

Module 3 : Mahatma Gandhi

Section 8 : Concept of Man

What is human nature? Can we generalize about human nature? Gandhi has his own view on the nature and status of man. Before going to dwell upon Gandhi's concept of man let us see in brief how human nature has been assessed in different spheres of intellectual pursuits.

Biology, psychology, social sciences and philosophy study human nature from different perspectives. These studies reveal the intricacies of human nature and complexity of human existence. Further human nature or condition has not remained intact right from man's evolution to the present age. There have been a lot of changes; such changes have not stopped, in man's physical, mental and moral spheres. Of course the changes in physical sphere is manifold and so slow that it does not appear in a generation or even in a few generations. But in socio-cultural sphere change may be conspicuous in a modern society within a short span. For convenience all enquiries into human nature may be brought under three categories such as the biological, socio-cultural and metaphysical. Each category has diverse specialization. Psychology, anatomy, physical anthropology etc. are concerned with the study of man as a biological species and such scientific studies can broadly be characterized as the biological study of man. Similarly psychology, sociology, ethnology, social anthropology etc. study human behavior and explain man's nature from a vast field of socio-cultural, racial, geographical perspective. Such studies also cover man's socio-economic interdependence, the rise and limit of man's social consciousness, growth of man's moral obligation etc. Such studies can be brought under the socio-cultural perspective. Similarly different religions and philosophical systems speak about human nature and as such a great deal of metaphysical views are there. The metaphysical studies about human nature are sometimes called philosophical anthropology. Philosophical anthropology includes phenomenology and existentialism which study behavior of human beings as both creatures of their social environment and creator of their own values. While the first two studies (biological and socio-cultural) are concerned with the relation of man to the environment and historical achievements, philosophical anthropology is concerned with abstract issues like human nature, man's knowledge of himself, his ultimate destiny, purpose of life etc. In different ages philosophers have construed human nature differently. In the ancient tradition a dominating idea about man is that man is considered to be rational. The primacy of reason is recognized for any pursuit of knowledge. In the medieval period philosophers give a different picture of human nature. They consider man to be a child of God fallen from his divine status. In different religious traditions nature of man is considered differently. In some tradition man's life is considered sinful whereas in a different tradition man is considered as essentially divine. The concept of human nature and man's ultimate destiny is widely different in materialistic and spiritualistic traditions. Different forms of humanism also explain human nature and purpose of life differently. Metaphysical speculations sometimes present conflicting model of human nature and destiny resulting in incompatible cultural patterns and values systems.

A glance at these studies of human nature, behavior, existence, relation with social environment etc. reveals that such enquiries are being done either at a speculative level or at an empirical level. The biological and socio-cultural studies rely on the empirical method to build up their theories; the metaphysical and religious studies rely on speculation or gross assumption. The speculative approach is therefore overshadowed by preconceived ideas and assumptions. In absence of empirical or rational justification, the religious or metaphysical theories are speculations with their own pattern of analysis.

With this brief discussion how human nature has been variously studied in different spheres, now we shall turn our attention to Gandhi's view. Unlike the view that man is basically selfish and man adapts to the social surrounding for his survival, Gandhi takes a different stand on the issue of human nature. According to him man is basically good and has an innate goodness in him. The acceptance of the essential goodness of human nature prompts him to accept the non-violent method in every sphere of social engineering. The exalted and idealized notion of human nature has been at the root of his social and political thought.

Gandhi believes that man is potentially good. Goodness is basically inbuilt in human nature. He justifies it by saying that a mother unhesitatingly undergoes all painful experiences for her child and expects nothing in return. A father sacrifices everything for his child to bring him up or cure him from a disease. Man's sense of sacrifice and fellow feeling guides the march of human civilization. The progress of man from the state of cannibalism and nomadic life to the present state of civilized social existence holds evidence that man has innate goodness. Love, affection, fellow feeling, mutual sharing and cooperation are the guiding principles of social life lest human society could not have progressed to the present state. One may argue contrary to Gandhi's position that if goodness is something innate to human nature, why is there so much of conflict, discord, war, violence etc. in society? Gandhi would say that such phenomena exist because of some evils in social life. In the process war, violence, discord etc., occur. But in a just society there would be no scope for outbreak of violence, terrorism etc. Gandhi's

mission was to transform the existing social system to a just one.

Further being influenced by the metaphysical belief of Hinduism that every living being has an imperishable soul; Gandhi too accepts that there is an element of divinity in everyman. Every person possesses a soul and the soul is the manifestation of the divine. Gandhi writes " though men are not of the same age, the same height, the same skin and the same intellect, these inequalities are temporary and artificial, the soul that is hidden beneath this earthly crust, is one and the same for all men and women belonging to all times".¹¹ Since the soul is non-physical and spiritual in essence, he believes in the essential unity of mankind. He brings the analogy of the sun and the rays. The rays of the sun are different but their source is the same. Similarly there are many people but they possess the same divine spark, the soul, whose source is God. On that basis of this metaphysical idea he accepts the essential unity of mankind.

Accepting the dichotomy of the body and the soul Gandhi maintains that man as the soul is non-violent. The spiritual element in human nature stands for all good qualities like love, rationality, non-violence etc. He not only accepts the spiritual unity of mankind but also accepts that mankind as a whole is working towards the promotion of love and non-violence.

¹¹ The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi, Op. Cit., P.45.

This belief that man possesses an imperishable soul is not a proven fact but a religious belief. Just as there are beliefs like god's creation, heaven, hell, reincarnation etc. so too is the belief that man has a soul. Any comparative study of the leading religions shows the doctrinal disagreement and incompatibilities of beliefs. Again within Hindu philosophy, where the idea of soul is there, there are wide diversities and disagreements regarding the nature of the soul. Ironically though Hindu philosophy preaches the idea of an imperishable soul, the Hindu social system shows gross inequality of a hierarchical caste system.

Out of the conviction that man is innately good, Gandhi believes that there is no wrong-doer who cannot be reformed. He is of firm belief that even the hardened criminal can undergo moral transformation by proper appeal and education. No person is a born criminal. Social system, psychological strain or adverse situation may make a person anti-social. By awakening the real spirit either by education, training or moral appeal any one's anti-social attitude or animal instinct can be subdued or rational spirit can be aroused. That is why Gandhi holds Satyagraha in high esteem as the only means of social control to remove injustice from society.

Gandhi also accepts man's unlimited potentialities and the power of the soul-force. He sometimes takes the soul force as inner voice, conscience or even the voice of God. Man's potentialities can be developed through training and education. Though he believes the doctrine of karma, he is not a determinist. He emphasized on individual effort and free-will. He accepts the moral accountability of a man for what he does. Gandhi exhorts individual liberty and is a votary of individualism. As an anarchist he considers the existence of a powerful state as a hindrance to individual freedom. He considers freedom as one of the absolute or basic values of life. The essence of freedom lies in choice of action and accepting moral responsibility for what one chooses to do. His notion of anarchism and absolute freedom is based on his conception of innate goodness of man. He believes that nothing can be imposed coercively on a person. Any compulsion will be only counterproductive.

Gandhi's view or assessment of human nature not only expresses metaphysical overtone but also reveals his oversimplification of his conviction. His belief in the innate goodness of man, imperishable soul, and inner voice cannot be substantiated by rational justification. Further his view that every man is basically non-violent or can undergo a moral transformation reveals his conviction that the rational faculty always dominates human personality. This view is contrary to the view of modern psychology. Human behavior is often guided by some powerful instincts and biological urges. So to believe that man is always guided by rationality is not true. His view that the progress of human society is due to the binding condition of love, fellow-feeling and sense of sacrifice does not stand historical testimony. Rather violence, selfishness and exploitation seem to be very much there in every society in varying degrees. His view does not seem to hold good from the stand point of evolutionary progress or historical development. His emphasis on human freedom and individualism has far reaching political consequences. In this respect he can be regarded as a great champion of human dignity and freedom. But his overall view of human nature is speculative and simplistic.