CHAPTER

I

INTRODUCTION

Even after half a century of the demise of the great thinker-saint and father of the nation Mahatma Gandhi, his ideas and thoughts are being continuously debated over in various forums, symposia, seminars and conferences at national as well as international levels. The very fact that his ideas still kindle the spirits of thought and debate is a clear testimony to their relevance even in today's society.

It is my firm belief that Mahatma Gandhi's ideas, ideals and the action programme proposed by him, for a total social transformation, can never lose their relevance. The greatness of Mahatma Gandhi's idea, is as beyond question, as his own self. While acknowledging this fact, I honestly feel that his ideas need certain modifications to meet the demands of the present day social system, so that the ideas will become more practicable and beneficial, as the modifications become easier for adaptation. The need of the hour is that one should understand the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi with the inevitability of modifying them to be adapted in keeping with the present day social circumstances.
Though it will be right to understand the Mahatma's political philosophy, economic thinking, religio-moral and reformatory aspirations in the context of his times, we face a situation wherein, we have to adapt those to suit the present times. This makes the task on hand all the more complicated. While suggesting such adaptations, one has to be cautious as not to harm the basic principles enshrined in his thinking.

With these ideas in mind, we have attempted to study and analyse certain important ideas of Mahatma Gandhi.

It may sound like a contradiction or an irony to attempt an adaptation of Gandhian ideas to the present day industrial, scientific and free economy, based on a social system, which is in a race with itself to reach nowhere. A serious consideration about the direction in which the present society is moving and the consequences that the mankind is being compelled to face in the name of scientific and economic progress, will make one take refuge under the Gandhian ideas as the last resort for the survival of mankind itself from the impending disaster, the unbridled scientific advancement is likely to bring about.

It will be an ideal exercise to examine whether, what all is going on in the name of scientific progress, is worthy of being
called 'Progress' at all. The fear of atomic warfare which has kept the whole mankind under constant fear of total annihilation, genetic engineering research like cloning and bionics which has raised several moral and ethical questions, the space research programmes which have led to unhealthy competition among nations to dominate space - can all these be called progress? If one is allowed to consider the fundamental issues, the question will be whether all these are really essential and inevitable? All this, which is termed as progress, is taking us towards darkness and ignorance where we just grapple in the grim world of nothingness. The worldly desires, material aspiration and insatiable greed have caught all of us in their iron grip.

Under such circumstances mankind appears to be almost on the brink of disaster and one finds solace, comfort and security in Gandhian ideals. An understanding of these ideals, and their concomitant benefits, will surely bring about an enormous change in our life styles towards a better kind of life. It is my personal belief that this kind of understanding will not only transform the individual personalities, but in the long run, will definitely bring about a social metamorphosis.
Importance of Mahatma Gandhi and His Philosophy

Should the Buddha take a reincarnation today, would he recognise the present day world? Perhaps, he would feel lost in the modern labyrinthine cities, automobiles running at maddening speed. The all-engulfing clouds of chimney smoke, the subway rattle from underground, supersonic jets whistling above. The Buddha will find the world greatly challenged. But should he talk to the modern hurrying, worrying man, he would recognise him as the same old fellow he used to meet in the market place 2500 years ago. He would still find him suffering and complaining. In other words, man has greatly changed his environments.

This unique phenomenon is the tragedy of humanity. Modern advances in science could be used to make our globe a happier place to live in. They could be used to root out hunger and disease. To some extent, we are using our knowledge to fulfill, but to a still greater extent, we are using it to destructive purposes. Today, humanity hangs from a cross of iron under the clouds of nuclear war.

There have been men of goodwill in the past who have raised their voice against violence and senseless destruction.
Jesus Christ advised the turning of the other cheek. Lao Tse said, 'The good I meet with goodness; the bad also with goodness—that is virtuous goodness'. The Buddha observed, 'Let a man overcome anger by love, let him overcome evil by good, lie by truth'. Socrates drank hemlock because he searched for truth. Thoreau declared that in an unjust state, the proper place for a just man was the prison. But these good men lost, for they always acted as individuals and the evil-minded acted in unison.

Gandhi was the first man, who used non-violence for a larger than shaping of individual conduct. He consistently preached non-violence as an instrument for shaping the destinies of nations. This non-violence was not mere submission to violence, the passive resistance to evil, but a patient and persistent challenge to violence until it exhausted itself and overcome. This is Gandhi's greatest contribution to the modern age.

As Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, the great Indian thinker said, 'Possessed and inspired by the highest ideals of which human nature is capable, preaching and practising fearlessly the truth revealed to him, leading almost alone what seemed to be forlorn hope against the impregnable strongholds of greed and folly, yet facing tremendous odds with a calm resolution which yielded
nothing to ridicule or danger, Gandhi presented to this unbelieving world all that is noblest in the spirit of man. He illumined human dignity by faith in the eternal significance of man's effort. He belongs to the type that redeems the human race'. Gandhi preached that violence creates only hatred, a desire to revenge - it never leads to a spiritual conviction. So the weapon he never used was not coercion but persuasion. If arguments and pleadings failed, he tried to show that he had nothing personally against his opponent, not rancour, only love. But in no case could he be co-operative with what he considered to be evil.

Sometimes, the consequences of such non-cooperation were none too pleasant. Gandhi faced them cheerfully. He lived a hard life, spent six years, four months and twenty-eight days in jail, suffered many a violent beating and ultimately fell to a fanatic's bullet.

But in his own life and by his own uncommon methods, he attained more success than any other living man. He raised the people of India out of dust and made them men. To them he brought back self-respect, the spirit of struggle and resistance.
Gandhi fought against the degradation of man against the senseless slaughter between Hindus and Muslims after India became free. He fought against bitterness in human minds and fell soothing Hindu and Muslim passions. He achieved by his death, what he could not achieve in his lifetime and today about 36 million Muslims live in India, enjoying as much freedom and privilege as Hindus.

Two million people attended the Mahatma’s funeral (January 31, 1948) but two billion people grieved wherever they were. The United Nations lowered its flag half-mast at the death of this poor, titleless, toothless, loin-clothed man.

India’s then Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru said, ‘The light has gone out of our lives. Yet I am wrong, for the light that shown in this country was no ordinary light... and a thousand years later that light will still be seen in this country and the world will see it... for that light represented the living truth’.

Gen. George C. Marshall, the then United States Secretary of State to explain humanity’s loss said, ‘Mahatma Gandhi was the spokesman of the conscience of mankind’.

But Gandhi’s great achievements are to be materialised. All his dreams were not fulfilled mass destruction of weapons since
he was centuries ahead of his age. But the latest weapons have convinced the world Gandhian way.

Social Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi

While acknowledging the Mahatma's achievements in many other fields I, solely for my purpose, shall confine myself to the study of his social philosophy.

Many Gandhians, as well as other great minds, have engaged themselves in the study and deeper understanding of the ideas and ideals of Mahatma Gandhi, pertaining to social philosophy and expressed their reactions and comments in various ways. It is interesting to note that each of these scholars as revealed in the books and writings have analysed the Gandhian ideas in a manner that suited his or her need and thinking. In the same way, many Indian and foreign sociologists, political thinkers (scientists) as also economists have tried to interpret Mahatma Gandhi without making a comprehensive effort to understand his ideas and programmes.

A brief look into these writings has led me to form a set of impression as follows:

a) that Mahatma Gandhi's ideas are to be studied within the framework of his own thoughts,
b) that it may be beneficial for us to study Mahatma Gandhi's ideas in a framework other than his own, and

c) that there are complex, deeper and profound meanings to Gandhian ideas which are capable of bringing about broader and lasting consequences.

Hence, it is our honest feeling that one has to prepare oneself with the above given thought configuration. Before attempting to study the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi, I desire to study the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi in the light of his entire personality because in his case thought cannot be separated from his life and action.

It may be the desire of many others also to study Mahatma Gandhi’s ideas in such a background. However, I consider myself privileged to be one among them, as I have been bestowed with an opportunity to do so. In a way, I consider that my study has its own special status and unique importance.

Plan of the Thesis

The entire study is divided into five chapters excluding an annexure, which contains the bibliography.

The first chapter comprises of a brief introduction of the subject of study along with the methodology adopted and a brief
explanation about each chapter. In this chapter I have tried to present a justification for the study and its benefits to the academic world in particular, and to the nation in general.

The second chapter, which covers the early life of Mahatma Gandhi, provides a base for his social activities. It is from this background that the significance of Gandhi as a social reformer will have to be understood. His family influences, childhood experiences, his adherence to truth even as a lawyer play an important role in his social service. This chapter includes: (A) Childhood of Mahatma Gandhi, (b) Academic Career, and (c) Professional Career as a Barrister.

We propose to discuss in chapter third Gandhi's views on prohibition. Prohibition is one of the important planks in social reform. Drinks and drugs destroy the health especially of our youth. Young men are the salt of the nation according to Gandhi. If they are not all right, the society cannot be all right. Gandhi considers social, economic, moral, religious and other bad effects of alcohol and waged a war against the evil. Therefore, we thought it appropriate to examine the views on alcoholism and bring out the significance of Gandhi's views. Hence, in the third chapter, I have tried to present/explain the views of Mahatma Gandhi on Alcoholism. This chapter stands divided into the
following five sections: (a) Meaning of alcoholism, (b) Definition of alcoholism, (c) Effects of alcohol consumption on health, (d) Gandhi’s ideas regarding alcohol consumption, and (e) Gandhi’s opinion regarding the effects of alcohol consumption.

The chapter fourth comprises of Gandhi’s views on status of women. Before Gandhi, many have tried to improve the conditions of women in India. It is because of his intense concern for the upliftment of women he carried out many activities and programmes for them. His views on women have a direct bearing on men and hence social philosophy of the Mahatma will be incomplete to that extent if we do not consider his views on women.

The subject is also sub-divided into four parts as under: (a) Status of women in ancient period, (b) Status of women during mediaeval period, (c) Status offered to women by Gandhi, and (d) Gandhi’s opinion regarding men-women relationship and their relative status.

In the fifth chapter we discuss various views on caste system and untouchability. Gandhi’s remark that untouchability is a curse on Hinduism shows his total opposition to the treatment given to Harijans by others, especially Hindus. All are
created by God and therefore all should have the equal rights and opportunities to lead a decent life. The fact that he invited a Hariajan family to live with him in his Ahsram shows that he practised what he preached. We have attempted here to analyse his efforts to eradicate untouchability with a view to understand his social philosophy better.

In this chapter, views on caste system and untouchability system are covered under three parts, viz., (a) Meaning and definition of caste, (b) Origin and growth of caste system, and (c) The ideas of reformers who tried to eradicate caste system (mainly three thinkers) : (i) Basaveshwara, (ii) Ambedkar, and (iii) Gandhiji.

In the sixth chapter, conclusions drawn on the basis of entire study are stated.

Methodology

As the study is post facto in the entirety of its nature, historical method is used as basic methodology of study. The data base contains both primary and secondary sources comprising of books, weeklies edited by Gandhi and biographies, autobiography, monographs, commentaries, etc., pertaining to various topics of the study.
Certain parts of the study are concerned with the views of other thinkers and in such cases a comparative analysis is adopted as the method of study.