



Humanistic Views Of Gandhi - A Philosophical Analysis

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Abstract: This paper explores the concept of humanism with special reference to Gandhian philosophy and its relevance in contemporary India. Humanism, derived from the Latin term *humanities*, emphasizes the dignity, value, and potential of human beings, promoting rational thinking, moral responsibility, and social welfare. Historically, humanism traces its roots to Greek thought, particularly Protagoras' idea that "man is the measure of all things," and later developed in both Western and Eastern traditions. While Western humanism often adopted an atheistic orientation, Indian humanism, reflected in the Vedas, Upanishads, and later reform movements, integrates spirituality with ethical living. The paper adopts a descriptive methodology based on secondary sources to analyse Gandhi's humanistic ideas. Gandhi's humanism was shaped by diverse influences, including his family, religious texts like the Bhagavad Gita, and thinkers such as Tolstoy and Ruskin. Central to his philosophy are truth, non-violence, service to humanity, and moral duty. Gandhi viewed religion as inseparable from daily life, defining it as *dharma*—a moral obligation that fosters both individual integrity and social harmony. Gandhian humanism advocates the creation of a just and humane society grounded in tolerance, unity, and ethical conduct. His vision of Ramarajya represents an ideal society based on justice, equality, and moral values. He emphasized duty over rights, believing that social transformation begins with inner moral development. In contemporary India, Gandhian humanism remains relevant as it addresses issues of inequality, conflict, and moral decline, offering a path toward peace, harmony, and holistic human development.

Key words – Humanism, Gandhian Humanism, Philosophy of Humanism, Gandhian Philosophy, Indian Philosophy

INTRODUCTION:

Humanism is regarded as founder of Greek humanism because Protagoras proclaimed that 'Man is measure of all things'. Humanism as a philosophical and literary movement originated in Italy in the Second half of the 14th Century and diffused all over Europe. As an atheistic theory it was conceived in 17th century by French philosopher but as a theistic-pragmatic theory it was conceived indirectly around 200 B.C. at the time of Vedas and Upanishads in "India have proclaimed the eternal supremacy of a primordial cosmic-transcendent Absolute real Existence which is (chit) itself. Mahavira, Gautama Buddha, the Bhagavad-Gita, Patanjali's Yogasutras, the bhagavat Purana and Gandhi proclaimed the sanctity of moral values" (V.P.Varma, 1979. p-3). The earthly life constitutes the central concern for the Vedic Aryans. The sacrificial fire-rites which were evolved during Vedic period had social welfare as its motto; the motive was to prepare the land for agriculture for abundance and welfare of human race.

The latter half of the nineteenth century witnessed Hindu Renaissance pioneered by Brahma Samaj of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Arya Samaj of Dayanand Saraswati, finally blossoming into Vedantic Hinduism of Vivekananda. Vedantic Hinduism stresses the importance of service to the weak and the needy as its practical aspect. That society is the greatest where the highest truths become practical. Humanism has undergone significant development assuming variety of forms in the West and in the East. Western Humanism is atheistic in content because Christianity conceives of God as the Creator, unlike Vedantic Humanism which is not atheistic.

METHODOLOGY AND OBJECTIVES:

This paper focuses on humanism and Gandhi's ideology on humanism. In this paper discussed about Gandhian Thought and his experiences and experiments in relation to promotion of just and humane society. This paper is descriptive in nature based on secondary data sources and the personal views of the authors. The central probe concentrated on in this paper is Gandhi's Philosophy of Humanism and Contemporary India.

Meaning of humanism:

Humanism the word came from the Latin '*humanitas*' implying ontological individualism and the quest for the perfection of the human spirit through the consummation of man's inherent potentialities is subjectivity and optimistic in its orientation. Humanism is a philosophical and ethical stance that emphasizes the value and agency of human beings, individually and collectively, and generally prefers critical thinking and evidence (rationalism, empiricism) over established doctrine or faith (fideism). It also finds meaning and significance in the leaves of grass (Darbha), in the beauty of the lotus and the daffodils, in the chirping of the goose and the cuckoo, in Rama's grief for Jatayu, in the pathos of Gautama Buddha for a stricken dear, in the nursing of a diseased patient, in the perspiring stone breaking widow in the midday sun and in the laments of an aggrieved Gandhari for her sons dead in the Mahabharata war.

In other words, it looks to the convincing character of deep inward authentic experiences (Cf. F.H. Bradley). Specificity and depth of sensitivity characterize the humanist's experience. Humanism holds that through interactions with explorations into and encounter with response-generating objects personality is built and solidified.

Humanism Influences on Mahatma Gandhi:

Mahatma Gandhi was open-minded. He was willing to adopt any idea from any source. He was influenced by a number of persons and intellectuals ranging from house-made Rambha to eminent thinker and writer like Tolstoy. Gandhi was very much influenced by his parents. His mother Putlibai, a lady of most devout temperament influenced his religious thoughts.

"The outstanding impression" says Gandhi, my mother has left on my memory is that of saintliness. She was deeply religious. She would not think of taking her meals without daily prayer (M. K. Gandhi, 2011. p-4). His mother Putlibai had strong commonsense (M. K. Gandhi, 2011. p-5). He learnt the Indian maxim that 'there is nothing higher than truth' from his mother. He has also learnt that a state of harmlessness or non-violence is the highest religion and a supreme duty from his mother (D. M. Datta, 1953. p-9). Gandhi learnt a lot from his father, Kaba Gandhi. He says that His rich experience of practical affairs stood him in good stead in the solution of the most intricate questions and in managing hundreds of men (M. K. Gandhi, 2011. p-4).

Gandhi referred to other two incidents which have always clung to his memory and shaped his thought. The first was the book on Shravana Pitribakti Nataka (a play about Shravana's devotion to his parents). He read it with intense interest. He also saw a picture of Shravana carrying by means of slings fitted to his shoulders, his blind parents on a pilgrimage. The book and the picture of Shravana left an indelible impression on his mind. He said to himself that here was an example for him to copy. The agonized lament of his parents over the death of Shravana was fresh in his memory (M. K. Gandhi, 2011. p-6). This impression has rise to render service to the humanity.

Another important effect on Gandhi's life was the play of Harischandra which captured his heart. He could never be tired of seeing it. He asked himself day and night the question 'why should not all be truthful like Harischandra?' To follow truth and to go through all the ordeals, Harischandra went through was the one ideal that inspired him. He literally believed the story of Harischandra. For Gandhi both Harischandra and Shravana are living realities for him (M. K. Gandhi, 2011. p-7). Jainism exerted profound influence on Gandhi. Jainism has been a great living force in Gujarat. He read the teachings of Jainas and also *Saddrsana Samuccya*, the philosophical text of Haribhadra Suri. Jainism lays more stress on non-violence which impressed Gandhi very much. Buddha says, Victory breeds hatred, for the conquered is unhappy (A. K. Coomaraswamy & I. B. Horner, 2003. p-122). Both Jainism and Buddhism lay more stress on non-violence, celibacy, non-possession and non-stealing. Of the books that influenced Gandhi's thought and ideas, Gita can be ranked first. It has become an infallible guide of conduct and a dictionary of daily reference (M. K. Gandhi, 2011. p-244).

The teachings of Gita especially the verses 2 and 63 of the second chapter have made a deep impression on him. For Gandhi Jesus was one of the greatest teachers humanity has ever had. He believed that Jesus does not belong solely to Christianity alone, but to the entire world and all races and people (The Modern Review, 1941. p-407). Gandhi was greatly influenced by the life and teachings of Swami Vivekananda. His

conception of *Daridranarayan*, the God of the poor had been adopted elaborated and practiced by Gandhi himself. Moreover Ruskin, Tolstoy, Romain Rolland and several others had deeply influenced his life. Ruskin wrote his famous work 'Unto this last' and Gandhi admitted: "I derived great inspiration from 'Unto this last' by Ruskin and his concept that good individual is contained in the good of all". The concepts of *Sarvodaya and Antyodaya* were the products of this influence.

Gandhian Humanism:

Gandhi's immense contribution to Humanism consists in conceiving a religion that centers almost wholly around man and his life here in this world. Religion, according to him, should permeate all our activities, it cannot and ought not to be pursued in seclusion from one's fellow beings and in separation from life's other activities. The equivalent for Religion is "Dharma" in Sanskrit which means moral obligation and connotes individual's integrity as well as social harmony. Gandhi understood religion completely from that point of view. His Humanism is integral, discussing all the aspects of human life and has rationalist attitudes which differ from Romantic Humanism as well as Radical Humanism and yet synthesizes the two.

According to Gandhi, a Hindu is anyone who, born in a Hindu family in India, accepts the Vedas, the Upanishads and the puranas as holy books; who has faith in the five Yamas [precepts] of truth, non-violence, etc. and practices them to the best of his ability; who believes in the existence of the atman and the paramatman and believes, further, that the atman is never born and never dies but, through incarnation in the body, passes from existence to existence and is capable of attaining Moksha; who believes that Moksha is the supreme end of human striving and believes in varnashrama and cow protection. I am happy to declare myself a staunch sanatani Hindu (M. K. Gandhi, 16th January 1921)."

The true spirit of harmony among different religions of the world is to create a just and humane society. Gandhi as a humanist has provided us the permanent solution to the irritated problem of supposed secularism. He proposed and worked to establish just and humane society. Humanism did not have an anti-religious nature. The religious discussions of the humanist had two principal themes the public function of religion and religious tolerance. The Civic function of religion was recognized on the basis of the communication between the heavenly and earthly city. The heavenly city was the norm or the ideal of man's social life, its recognition meant the commitment of man to realize, as much as possible, its characteristics in the earthly city. Gandhi's earthly city was 'Ramarajya' and he tried to realize that throughout his life. For the humanists, the attitude of tolerance is derived from their conviction of the fundamental unity of all the religious beliefs of mankind and therefore the possibility of a universal religious peace. The vow of tolerance of all religious beliefs in Gandhi's everyday Prayer, and the cooperation he received from the people of all faiths, confirm his genuine tolerance. Gandhi's religion was not narrow sectarian. He did not want his house to be walled in on all sides and windows to be stuffed. He wanted the cultures of all lands to be blown about his house as freely as possible.

An effort might be complete to discourage the use of labels of caste and creed which raise imaginary barriers between man and man. Not only should the practice of Untouchability go, but the Harijan [Untouchable] should not be allowed to continue a *Harijan*. Similarly the Hindu and Moslem differences might be solved by discarding the labels. Such an attempt will no longer keep the form of communal harmony, but it would lead to the growth of one-humanity. Though a powerful personality like Gandhi might harmonize communities for a while, when the personal influence weakened, the communities would clash again. *Gandhi*: "Though there is a resemblance between your thought and practice and mine superficially, I must own that yours is far superior to mine (M. K. Gandhi, 17th February 1946)."

Religion means self-realization or the true nature of the self (Pyarelal, 1965). Gandhi considers man's ultimate aim as the realization of God. All his political, social and religious activities have to be guided by the ultimate vision of God. The immediate service of all human beings becomes necessary as the only way to find God is to see him in his creation and be one with it. This can be realized only through the service of all. He was a part and parcel of the whole and he cannot find him apart from the root of the humanity. He believe that, "my countrymen are my nearest neighbors." They have become so helpless so resource less, so inert that I must concentrate on serving them. Gandhi proclaimed that, if I could persuade myself that I should find him in Himalayan cave, I would proceed there immediately. But I know that I cannot find him apart from humanity (M. K. Gandhi, 1936. p-226). Religion is not 'ism'; it is not merely intellectual knowledge or belief in any set of doctrines but an innate attribute of the soul. Religion enables us to define our duties in life as a human being and enables us to deal correctly without fellow beings. We have to know about ourselves.

Philosophical Humanism and Contemporary India:

Nurtured amidst all tribulations, depressions and calamities the notion that man is not a subservient instrumental means for being exploited by the dominant elite but is a self-legislating autonomous person and belongs to a spiritual and moral kingdom of Rita, Dharmasi and Shila. Gandhi considers world peace, the vision of League of Nations, human equality, or the question of his freedom all moral ideals saying if their accomplishment is desirable to human race, the path to them can only be moral. Hence if world problem is to be solved, man's interior and exterior, his ideal and practice, his desire and deed should be taken to that direction where in Gandhi's words "love and law are one" and this is the mark Gandhi is trying to hit at.

That is why he urges more for discharging duty than right. His characteristic is that he always lays emphasis on duty and says discharge your duty, right would follow of itself. When he talks of right man gives importance to him. But in duty the basic feeling is that of giving. The concept of duty comes from the concern for good of others. When he cares for others, man's bonds of ego loosen. In arousal of this feeling Gandhi finds the way to take man and society towards that morality where the basis of all establishment and system is love. He with faith and devotion saw that the form of human life is dialectical wherein inherently placed humanity along with brutality is. The man struggling with his own brutality has moved ahead towards progress. Hence, if he has to continue his journey, he has to continue that battle. Under the circumstance conflict between human brutality and man's humanity is expected. He merely took up the burden of marshalling that humanitarian battle. Bringing war and revolution out of violence and bloodshed, taking humanity towards lofty and purified stature became basis of his experiment system. In non-cooperation and *Satyagrah* is manifested his nonviolent strategy. The un-rebellious rebellion and system of bloodless battle was the other great contribution that he gave to the practical deed-sphere of human society.

In Gandhi's view determination of proper ideals and do's and don'ts for man can only be done in the light of morality. The ideal favorable to bright instinct of man and thus he may being the cause for progress of humanity alone is acceptable in his view. The conduct agreeable to it and which may drive him towards it alone is enjoined. Gandhi sees only in it the meaningfulness of life and progress of humanity.

That means Gandhi's ideology flows from moral source, hence, for him looking at history from this point of view is inevitable. If human history has any stream, Gandhi sees it flowing through the struggle of inner conflicts of men. It originates from good and evil tendencies in life and with that this stream is also affected. Man to man relationship, the making and running of economic, political, and social organizations and systems etc. are all related to man's life, hence, all of them are deeply affected by this inner goodness and evil. In short we may say that the entire outer universe of human world is the reflection of his inner-being.

In Gandhi's view the cause of present ill-state is that immorality and inhumanness which is born in human heart itself. If in their disappearance welfare of the world is possible, change of man's heart is certainly required. Establishment of peace, freedom, equality, and justice too are only possible when the natural moral tendency of man is awakened. Obviously these are the moral ideals whose basis is man's inner being.

This is why Gandhi finds meaningful change of the world in change of man. He doesn't accept that man is mere effigy of the elements or mere machine governed by animal instincts. He says, "The man is neither mere intelligence nor crude animal body. He is also no mere feeling or soul. Actually he is made of all these three things. By the proper harmony and coordination of all the three only in every way making of man is possible. Let the mind and the body develops equally so that the soul may be awakened. The terrible outcome of the want of harmony of the all three is before us."

CONCLUSION:

In his view if ideal is truth then towards that truth the life must be followed. Here in lies the meaningfulness of life and its beauty. Had it not been so and the stream of life could not be inclined towards ideal, in Gandhi's view that ideal is valueless. That is why Gandhi does not discriminate between the ideal and practice, means and end. He considers that ideal false, and so is life, towards which life cannot move. With this attitude, taking truth and nonviolence as ideals, Gandhi provides them practical form.

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- [13] <http://www.mkgandhi.org/humantouch.htm>
- [14] A person, who belonging to Orthodox Hindu family in Indian society.
- [15] Cf. “Once read thine own heart aright And thou hast done with fears Man gets no other light Search he a thousand years Sink in thyself! There ask what ails thee at that shrine” (Matthew Arnold, *Empedocles on Etna*).
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