one of the main principles upon which any social transformation must operate.

Gandhi was not an ardent believer in economic theories in which Karl Marx was. He had his own views about a set of solutions to economic problems. He knew very well that India had been facing many economic crises. He expressed his views about the population problem of India in his own way. His view was that if every man was prepared to work the population would not be acute.

Gandhi suggested many means and measures to wipe off the miserable conditions of the Indian villages. He urged the leaders to take immediate step to eradicate despair and decay from the Indian villages. He called the project gramodharan. In order to effect economic development, he suggested the villagers to establish cottage industries. He told them that better techniques would be adopted for the improvement of cottage industry. He pleaded for khadi and loved charka. In what way the potter's wheel brought the first Industrial Revolution in human progress and civilization, the same way weaver's wheel created an industrial revolution in India. He strongly believed in one principle of life that is all men should give his best to the society and in turn, the society should
provide for his normal need. Gandhi stood for man’s needs and to provide whatever that man needed to lead to a standard living.

Gandhian economic thought rests on human elements non possession and doing good to all. He also stressed that there should be some improvements in man’s life day after day. So he wanted to make use of his ideals to reconstruct the entire social order into a new society. Gandhi was alert about bringing some change in the social environment. He visualized ownership of property on the basis of trusteeship. In order to achieve the target he supported private ownership. He believed in a classless and stateless society which might be of great help to solve out economic and social ills created by the corrupted state. He stood for the social system and not the capitalist system which had failed to solve the unemployment problem. In order to give employment to the jobless, he encouraged the small scale industries.

Gandhi’s economic concept was of simple nature because he preferred a simple living. According to Malthusian theory of population, food increases in arithmetic ratio while population increases in geometric ratio. This was the reason why Gandhi advocated preventive checks. He realized the importance birth control.
He suggested self control for unnecessary birth. Gandhian economic thought rejects Capitalism, Communism and mixed economic system. He used to give his support to Cooperative and Collective farming.

Gandhi was an apostle of rural development. In order to bring out social transformation he applied rural development or gramodharan in an effective manner. To achieve this goal he turned himself to village education. He found the truth that basic education from pre-primary to university stages would be suited to India. He did not put his trust only in educating a person with a reading, writing and arithmetics, but the method of education should be job-oriented. He preferred vocational training to keeping the student whole day at school.

The Mahatmas' contribution to the social transformation is simply this: it is a transformation of society through *religion*. Here the transformation is that of an evolutionary phenomenon rather than a drastic revolutionary change. Transformation through religion operates from within, and its outward manifestation can only be seen once the inward transformation had already taken place. Such transformations are the only ones which are consistent, authentic, sustainable, creative, spontaneous and permanent. This evolutionary transformation, on the
contrary is from *without* drastic, destructive, artificial and very short living.

The Mahatma was banking on this internal agency of force and power, of spirituality. The most effective, scientific and permanent transformation shall be evolutionary through the forces of spirituality happening and originating from within. The Mahatma envisages just that.
Reference:

2. MK. Gandhi, Harijan, 10-2-1940, p.445
3. MK. Gandhi, Young India 12-5-1920, p.2
4. Young India 23-1-1930, p.25
5. Young India 21-7-20, p.4
6. Young India 24-11-21, p.385
7. It is Muller who coined the term Religion swissen suchaft. In spite of its literal mearsy ‘science of religion’ it has defied an adequate translation in English.