

## Module 3 : Mahatma Gandhi

### Section 7 : Truth

Gandhi uses 'truth' in various perspectives. So it has far-reaching implications in Gandhi's philosophy and practical life. He names his autobiography as "The Story of my Experiments with Truth" some of his key concepts like non-violence, satyagraha, god, morality etc. are intimately connected with its notion of truth. Truth has a great deal of metaphysical, ethical, practical and even emotional significance for him. Before going to discuss after Gandhi the different implications of truth, it is desirable to see its significance in ordinary discourse. In common usage truth is taken as the characteristic of a statement or proposition. A sentence or statement to be considered as a proposition at all must have a truth value, i.e. it must be either true or false. The sun is static around which the earth rotates; parallel lines never meet, India is the second largest populous country in the world etc. are all true propositions. A proposition is said to be true when it is in accordance with the existing state of affairs, reason or some correct principle. So too a proposition is false when it is not in agreement with fact or reason as the case may be. Thus truth or falsity has epistemological implication. There are some epistemological theories of truth to ascertain the truth value of different categories of propositions.

Gandhi seems to deviate from the common usage of the concept and makes various stipulations of truth. So what follows we shall discuss some of his stipulative implications and point out the metaphysical, ethical, mystical, practical significance of what he means by truth.

By economic equality Gandhi does not mean that everyone will have literally the same wealth. The real meaning of equality implies the principle "from each according to his ability to each according to his need". Every individual in a society must contribute something to the social life and in return would be able to live a decent life. Each person should get what he/she really requires provided such needs are natural. But in practice it is found that man's craving for material goods has no limits. This craving for unnatural things and comforts gives rise to competitive acquisitiveness. In this process there is concentration of wealth in the hands of a few individual. They manipulate to acquire wealth disproportionate to their actual needs. Exploitation gives rise to accumulation. When a few people who are in an advantageous situation go on accumulating wealth, majority of the people go unprivileged. Gandhi finds that the deprivation of the millions is due to the capitalistic system of economy and rapid industrialization. The capitalistic system is responsible for the wide economic gap between the people in the society. In his system majority of the people are deprived of the basic needs of life whereas a minority group lives very exuberantly multiplying their wants beyond their natural needs. Rapid industrialization has helped the capitalistic system to create great economic disparities in the society. It has also given rise to unemployment and ecological imbalance. Gandhi was thoroughly dissatisfied with capitalistic system, industrialization and possessiveness which mean accumulation of wealth with a selfish motive.

Gandhi accepts the fundamentality or primacy of the concept of truth over non-violence, satyagraha, God etc. in his political activism to establish justice he innovates non-violence, Satyagraha, trusteeship, the important moral ideals. Among all the moral ideals he takes truth as sovereign. He writes, 'for me truth is the sovereign principle which includes numerous other principles. This truth is not only truthfulness in word, but truthfulness in thought also, and not only the relative truth of our conception, but the Absolute Truth, the Eternal principle, that is God.'<sup>1</sup> From this it is obvious that he makes a distinction between the Absolute truth and relative truths. Anything that is objectively true or true on the basis of human experience can be taken as relative truth. What is empirically true can be considered as relative truth as different from absolute truth. Absolute truth transcends human experience. Absolute truth is the sum total of all that is there in the universe. Here Gandhi seems to attribute an ontological status to truth. He takes truth in the sense of ultimate existence or Reality or God. In metaphysics, what is called Absolute, Substance, Brahman or the principle of Being is characterized as Truth by Gandhi. What has absolute existence, as different from conditional existence, is truth. This view of truth is a metaphysical speculation. His theistic belief overshadows his rational analysis of truth.

<sup>1</sup>Ruskin, *Unto this Last*, Tr. By Desai, V.G., Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad.

Gandhi takes Truth in the sense of supreme order. He believes that there is some supreme moral law

that sustains the entire cosmos. There is a Vedic concept which holds that the cosmos is governed by some unalterable law which is called Rta. Rta means self-abiding law that governs the world. Being influenced by the Vedic concept of Rta, Gandhi speculates some supreme order and identifies truth with it. But order has two different implications. Order may mean natural uniformity or moral law. Laws of nature come under descriptive law and moral principles come under prescriptive law. Prescriptive law and descriptive law are categorically different from each other. Prescriptive laws apply to human behavior and such laws are variable and changing. Descriptive laws apply to natural phenomena and such laws are invariable and unchangeable. When Gandhi identifies truth with order, most likely he means the natural order as they are unalterable and they sustain the world. But in that case they are plural and to identify truth with the laws of nature will be misleading.

Gandhi sometimes identifies truth with inner voice. He also believes in the efficacy of conscience. Inner voice and conscience can be taken as synonymous. Gandhi has written, "What is Truth? A difficult question, but I have solved it for myself by saying that it is what the voice within tells you".<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi, Op. Cit., P. 42.

If inner voice or conscience is interpreted as the rational ability to frame the criterion of truth, then there will be rationale in this view. But inner voice is interpreted in the sense of some intuitive awareness. Intuition, it seems, is an indefinable experience that comes in a flash. Through this an insightful idea occurs to the mind regarding the truth of something. The possibility of an intuition as an experience cannot be doubted. Since inner voice or intuitive experience is a subjective feeling it is grounded on subjectivity. If truth will be rooted on subjectivity, then there will be no common standard of applying the concept. For it is possible for there to be conflicting inner voices of different people. In the absence of explanatory value or objective standard, inner voice cannot be the basis of truth. Of course Gandhi uses terms interchangeably which have different implications in practical use. He identifies Truth with God, inner voice, justice even life. He writes, "for me the voice of God, of conscience, of Truth, or the inner voice or the still small voice mean one and the same thing"<sup>3</sup> God, inner voice, conscience, justice are all very abstract concepts. They can be differently interpreted and their conceptual boundary can be made distinct from each other. To identify all of them with truth will create a lot of confusion and ambiguity. Gandhi's identification of Truth with these ideas makes truth conceptually ambiguous.

<sup>3</sup>The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi, Op. Cit., P. 42.

Gandhi takes truth in the sense of ought or moral value. He assumes some ultimate values and wants society to approximate these values. What is in accordance with the moral principle is true and what deviates from the moral principle is untrue. Ought is the ideal and society must strive towards that ideal. If there is a gulf between ought and is, then society should change in agreement with the ultimate values through a process of successive approximation. Then only truth will be realized. Here he takes truth in the sense of immanent justice. He takes truth, justice and dharma as interchangeable. Realization of truth means realization of dharma or righteousness and justice in the society. Truth and justice are closely intertwined in Gandhi's socio-political thought.

Further Gandhi takes truth as the highest ideal or the summumbonum of life. Summumbonum is the perfection that an individual can aim to achieve. In Indian tradition practice of some moral conduct is prescribed for the attainment of perfection. One is truthful if one scrupulously follows the moral ideals. Truth can be translated into action by adhering to the values in all walks of life. For him truth is a higher value than life. For life can be sacrificed for upholding the truth. That is if in a situation one has to choose between life or truth, Gandhi would prefer truth. He writes, "let hundreds like me perish, but let truth prevail."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi, Op. Cit., P. 33.

Gandhi holds that there is a close link between truth and satyagraha. Satyagraha is the non-violent resistance to remove injustice from social life and usher in a just system. A true Satyagrahi must remain committed to truth and non-violence. It is truth personified in action in all its purity. Very often Gandhi speaks of Satyagraha as soul-force born out of truth, justice and non-violence. Since truth is considered as the highest moral ideal and Satyagraha is the means to strive for the ideal they are nevertheless intimately connected. Truth is the end and Satyagraha is the means. As end and means are convertible according to Gandhi so too truth and satyagraha as they are the end and the means respectively. Further Gandhi relates truth with non-violence. One cannot be non-violent without remaining truthful. Any act of non-violence is a manifestation of truth. In its immanent form truth is the expression of non-violent action.

Further Gandhi identifies truth with God. There can be unanimity with regard to truth but not with regard to God. The concept of God may be different to different people. Again there are skeptics, agnostics, atheists, naturalists, positivists, materialistic etc., who do not accept any supernatural deity called God. Though they are skeptical about the existence of God, no one will deny truth. For negation of truth is the denial of knowledge, morality and all that is ideal in human life. So denial of truth is not possible. Gandhi initially believed that God is truth. This may be because of his theistic upbringing. But gradually with intellectual maturity he realized that god is a matter of personal belief but not a proven reality. So he changed his version and maintained that "Truth is God".

Gandhi's interpretation of truth has multifarious implications. He gives stipulative meanings to truth on different occasions. Instead of using the term in its conventional meaning, he has added various new meanings to it. The term has metaphysical, ontological, moral and mystical significance in Gandhi's writings. When a term is used equivocally it is likely to create ambiguity and confusion.