Humanism in the Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi

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By

B. SRISAILAM

Supervisor

Prof. B.D. LAHOTI
Department of Philosophy
Osmania University
Hyderabad

DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY
OSMANIA UNIVERSITY
HYDERABAD- 500 007
ABSTRACT

Introduction

The present scenario of disarray in world affairs creates a need for revising of Gandhian philosophy for new generations. Gandhi is not an academic philosopher. At the most he was interested in human affairs in all respects. Gandhi is well aware of both Indian philosophy and western thought. He was deeply influence by Tolstoy, Ruskin, Emerson and Thoreau.

Gandhi’s period during the South Africa also have deep impact on his thought. His theory was taken from Tolstoy, Ruskin, Emerson and Thoreau and practically implemented in South Africa and India. During the freedom struggle also he is deeply committed for these ideas.

He is basically influenced by every theory and personality in his life. Bhagavat Gita also has deep influence on him.

Humanism implied dignity of man and his privileged positioning the world. The humanists emphasized the elegance of writing and speech as well as morality which stressed the uniqueness of man, his feelings and his potential. Humanism emerged as a broader intellectual influence, focusing attention on the nature, achievement and potential of humanity rather than on the power and mystery of divinity. Thus humanism was a conceptual and secular shift from religion to the potential of humanity. It also meant the study of the texts of antiquity with renewed interest.

Humanism thus meant an educational and cultural interest based on the study of classics. Humanism was a basic source of inspiration for all cultural changes of the Renaissance, greatly influencing literature, history, painting, sculpture and political ideas. The intellectual interest of the humanists were primarily literary, rhetorical, and ethical and they typically wrote poems, orations, letters, plays, historical works of scholarship and a very wide range of moral treatises.
IMPORTANCE OF STUDY

Gandhi’s Scientific Humanism

By equating Gandhi with any saint or philosopher who couched transcendental truth and spoke in riddles offering a plethora of aphorisms, we will be missing the essential Gandhi. He was a revolutionary in the sense that he aimed at changing certain social and political structures but the means he adopted were not the usual violent methods associated with revolutions. He offered a package of alternatives to humanity. His insistence of nonviolence to violence; persuasion and reconciliation to end hostilities; trusteeship to end economic injustice; improvement of the lot of the depressed sections by abolishing factors that perpetrate social iniquities; ending man’s tyranny on nature by respecting nature as the protector of human race; limiting one's wants.

It is said in certain quarters that Gandhi was successful only to a limited extent that too his impact is felt only in certain cultural context. There is no denying of the fact that Gandhi was deep-rooted in his cultural and religious traditions. The phenomenal success Gandhi registered in the far-away South Africa, fighting for human rights and civil liberties in the first two decades of this century and later the adoption of the Gandhian techniques, if not fully, by Nelson Mandela and the subsequent revelations made by the former South African President Mr. De Klerk that he was also influenced by Gandhi in adopting the path of reconciliation and forgiveness, certainly show that Gandhi had not spent twenty-one years in South Africa in vain.

In the American continent, Martin Luther King’s heroic fight for civil liberties on the Gandhian lines and his own admission that it was from Gandhi that he learnt his operational tactics also is not an isolated instance of the relevance of the Gandhian tactics. The manner in which the Greens, particularly in Germany, adopted Gandhian techniques to arouse human consciousness and how they practice their strategy, and the bold assertions
made by Petra Kelly about the way they were influenced by Gandhi, also indicate that it is not the cultural traditions of a country or continent that would make the efficacy of certain philosophy or attitude viable, but it is the willingness and readiness of people to react and respond that matters. One can give quite a few instances from almost all parts of the world to show how in different measures the Gandhian vision and approach is found to be an effective weapon in the hands of freedom fighters and social reformers.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

The aim of the study is to analysis the various dimensions of humanism in Gandhian philosophy.

Objectives:

Specific objectives of the study are:

1. To find out the religious, ethical & spiritual outlook of Gandhi in promoting universal human well being.
2. To evaluate Gandhian philosophy concerning the upliftment of the downtrodden.
3. To find out the philosophical outlook of Gandhi on equitable distribution of economic fruits to the poorest among poor and empowering these sections of the society.
4. To understand the development of women and their empowerment in Gandhian philosophy.

Methodology of Study:

The following methodology of study and research is proposed to be followed. Both descriptive and analytical methods are used in analyzing the Data.
1. Reference of books, magazines and journals
2. Study the relevant seminar paper presentations.
3. Interviewing contemporaries and associates of Gandhi in freedom struggle and other social movements.

The chapters’ scheme:

**The chapter I: Introduction** deals with various aspects of the Humanism and its evolution and Gandhian aspects

**Chapter II: Impact of Humanism on Gandhi:** which shows how Humanism influenced Gandhi is discussed.

**Chapter III: Humanism and non-violence in the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi** discusses the topics such as Gandhi and non-violence, non violence and truth, Gandhi and self suffering and Buddha.

**Chapter IV: Gandhian practices and their philosophical significance** discusses issues such as non violence and moral principles, Gandhian trusteeship in theory and practice, the true significance of Gandhi and *sarvodaya* or welfare of all, and Gandhi as a Philosopher

**Chapter V: Gandhi’s contribution to humanism** is clearly gives the various contributions such as concept of man in Mahatma Gandhi, The human family, Gandhi’s impact on American civil rights movement such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Global peace and Gandhi.
Chapter VI: Conclusion; the final and last chapter is conclusion. In this chapter major findings and suggestion for further research is provided. The conclusion from the present study also is dealt critically.

Objectives of Gandhian Humanism:

One of the fundamental objectives of Gandhian humanism is to be empowered with the weapon of self-restraint. This will enable an individual to guard himself against disrupting forces. It is an inner force that quickens his judgment to take action against all ills and evils however undesirable and unexpected.

The above strategy of self-restraint in the form of a Brahmachari as one of the Gandhian strategies of human consciousness also encompasses another important objective of humanism. It is to practice in the control of sensualist, of temptation and sentimentalism. The important factors associated with this practice are to have a careful and cautious control over sense-organs. From the diary of Mahadev Desai, we come across a better exposure of this Gandhian strategy of humanism in the observance of Bramhacharya.

The dispassionate attitude towards all sensual objects or events of life that a Brahmachari maintains with strictness of perfection divulges the truth that a man’s life should always be directed towards greater values of humanism. Even when sensualist produces an aroma of attachment, the real humanist laughs at easy expositions of life in senile sentimentalism. The real humanist is always an iconoclast.

Perhaps in delineating with the objectives and strategies of humanism, Gandhi comes nearer to Swami Vivekananda who also emphasizes on the role of detachment and self-restraint in human endeavour.
Gandhi’s chief antagonist, General Smuts, himself characterized the course and culmination of his Satyagraha as “a successful coup”. Concrete success has eluded the struggle in South Africa during the seventy-odd years since Gandhi’s departure for India. And in India, in the next three decades, Gandhi was able to achieve another and greater “successful coup” by dismantling the most powerful imperial structure of all times.

Influences on Gandhi

Impact of Buddha on Gandhi

So, Gandhi’s humanism, like that of the Buddha, crossed racial and national barriers because of this loving kindness and goodwill as *Maitribhava* (friendliness). Thus the spirit Buddha molded the great mind of modern India. Gandhi’s role was more in the nature of enlarging the scope of ahimsa to fit mode environments. He maintained, “Ahimsa is a science, the word ‘failure has no place in the vocabulary of science. A failure to obtain the expected result is often precursor to further discoveries”.

Gandhi considered war a great evil. The killing and bloodshed”; that the Second World War brought about filled Gandhi with dismay: and pain; the devastation caused by the atom bomb shocked his conscience. He believed that permanent peace could be established in, the world on the basis of ahimsa only. He therefore located himself in the tradition began by the Buddha.

Non-violence is the essence of Buddhism. Buddha did not advocate a literal application of violence to the punishment of criminals and to war. Buddha teaches Ahimsa both as love and avoidance of injury to self and others. Positively Ahimsa finds expression in love, pity, tenderness and impartiality. The love that the Buddha teaches is the deliberately radiated well-wishing love towards all living things whatever. The Buddhist doctrine of violence is more practical and it steers clear of extremes. The path of the Buddha has been called the ‘Middle way’.
**Impact of Jainism**

Jainism had been a greater living force in Gujarat than in any other part of India. Gandhiji read with great interest not only the life of Mahavir and the ethical teachings of the Jainas but also Saddarsana Samuuccya, the philosophical texts of Haribhadra Suri. Jainism laid great stress on non-violence, celibacy, non-possession and non-stealing. Gandhiji's family contact with the Jains and the Jain philosophy of non-violence accentuated his ethical outlook in favour of communitarians. Jainism as a religious faith arose as an offshoot in Hinduism, as an attempt at reforming Hinduism in order to make it less violent and more humane, compassionate and a selfless faith, infusing a greater sense of sociability into the doctrine.

**Impact of Vaishnavism**

The Vaisnavic family influence of self-sacrifice, self-surrender, identification with God’s creation and renunciation of worldly possessions, on Gandhiji, had its manifestation in form of compassion for the suffering humanity, and egalitarian philosophy.

**Impact of Islam**

Islam is a religion of peace and brotherhood. The very word ‘Islam’ means peace, safety or salvation. The Prophet himself was extremely gentle, humane and more modest than a virgin in her veil. To his disciples, he was always indulgent: he rebuked none. However, the Koran favours war against the aggressor. The Prophet himself waged defensive wars, although at the end forgave his defeated enemies. Yet, the Prophet preferred non-violence to violence.

Gandhiji was influenced by Harischandra’s story. After getting permission from his father, he once witnessed a play on *Satyavadi Harischandra* which captivated him. He remarked that Harischandra captured his heart. He said, “Why should not all be truthful like Harischandra was the question I asked myself day and night. To follow truth
and to go through all the ordeals Harischandra went through was the one ideal it inspired in me”. His religion was impressed by Harischandra’s story. Like Harischandra, he also suffered for preaching and practicing truthfulness.

Gandhiji was also deeply influenced by the story of Shravana’s devotion to his parents. He read the play Shravana *Pitribhakti* with intense interest which left an indelible impression on his mind. He learnt the lesson of selfless service and devotion from the pictures depicting Shravana carrying, by means of slings fitted for his shoulders, his blind parents on pilgrimage. Shravana became his model.

**Impact of Christianity:** Sermon on the Mount in New Testament of Bible has essential teachings of Jesus Christ. It has deep impact on Gandhiji in preaching non-violent philosophy.

**Gandhi and Non-Violence**

In his trial speech made at Ahmadabad Sessions Court in March, 1922, Gandhi put forward his philosophy with great eloquence, when he stated non-violence to be the ‘first article of (his) faith’ and the 'last article of (his) creed'. Non-violence had always been the founding principle of Gandhian spirituality, and his bedrock of this political philosophy. Gandhi's distrust of violence as a mode to assume political power and as a tool of revolution was ingrained in his world-view from the very early days of his political career.

**The Origins of Gandhi's Non-Violence Philosophy:**

Gandhi's secularism and openness to all kinds of theological and philosophical schools is well known. It was through an assimilation of various concepts and philosophical tenets that Gandhi arrived at his own understanding of non-violence. Jainism and Buddhism were the most important influences that lay behind the foundation of Gandhi's non-violence theory. Both Jainism and Buddhism preached non-violence as the basic principle of existence. All other thoughts and actions propagated by these two religious schools were based on
this base of non-violence. Gandhi was deeply influenced by his readings of these scriptures.

GANDHIAN HUMANISM:

If humanism is man’s real identifying as man, Gandhian humanism is more than that. He goes deeper into the problems of human consciousness and probes into the inner sensibilities of mankind. There is neither any theory nor there any dogmas to uphold humanism as something novel or new in him but where he departs from others in evolving a new concept of humanism is: it is Love and Truth for which man is and eternally thrives for the fusion of man and the All Beautiful.

The Gandhian aesthetics of Sarvodaya is undoubtedly a new dimension in the discovery of human consciousness. It is a concept that embraces humanity for global awareness and global welfare. “Sarvodaya and Gandhian Humanism” is an introspective analysis to this end in view.

Non-Violence and Gandhian Humanism:

A humanist par excellence, Gandhi finds the source-point of humanism in non-violence, which, according to him, bears a long tradition. It is nothing new because the spirit of non-violence is dormant in every human being. This necessitates apart to be ignited, a method to be practiced in perfect harmony and poignancy. Moreover, as non-violence is rooted in ancient culture and tradition, it merely awaits a move anew for better awakening of humanistic awareness. Gandhi elucidates the truth from a new angle of vision and foretells on the salvation of a battered world through non-violence:

As Gandhi gives little importance to external fear that tempts one to take recourse to violence, he does not think that violence can win over internal fear-the fear of being accountable to God for one's wrong doing. He, therefore,
emphasizes on non-violence that brings forth protection of the self for the cause of humanism:

Gandhi also explains the failure of non-violence with a well-drawn simile and concludes with extraordinary' humility that in introducing and translating non-violence he is merely a seeker of humanism:

Looking upon non-violence as the most positive aspect of humanism, Gandhi considers it to be an endless preparation within' for perfection. It is an awareness of the eternal values of mankind. Born to suffer in order to purify himself, every man has a responsibility, as Gandhi firmly believes, towards himself and towards mankind as a whole. For this, the person who believes in non-violence banks heavily on modesty for justice denied to him. He is well aware of the fact that love that plays a very significant role in his strategy of non-violence wins in the long run.

Gandhi explains the above-mentioned inherent role of love in non-violent non-co-operation in terms of humanity. Thus sharing others' opinions and making a conjoint endeavour to arrive at Truth through non-violence allows a wider avenue of humanistic advancement as Gandhi warns.

In his humanistic approach to non-violence, Gandhi always derides autocracy. He thinks that freedom of individual opinion is actually making a good ground for implementing non-violence. The individual dislikes imposition of any principle however sound it may offer and Gandhi is well aware of this psychological principle or human behavior. He therefore, humbly submits about himself as an ardent humanist:

While explaining the pre-requisite for Civil Disobedience Gandhi also expounds the same principle of tolerance as a mark for non-violent humanism. Here, again, he elucidates his point of tolerance with a smile.
As a practical humanist, Gandhi banks upon non-violence because it best teaches us how to remain pure in thought and action through non-cooperation. Violence, on the other hand, manifests our utter stupidity and inaction, ignorance and rage. A restrained approach to oddities in life brings forth positive approach too humanism and such an approach cannot but embrace constraints through non-violence.

The lesson of Gandhian non-violence is one of natural humanism. It is the lesson that teaches mankind of oneness, the great truth of inseparable identity and also of the fact that all men and women are 'children of the same God'. One cannot, in this connection, but recall his poignant words against the proposed partition of India:

As a foreseer of humanism, Gandhi believes that the future of humanity-depends on eliminating hatred against the down-trodden and the deprived, the weak and the mute millions who never bother for force or the wistful outcome of force. The dignity of human beings is to be nursed not with violence of hatred but with mutual love and sympathy. From his own rich experience of harmonization of a global society in the frame-work of non-violence, he observes.

The emancipation of humanism in each individual through non-violence awaits release from all sensualities and striving for Truth. Indeed, truth and non-violence are so intertwined that in course of operation they lose separate identities and act as complementary to each other towards fullness of humanism. This fullness of humanism is the end-point of ahimsa that serves as a means of that end-point. Gandhi, therefore, visualizes ahimsa as a means, and Truth the final victory of humanism as he concludes.

That the education of Satyagraha is the education of perfection, the education that excels humanism is the most remarkable contribution for which Gandhi-will ever-remain illustrious in the history of human advancement. What
he essentially emphasizes is to inspire emancipation of the greater self in everyone from his little self-an emancipation that calls forth awakening and exercise of the soul-force. This necessitates a prolonged training in disinterested service towards mankind.

The lesson of non-violence learnt through the Gandhian concept of humanism is that lesson of the inner soul that marks one's excellence as a human being. And that excellence is the excellence attained in truth, self-negation and humility. When, as Gandhi believes, one wins over one's physical bare necessities, the dawn of humanism awakens in the midst of non-violence as he elucidates.

NON-VIOLENCE AND TRUTH

"Non-Violence and Truth (Satya) are inseparable and presupposes one another. There is no God higher than truth." (From True Patriotism: Some Sayings of Mahathma Gandhi, 1939, ed. By. S. Hobhouse).

"The axiology of New Humanism deduces all values from the supreme value of freedom. Freedom is the supreme value of life, because the urge for freedom is the essence of human existence. Indeed, it can be traced all the way down the entire process of biological evolution. Since all ethical values are derived from the biological heritage of man, they require no sanction which transcends human existence. To be moral, one needs only be human; it is not necessary to go in search of divine or mystic metaphysical sanction. Humanist morality is evolutionary.

The concept of man and the Human Community:

The Concept at Man in Mahatma Gandhi is ideal, moral and spiritual. It is also realistic, "pragmatic and humanistic, man is the nucleus of society and centre of reference for all. There is a close resemblance between the sophistic philosophy of the early Greek Thought and the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi. 'Man is a measure of all' forms the central theme of the sophistic thought whereas man is the primary necessity
in Gandhian thought. Man is the main product of nature. Man is governed equally by two factors i.e., heredity and environment.

**Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi**

The evolution of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi into the ‘Mahatma’ of our times very much hinges on the principles that were the guiding light of his life. Till his last breath, Gandhiji unflinchingly adhered to these philosophies often referred by the collective term ‘Gandhism’. Over the years the thoughts and the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi have inspired generations across the world and they have often been the bedrock of civil rights movements waged against oppressive regimes.

**Truth**

Truth or ‘Satya’ was the sovereign principle of Mahatma Gandhi’s life. The Mahatma’s life was an eternal conquest to discover truth and his journey to that end was marked by experiments on himself and learning from his own mistakes. Fittingly his autobiography was titled ‘My Experiments with Truth.’ Gandhi strictly maintained that the concept of truth is above and beyond of all other considerations and one must unfailingly embrace truth throughout one's life.

**Satyagraha**

Gandhiji pioneered the term Satyagraha which literally translates to ‘an endeavor for truth.’ In the context of Indian freedom movement, Satyagraha meant the resistance to the British oppression through mass civil obedience. The tenets of Truth or Satya and nonviolence were pivotal to the Satyagraha movement and Gandhi ensured that the millions of Indians seeking an end to British rule adhered to these basic principles steadfastly.

**Nonviolence**

The principle of nonviolence or Ahimsa has been integral to many Indian religions and Mahatma Gandhi espoused for total nonviolence in the Indian freedom struggle. He was determined to purge the Satyagraha movement of any violent
elements and incidents of violence by Satyagrahis in Chauri Chaura, Uttar Pradesh led him to call off the civil disobedience movement. Gandhi’s adoption of vegetarianism is often regarded a manifestation of his faith in the principles of nonviolence.

The book 'Unto This Last' written by John Ruskin profoundly influenced Gandhi and it brought about an instantaneous and practical transformation in his life. According to Gandhi the teachings of 'Unto This Last' are:

(1) “That the good of the individual is contained in the good of all
(2) That a lawyer’s work has the same value as the barbers is as much as all have the same right of earning their livelihood from their work.
(3) That a life of labour i.e., that the life of the tiller of the soil and the handicraft man is the life worth living.”

In order to ensure the welfare of all, money is needed. This money must be legitimately earned in tune with moral and spiritual considerations. The money earned without these considerations leads to animalism. According to the concept of Sarvodaya when man becomes materialistic or money minded he does not care for any thing good or bad it leads to social imbalance. Thus Sarvodaya is a philosophy which provides checks against these imperfections of human mind and soul. It endeavors to put man on the tract which may lead him to real social happiness.

Gandhiji said “self-giving, self-control and self-suffering are prime requisites" for realizing Sarvodaya. It also requires great self-discipline and training and development of soul-force.” Gandhiji was of the opinion that for achieving Sarvodaya the best and effective means is spiritual through the technique of Satyagraha or clinging to the Truth and Nonviolence at the cost of untold suffering for oneself and even death.

Gandhiji believed like Ruskin that the Socio-economic organization that guarantees the well-being of all the high and the low, the rich and the poor, the strong and the weak, is the only one worth striving for, what is good for all must also be good
for each and everyone individually. Gandhiji’s modification of the concept from, the Welfare of the least *antyodaya* to ‘welfare of all’ (Sarvodaya) is profoundly significant.

For Gandhi, non-violence is the means to achieve the end, that is Truth. Non-violence which Gandhi followed was no ordinary idea or belief but it was born of conviction and was based on the participation of the body and mind. It evolved through the control of the palate, non-possession of property or any other material or non-material thing, restraining one’s senses, adoption of the principle of non-stealing, abolition of untouchability, promotion of communal harmony and above all anchoring life on moral principles and higher ideals. Non-violence, thus, did not mean only the non-use offered; it was deeper in connotation and practice. It involved changing the whole way of life and consciousness and remaining in communion with nature and feeling that everything in this world is throbbing with the divine spirit of which the individual is one small part. This identification of the individual with the whole cosmos and at the same time retaining the individuality constituted the core meaning of nonviolence- such a consciousness would obviously make one realize his or her shortcomings.

**Conclusion**

Mahatma Gandhi’s concern for humanism was essentially based on the excellence and ascent of man. His patriotism incorporates love, sympathy and the inherent goodness of mankind irrespective of caste, creed, community, colour, sex, etc. “I do want to think in terms of the whole world. My patriotism includes the good of mankind in general. Therefore, my service in India includes the service of humanity. The spinning wheel symbolizes Gandhi’s philosophy of truth and humanism. The inherent spirit of humanism as the spinning wheel represents lends an altogether new dimension to his philosophy of life – the goodness of the lowly and the lost, the oppressor and the oppressed.

Humanism as a theistic, pragmatic theory was first conceived around 2000 BCE in India. It is a this-worldly, human-centered, secular philosophical outlook. Gandhi
understands religion as connoting the individual's integrity and society's solidarity. Free-will for him is freedom of the "rational self." Morality is not a matter of outward conformity, but of inward fulfillment. His integral humanism is indicated by his enumerated seven social sins: (1) politics without principles; (2) wealth without work; (3) commerce without morality; (4) knowledge without character; (5) pleasure without conscience; (6) science without morality; and (7) worship without sacrifice. The eleven vows recited in his Ashram prayer began with Truth and Non-Violence as foundational for the integration of moral, social, political and economic values. Non-Violence should be a creed rather than a policy. Gandhi’s Truth meant freedom of self-actualization for societal development.

Gandhi’s strategy for the freedom movement was based on the aesthetics of enriching and exercising “inner strength”, which is a positive component of the aesthetics of excellence.

Therefore, he and the utilitarian will converge in many points in their career, but there does come a time when they must part company, and even work in opposite directions. The utilitarian to be logical will never sacrifice himself. The absolutist will even sacrifice himself. “To accelerate the spirit of humanism in terms of purity and depth of vision where the self merges in the absolute goodness is the route to excellence.
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