

Module 3 : Mahatma Gandhi

Section 2 : Introduction to Gandhi's Thought

Gandhi was a multi-faceted personality but not a system builder. He was basically a man of action, a social revolutionary, a visionary, a politician and even a saint. He has a good deal of writings on many issues of social importance. His writings, speeches and letters have been published nearly in one hundred volumes. There are also hundreds of books written on various aspects of his ideas by academicians and others all over the world. So a good deal of literature has emerged on his life and thought. Though he himself is not a coherent system builder, scholars have systematized his thought. They have brought out his social and political ideas in a coherent manner theoretically analyzing his basic ideals and presuppositions. Gandhi's contribution lies in the sphere of social and political philosophy but not in the spheres of abstract metaphysics or epistemology or logic as the latter largely constitute the realm of technical philosophy. So if philosophy is not to be understood in a populist sense as done very often naively, but in a technical sense befitting its subject matter and history, then Gandhi's status is more of a political thinker than a technical philosopher. As a practical idealist and visionary he has a philosophy of life. In his practical life he was deeply a religious man. Because of his religiosity his social and political ideals are sometimes bound up with some religious beliefs. It was also a convenient way of attracting the public sentiment since the common people were very much prone to religious beliefs. He has tried to mix up religion and politics. He has openly stated-

For me politics bereft of religion are absolute dirt, ever to be shunned. ... My politics and all other activities of mine are derived from my religion.⁵

⁵The mind of Mahatma Gandhi, compiled and ed. By R.K. Prabhu and U.K. Rao, Navjivan Publishing house, Ahmedabad- p. 102.

Of course Gandhi does not go by the conventional meaning of politics and religion; rather he has stipulated new meaning to them. His intermingling of religion and politics is because of the fact that he has not accepted their conventional meaning. He has never been a supporter or propounder of theocracy. A theocratic state is founded on the principle of obedience to religious beliefs. Theocracy supports authoritarian monarchy and dogmatism. It is opposed to democracy, individual liberty and rational approach to morality. But Gandhi propounds a political system based on the fundamental values of equality, liberty and non-violence. He is quite opposed to any kind of authoritarianism and monarchy. So Gandhi neither advocates nor believe in any theocratic order.

But then the problem is: why does Gandhi mix up religion with politics? It is because of the fact that he has given stipulative connotation to politics and religion. By politics he does not mean acquiring power or running civil administration in a state. By politics he means the method of transforming social system in terms of justice. He gives the blue prints of an ideal social system or a just society to be founded on justice. Justice is a synthetic notion consisting of some fundamental moral values. Thus politics for him is the moral effort to establish justice in all spheres of social life. Just like politics he also gives new meaning to religion. By religion he does not mean any sectarian ideal or belief in accordance with a religious tradition. He takes religion to connote moral order as is usually understood by the Sanskrit word 'dharma'. The purpose of religion is to realize truth and justice in all spheres of social life. This is the Gandhian scheme of belief, religion connotes the fundamental values like Truth and Justice as social goals and politics connotes the practical programmes to transfer social relations to realize these goals. So religion does not mean sectarianism nor does politics means capture of power of a state to run its administration. Once religion is understood in the sense of some highest moral ideal and politics is looked upon as the process of realizing it the two becomes inseparable. Thus, by defining religion and politics somewhat stipulatively in the aforesaid ways Gandhi maintains their inseparable relation.

Gandhi's novel method of socio-political activism both in Africa and India was quite innovative. He confronted with an authoritarian and tyrannical Socio-political system in both the countries. The social practice in Africa was against individual right and human dignity. He tried to oppose and fight it out. Similarly in Indian he found a colonial authoritarian polity. He thought it to be the main cause for the plight of the masses. So he wanted to change the political situation by mass action. Hence the social and political scenarios were behind his revolutionary action and intellectual deliberations.

Gandhi considered the prevailing situation to be faraway from his conviction of an ideal society. The existing socio-political situation was not only unjust in practice but also repulsive in theory. He therefore conjectured an ideal republic which he thought to be free from all existing evils. He may not be a coherent system builder but he has had a system of ideal republic with theoretical pre-suppositions which can be analytically discussed. Gandhi's notion of an ideal republic is based on some ethical ideals which are reducible to some fundamental values. His ideal social order is supposed to be founded on

some fundamental values. The values like non-violence, equality, freedom and justice seem to be the foundational basis of his ideal society. Since these values are not actually realizable in a society, Gandhi's conjecture of an ideal society contains elements of utopianism. Gandhi thinks of gradual approximation of these ideals in the process of social progress. More the society approximates them, more civilized it becomes.

While analyzing his political ideals and ethical values there is no need to bring emotional or subjective pre-occupations. An objective evaluation of his ideas and ideals need not be influenced by his personality traits. The theoretical consistency of his ideas can be analyzed without any hero-worship or denigration of his personality as is sometimes done by his admirers and critics respectively. His personal inhibitions need not be mixed up with his political ideals. Political and moral issues constitute the foundation of his social philosophy an analysis of which can lay bare the conceptual framework and the theoretical consistency of his philosophy.

Gandhi's political ideals are keenly associated with some value goals. He is more concerned with the moral issues while explaining his political ideas and ideals. While envisaging his ideal of Sarvodaya (an ideal social order) Gandhi throws valuable insight on some basic values of justice, non-violence, equality and freedom. He had also dealt at length with concepts of truth, god, human nature, trusteeship, basic education etc. All these ideas constitute the important basis of his social philosophy and intellectual discourses. We shall discuss some of the basic concepts which constitute the domain of his political ideal.