Chapter – I
INTRODUCCION

If then virtue is an attribute of the spirit, and one which cannot fail to be beneficial, it must be wisdom: Socrates.¹

It is this wisdom that both these great men, Plato of the ancient Greek world and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi with his very Indian origin, shared, inculcated and lived in. It is also this wisdom which led these two men develop their own ideas regarding individuality, society and the larger world order. The wisdom which they possessed distinguished them from the rest in their own times. It is also true that Plato, a philosopher and political thinker of the ancient Greece, and Mahatma Gandhi, a religio–moralist, social reformer and political activist of colonial India exhibited a very typical yet a discernible similarity in their approach and deliberation upon the politico–social issues of their respective place and times.

This thesis is a reappraisal of the politico–social thoughts of these two great men, belonging to two different cultures and tries to unveil their roots and find the causes of their failure in realizing their socio-political visions in practical terms.

It is not wisdom in general the attainment of which was the goal of these two thinkers, but it was a kind of practical wisdom which they strived
Man surely cannot survive alone. He is born in a community, acts in a community and contributes towards the growth of the community to leave a legacy for the coming generations. Surely, the kind of man’s communal life prevalent in the late fifth century and early fourth century B.C. in Athens was not the same for man living in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century colonial India. Their life-patterns differed not only because of the temporal difference but also due to cultural difference. The political structure in which a man lives and has lived in different eras of human history is fashioned by his cultural heritage. This cultural heritage in turn is structured by the value–system to make it functional. A particular epoch in history is identified, largely, by its value system that gives meaning to its cultural living, that in turn largely fashions the intellectual development of the leaders and the laity of the community of the time. Plato and Gandhi illustrate the point eminently. And as seers they looked beyond their times.

Plato, whose original name was Aristocles, was born in May–June 428/427 B.C. in Athens. Having born in an aristocratic though not very wealthy family, Plato owed his lineage to his father Ariston who was a descendent of the early kings of Athens and of Poseidon, who was the master of the sea. Plato’s mother was Pericitione, who owed her lineage to
Athens’s famous Law–giver Solon (640-559 B.C.). Charmides and Critias were Plato’s relatives from the maternal side and they belonged to the group of thirty tyrants who ruled Athens after its defeat in the Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.). Adeimantus and Glaucon were Plato’s brothers. Thus it is obvious from his background that Plato’s political awareness was naturally imbibed from his family. The idea of “citizen” was central to Plato’s politico-cultural thinking. Plato met Socrates in 407 B.C. and that was the turning point of his life. It not only determined his thought process, it determined his life pattern and his philosophy of life. It was the Socratic methodology which Plato ardently followed in his early dialogues and it is this Socratic Plato who wanted his ideal political republic to be founded on morality.

It is also noteworthy that Plato took an active part in the contemporary political events. He himself fought in three wars and also won an award for his contribution in those wars. In 404 B.C. at the end of the Peloponnesion War when an oligarchic revolution took place in Athens, in which Charmides and Critias were positively involved, Plato was involved in active politics. He withdrew from it when democracy was restored in Athens. He then fled to Megara, where he took refuge along with Euclid, from where he went to Egypt and returned to Athens in 395 B.C. He fought for the city of
Corinth for the succeeding few years. He then visited Archytas the philosopher, political leader and mathematician in 387 B.C. at Taras and returned to Athens in 386 B.C. It was in the same year that he founded his academy in Athens, which became famous as an institution of higher learning and intellectual exercise. Plato’s further active engagement in politics occurred much later, sometime in 367 B.C. when he visited Sicily on the invitation of Dion with whom he had established strong bonds of friendship. Dion was much impressed by Plato’s idea of rulers being guided by the wisdom of a philosopher and wanted to implement it in Sicily. However, Dionysius II’s (the successor of the late King Dionysius the elder) serious difference with Plato’s ideas made him retire to his own land Athens. He again visited Sicily in 361 B.C. for a reconciliation of Dionysius II with Dion who was in exile, but was not able to succeed in his effort. In fact the latter imprisoned him and sold him as a slave, and he could only return to his place after payment of a ransom. This event shattered Plato’s dream of the “philosopher–king” of a morally based republic.

Thus it is obvious that Plato was not only a political thinker, he was also a political activist. He seriously took up the political cause of his times and took active interest in putting to practice his political thoughts. This goaded him to rush to Sicily with a belief that his idea of republic was being
materialized. He continued his intellectual pursuits at his academy after returning from Sicily till his death in 347 B.C. The Academy which Plato founded in 386 B.C. followed the Socratic ideal of ‘knowing the Truth’. But this Truth not only meant deciphering the epistemological status of Truth, it also signified imparting education and training in the disciplines, the knowledge of which is necessary for reforming the world. Thus the ‘love for wisdom’ or Socratic wisdom in the strict sense implied quest for practical wisdom.

It is the quest for practical wisdom which was the guiding factor of all the works of Plato. The actual volume of Plato’s works is a matter of debate. But it can be said without much controversy that Plato’s original works include 23 dialogues, 13 letters and The Apology of Socrates. About the rest 11 dialogues, there is a great deal of controversy regarding their authenticity. Plato’s works can be roughly divided into four groups. (i) The early dialogues are often described as the Socratic dialogues, chiefly because the Socratic influence is dominant in these dialogues. These include: Apology, Crito, Euthypro, Laches, Lysis, Charmides, Protagoras, and the first book of The Republic. (ii) The early middle dialogues or the transitional dialogues, include Meno, Euthydemus, Gorgias, Cratylus, Lesser Hippias, Greater Hippias, Ion and Menexenus. (iii) The later middle dialogues are the mature
dialogues which include: the *Phaedo, Symposium, Phaedrus* and books two to ten of *The Republic*. (iv) The last group include *Laws, Theatetus, Sophist* and Statesman.

This voluminous work itself speaks for the man. The philosopher–thinker of ancient Greece had his own way of thinking and is perhaps the first system–builder in the areas of political thinking. The chief concern of this study is to unearth the principles governing three of Plato’s renowned works, *The Republic, Statesman* and *Laws*, and his idea of republic expressed through these works. These three dialogues constitute the crux of Plato’s politico–moral theorizing as these exhibit his transition from a theoretician to a practical philosopher.

It can be significantly derived from Plato’s works that his political observations are not mere political prescriptions, guidelines following which a ruler should rule and subjects should obey. These political observations are built upon a very strong epistemological structure. The philosophical base forms the rational justification of the political observations which makes Plato a political philosopher, a political thinker and not merely a political advisor. The concerns about who should rule, what qualities should an ideal ruler be endowed with, why should the commoner follow such a rule, what should be the goal of such a rule, what should be the socio-economic
political structure of an ideal state, above all the values which is to be preserved by the ruler in an ideal state, are genuine philosophical concerns for Plato and the answer to which aim at establishing Truth. The aim of human life is to attain knowledge. Knowledge or cognition has different levels. It is not possible for everyone to attain this highest form of knowledge. For Plato, the Socratic idea of ‘virtue is knowledge’ is also conversely true, i.e. ‘knowledge is virtue’. Virtue in the Hellenic world signified ‘arête’ which meant all round excellence. This excellence also meant all round activity. For Plato, virtue meant individual excellence and also excellence in individual activity as reflected in the society. This also signified specialization in the field of thought and action. It is in this context of acquiring correct knowledge, that the answers to the question of who should rule and who should obey, should be understood.

The epistemological base of political theorizing lends another significant feature to Plato’s thoughts. The ultimate end of all theorizing is the search for an essential unity. Unity is essential for unity is truth, disunity is falsity. It is this unification of epistemology and politics which sets Plato apart from the other contemporary thinkers. Thus the search for a just socio–political order, is actually a search for unity, stability, permanence which in turn is a search for political truth or value as well. Truth in turn is nothing
but knowledge, and knowledge or episteme is knowledge of the Forms. These Forms are eternal and immutable. Thus metaphysics too enter into Plato’s political theorizing.

The social order which Plato proposes to build in *The Republic*, *Statesman* and *Laws* is a just socio-political order. A ruler is important, a statesman is important even law is important in so far as they are moral functionaries of imparting justice. It is thus that morality finds so significant a place amidst the radical politics advocated by Plato. The quest for a moral order sustaining the political order is essential because the moral order, as Plato believed, is eternal, it is permanent. It is this quest for permanence, for stability of the social order that underlies Plato’s idea of republic.

It is the same concern of finding stability and permanence in the political state of affairs that let Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, ages later in India, to develop his political observations on the strong foundations of morality and ethics and religion. Gandhi was first a God’s man and then a political man. For Gandhi no sphere of human enquiry can be divorced from the ethical realm, as morality is rooted in the human ethos. For Gandhi man is more a moral being than a rational being. It is of course true that the historical politico–social scenario prevalent in the fifth and fourth century B.C. in Greece had little semblance to the nineteenth and twentieth century
India when Gandhi pursued his political activities. The nation-state had emerged, the problems of political pluralism was also there. Colonialism had assumed new forms, where the colonies were subject to unjust atrocities by the colonial power. The concentration of economic power had begun to divide the world into several groups. The era also was witnessing development of war tactics, violent military warfare and extreme extortionate measures were becoming common. Amidst such a historical scenario Gandhi’s rise to political activism in India took place. The God’s man entered politics with the ideas of freedom, society and morality blended into an active principle of life. ‘Morality’ of course was for Gandhi, religious morality with the belief that India never entertained the idea of a denominational religion to be the religion of man.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born in a Vaishnavite family on 2 October, 1869 and his father was a diwan (Finance Minister) of a family State in Porbandar in Kathiawad. It is noteworthy that both his grandfather and his father were once leaders of their community, and both had to flee to avoid persecution, because of their free and non–customary activities. However, Gandhi had a very ordinary childhood, having his basic education in a local school. He had an early marriage, at the age of twelve or thirteen and at the age of nineteen he was sent to England to pursue higher education
in Law. He spent three years in London, and returned to India 1891, after attaining his degree in Law.

However, it was his stay in South Africa from 1891 to 1914 that provided the mental and intellectual strength in him to pursue the cause of the welfare of the nation. It may be said that the events which happened in South Africa in Gandhi’s life were circumstantial and were really not very related. But the policy of colour–prejudice of the British administration, the tremendous insult faced by him in the historic rail journey from Durban to Pretoria via Johannesburg, the legislation depriving the Indians of their voting rights, all had their impact upon his psyche. Gandhi viewed them as characteristics of a malady, against which he must rise to restore human dignity and freedom. Thus, for Gandhi the activities which he organized in South Africa were not mere protest against colonialism and apartheid, they were actualization of techniques which he believed in, the methods of attaining dignity and self–honour. Following this ideal he set up the Natal India Congress in 1894 August, organized a protest movement against a proposal to impose a poll tax of twenty – five pound per head on all Indian labours who stayed back in Natal after completing their indenture, organized a protest movement against the Black Act. It was in the last case that he introduced his very original technique of satyāgraha.
It can be said that Gandhi’s political activities and experiences in South Africa was the formative phase of his political career. It is true that Gandhi did not succeed in acquiring all the civic and political rights and liberties for the Indian working populace in South Africa. But the positive aspect of his involvement in South Africa was precisely this, the racial discrimination forced him to organize the people and foster the cause of individual liberty following the method of non–violence. It was his belief that moral strength will defeat the immoral ruler, and before the moral man the immoral ruler will fail to stand. It was this belief that did not make him adopt active resistance as a means of attaining freedom. Freedom, to Gandhi, meant not only absence of foreign rule, it was a positive notion implying liberty of the soul as well.

Thus what Gandhi learnt in South Africa he put to practice in India. The political programming based on the moral principles of *satya* (truth) and *ahimsā* (non–violence) were pursued along with the social reforms in South Africa as well as in India. ‘Truth’ for Gandhi was not merely ‘truth–telling’, it had a far wider connotation. After his arrival in India from South Africa in 1915 his active political involvements began in 1916 when he took up the cause of the Indigo cultivators in Champaran district in Bihar, and continued
up to the launch of the Quit India movement in 1942. Civil Disobedience movement was the last mass satyagraha movement organized by him.

He was a genuine mass leader, not merely a political leader in the narrow sense of the term ‘politics’. People addressed him as ‘Gandhi Maharāj’ and Mahātmā, the great soul. He communicated his thoughts, even personal, through his writings. He regularly voiced his opinion in the periodicals and journals like the Harijan, Young India, Indian Opinion amongst others. These writings together with the innumerable speeches which he delivered in different places in different gatherings communicated his beliefs, actions, programmes and even his ideals to the masses. These documentary evidences convey that Gandhi was not merely a political man. In fact he himself said ‘My life is my message’ and his life exhibit a political activism grounded in religio-moral understanding. Gandhi thus lived an authentic life, open to the people to adore or criticize.

His quest for political independence was simultaneously a quest for moral independence implying one’s freedom from human follies and vices. These two ideas make one meaning or sense of the term ‘freedom’. It is the quest for freedom in this sense embodied in his idea of svarāj that made him adopt the socio–political programmes in the course of his life. Among the different concepts he developed, explicated and implemented, the concepts
of satyāgraha, svarāj, rāmrājya and sarvodaya constitute the foundation of his belief system as also that of the socio–political state of affairs he wanted to establish with a philosophy of man, man to live and attain something of ultimate concern. These four cardinal concepts overlap and intersect as they form the basis of his idea of republic. The present study tries to elucidate these concepts together with some other key concepts of Gandhi’s thoughts and also tries to determine the applicability of these concepts in his constructive programme.

An exposition of Plato’s idea of republic and an exposition of Gandhi’s idea of republic have been attempted in this study, not merely to attempt a comparison between the two systems of thought but also with an objective of deciphering as to what do these ‘two ideas of republic’ really intend and express? Is it that the two ideas of republic discuss two conceptions of political order based upon a common grounding, or is it that these two ideas of republic discuss and deal with a fundamental question of life and existence? The subsequent chapters and the final discussion are an answer to this query.

**Reference:**

1. Plato, *Meno, Protagoras* and *Meno*, (trans.) W.K. C. Guthrie,

   Penguin Classics, p 141 – 142.