



M. K. Gandhi

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

or

The Story of My Experiments with Truth

An Autobiography Or

The Story of My Experiments With Truth

By: **M. K. Gandhi**

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FOREWORD

Throughout the world, almost all nations will be celebrating from October 2 this year the birth centenary of Mahatma Gandhi who is now universally recognised as the glorious symbol of truth and non-violence. Gandhiji was not only a great national leader who liberated India from foreign domination through a peaceful and bloodless struggle, but also a profound thinker who placed before the world certain eternal principles for the guidance of human relationship and international behaviour. He laid the greatest stress on the purity of the means for the achievement of noble ends. "The means may be likened to a seed, the end to a tree; and there is just the same inviolable connection between the means and the end as there is between the seed and the tree." ¹ The Mahatma never compromised his adherence to this ideal even for the attainment of *Swaraj* for India. He was convinced beyond any shadow of doubt that this method of righteousness was, "ultimately, the shortest, although it may appear to be long, perhaps too long." ²

To Gandhiji, civilization, in the real sense of the term, consisted "not in the multiplication, but in the deliberate and voluntary restriction of wants." ³ He always upheld the sublime aim of "simple living and high thinking". While he strained every nerve to provide gainful employment to the hungry millions of India through various constructive activities, he underscored the imperative need for raising the 'standard of *life*' of the people, including the ethical and moral aspects. To him mere affluence and accumulation of material wealth was 'a primrose path' leading to social, economic and cultural disintegration. "True economics," affirmed Gandhiji, "never militates against the highest ethical standard." "An economics that inculcates Mammon worship, and enables the strong to amass wealth at the expense of the weak, is a false and dismal science." ⁴ At a time when a number of developed countries are faced with this 'tragedy of mere affluence' it would be worth our while recollecting Mahatma Gandhi's insistence on higher values for the establishment of a new world order. As a recent editorial in the *New Statesman* captioned 'Not By Bread

Alone' stated, "there is evidently a hunger in the world for governments which are activated by moral principles, which take decisions not because they are expedient, but because they are right." ⁵

There is an erroneous notion that Gandhiji was against the use of modern science and technology and favoured out-dated techniques for some spiritual or sentimental reasons. "I would prize every invention made for the benefit of all," remarked Gandhiji. "Mechanisation is good when the hands are too few for the work intended to be accomplished. It is an evil when there are more hands than required for the work, as is the case in India." ⁶ Gandhiji was, thus, not against machinery as such, but objected to the 'craze' for machinery and its 'indiscriminate multiplication'. In place of 'mass production' he advocated a system of 'production by the masses'. He clearly envisaged that in a developing country like India, with scarce capital and abundant labour, the physical energies of the masses could be converted into a vast constructive force under a democratic frame-work, which Professor Mumford, in a somewhat different context, terms a 'megamachine'. ⁷

We have to realize without equivocation that the pursuit of material prosperity alone would land us into a blind alley. The modern industrial organisation has given birth to a few giant business corporations which tend to reduce the State to a subservient position and bind it to, what Professor Galbraith calls, a *Techno-structure*, consisting of specialists, planners and technicians. In order to avoid the perils of such an industrial system, the American economist recommends the strong assertion of 'other goals', so that the new Industrial State would become "responsive to the larger purposes of the society". ⁸ These 'goals' could, doubtless, be essentially human and spiritual in accordance with Gandhiji's ideals and programmes.

Mahatma Gandhi was deeply concerned with the welfare of the 'unprivileged' classes in India as well as in other countries. While striving to promote the good of all in a *Sarvodaya* society, he directed his first care and attention to the needs of the poorest and the lowliest. Ruskin's maxim of *Unto This Last* was a source of deep inspiration for his life and work. It was this human approach

which made Gandhiji an uncompromising crusader against racialism and colonialism. He gave us an unfailing 'talismán' for right action: "Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test: Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen, and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him.... Then you will find your doubts and self melting away." ⁹

Gandhiji was a firm believer in the democratic way of life. He maintained that true democracy could be evolved only through non-violence and spontaneous cooperation. "The spirit of democracy cannot be imposed from without; it has to come from within."¹⁰ He envisioned a 'world federation' raised on the foundations of integrity and mutual respect in international affairs. While he laboured ceaselessly for India's freedom and renaissance, he was averse to 'isolated independence'. He wanted each nation to imbibe the good qualities of others, without losing her own soul or genius. To quote his own classical expression, "I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed; I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible; but I refuse to be blown off my feet by any."¹¹

It is, therefore, quite appropriate that we should suitably celebrate the birth centenary of one who had lived every minute of his life for the good of mankind, and had highlighted some basic principles as guide lines for humanity. In the inimitable words of Pandit Nehru, "the light that has illumined this country for these many years, will illumine this country for many more years, and a thousand years later, that light will still be seen in this country and the world will see it, and it will give solace to innumerable hearts." "For, that light represented something more than the immediate present; it represented the living, eternal truths, reminding us of the right path, drawing us from the error." ¹² And as Dr. Albert Einstein had feelingly observed, "generations to come, it may be, will scarce believe that such a one as this ever, in flesh and blood, walked upon this earth."

As a part of the Gandhi Centenary celebrations, the Navajivan Trust, which was founded by Mahatma Gandhi himself half a century ago, has decided to publish

The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi in five volumes, so that the message of truth and compassion could be conveyed once again to millions of people in India and abroad. As the General Editor of these Volumes, I have tried to make a representative selection of all the writings of the Mahatma which are of permanent value and have a universal appeal. The first two Volumes cover his Autobiography, which he called *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. The third Volume of the series is *Satyagrah in South Africa*. In the fourth Volume I have collected most of the 'basic works' of Gandhiji, including *Ethical Religion, Unto This Last, Hind Swaraj, From Yeravda Mandir, Constructive Programme and Key to Health*. The fifth Volume contains a rich selection of letters which are either of historical interest or contain notable ideas on a variety of important subjects. The sixth Volume incorporates all the essential ideas of Mahatma Gandhi on philosophy, religion, culture, economics, politics, sociology and education. I earnestly hope that these *Selected Works* will be found useful by all those who are keenly interested in the study of Gandhian thought on different aspects of life.

I take this opportunity of thanking the Navajivan Trust for giving me the privilege of placing these Volumes in the hands of a large number of readers within India and outside. I am grateful to Shri H. M. Vyas, Dr. Raman Modi and others who have actively helped me in editing this series.

Raj Bhavan,

Ahmedabad,

August 15, 1968

(Shriman Narayan)

1 *Hind Swaraj*, Navajivan, 1962, p. 71

2 *Amrit Bazar Patrica*. 17-9-1933

3 *From Yerawada Mandir*, Navajivan, 1957, p. 24

4 *Harijan*, 9-10-1937

5 *New Statesman*, London. 31-5-1968

6 *Harijan*, 16-11-1934

7 *The Myth of the Machine*, by Lewis Mumford, 1967, p. 188

8 *The New Industrial State*, by Professor J. K. Galbraith, 1967, p. 399

9 *Mahatma Gandhi - The Last Phase*, Vol. 2, Pyarelal, 1958, p. 65

10 *The History of the Indian National Congress*, by Dr. P. Sitaramayya, 1935, p. 982

11 *Young India*, 1-6-1921

12 *Nehru: The First Sixty Years*, Vol. II, edited by Dorothy Norman, Asia, 1965, p. 364

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

A deluxe edition of **Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi** was released in 1969. It went out of print in about six months. To meet the popular demand for it and to make it available to individual readers at a reasonable price a new soft-cover edition was soon released. It, too, was enthusiastically received and the entire stock of the publication was sold out in less than three years.

We are very happy to say that the set was reprinted and was offered at a subsidised price to commemorate the Diamond Jubilee year of Navajivan Trust during 1993-94. Looking to its continuous demand and so also to fulfil Navajivan's objective of propagating Gandhian Literature, its eighth reprint is being published with new size and type-setting. We are sure, this new edition, too, would be well-received by individual readers, in order to enrich their personal library.

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

The first edition of Gandhiji's Autobiography was published in two volumes. Vol. I in 1927 and Vol. II in 1929. The original in Gujarati which was priced at Re. 1/- has run through five editions, nearly 50,000 copies having been sold. The price of the English translation (only issued in library edition) was prohibitive for the Indian reader, and a cheap edition has long been needed. It is now being issued in one volume. The translation, as it appears serially in *Young India*, had, it may be noted, the benefit of Gandhiji's revision. It has now undergone careful revision, and from the point of view of language, it has had the benefit of careful revision by a revered friend, who, among many other things, has the reputation of being an eminent English scholar. Before undertaking the task, he made it a condition that his name should on no account be given out. I accept the condition. It is needless to say it heightens my sense of gratitude to him. Chapters 29 - 43 of Part V were translated by my friend and colleague Pyarelal during my absence in Bardoli at the time of the Bardoli Agarian Inquiry by the Broomfield Committee in 1928-29.

1940

Mahadev Desai

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* * *

INTRODUCTION

Four or five years ago, at the instance of some of my nearest co-workers, I agreed to write my autobiography. I made the start, but scarcely had I turned over the first sheet when riots broke out in Bombay and the work remained at a standstill. Then followed a series of events which culminated in my imprisonment at Yeravda. Sjt. Jeramdas, who was one of my fellow-prisoners there, asked me to put everything else on one side and finish writing the autobiography. I replied that I had already framed a programme of study for myself, and that I could not think of doing anything else until this course was complete. I should indeed have finished the autobiography had I gone through my full term of imprisonment at Yeravda, for there was still a year left to complete the task, when I was discharged. Swami Anand has now repeated the proposal, and as I have finished the history of Satyagraha in South Africa, I am tempted to undertake the autobiography for *Navajivan*. The Swami wanted me to write it separately for publication as a book. But I have no spare time. I could only write a chapter week by week. Something has to be written for *Navajivan* every week. Why should it not be the autobiography? The Swami agreed to the proposal, and here am I hard at work.

But a God-fearing friend had his doubts, which he shared with me on my day of silence. 'What has set you on this adventure?' he asked. 'Writing an autobiography is a practice peculiar to the West. I know of nobody in the East having written one, except amongst those who have come under Western influence. And what will you write? Supposing you reject tomorrow the things you hold as principles today, or supposing you revise in the future your plans of today, is it not likely that the men who shape their conduct on the authority of your word, spoken or written, may be misled? Don't you think it would be better not to write anything like an autobiography, at any rate just yet?'

This argument had some effect on me. But it is not my purpose to attempt a real autobiography. I simply want to tell the story of my numerous experiments with truth, and as my life consists of nothing but those experiments, it is true

that the story will take the shape of an autobiography. But I shall not mind, if every page of it speaks only of my experiments. I believe, or at any rate flatter myself with the belief, that a connected account of all these experiments will not be without benefit to the reader. My experiments in the political field are now known, not only in India, but to a certain extent to the 'civilized' world. For me, they have not much value; and the title of 'Mahatma' that they have won for me has, therefore, even less. Often the title has deeply pained me; and there is not a moment I can recall when it may be said to have tickled me. But I should certainly like to narrate my experiments in the spiritual field which are known only to myself, and from which I have derived such power as I possess for working in the political field. If the experiments are really spiritual, then there can be no room for self-praise. They can only add to my humility. The more I reflect and look back on the past, the more vividly do I feel my limitations.

What I want to achieve - what I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years - is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain *Moksha*¹. I live and move and have my being in pursuit of this goal. All that I do by way of speaking and writing, and all my ventures in the political field, are directed to this same end. But as I have all along believed that what is possible for one is possible for all, my experiments have not been conducted in the closet, but in the open; and I do not think that this fact detracts from their spiritual value. There are some things which are known only to oneself and one's Maker. These are clearly incommunicable. The experiments I am about to relate are not such. But they are spiritual, or rather moral; for the essence of religion is morality.

Only those matters of religion that can be comprehended as much by children as by older people, will be included in this story. If I can narrate them in a dispassionate and humble spirit, many other experimenters will find in them provision for their onward march. Far be it from me to claim any degree of perfection for these experiments. I claim for them nothing more than does a scientist who, though he conducts his experiments with the utmost accuracy,

forethought and minuteness, never claims any finality about his conclusions, but keeps an open mind regarding them. I have gone through deep self-introspection, searched myself through and through, and examined and analysed every psychological situation. Yet I am far from claiming any finality or infallibility about my conclusions. One claim I do indeed make and it is this. For me they appear to be absolutely correct, and seem for the time being to be final. For if they were not, I should base no action on them. But at every step I have carried out the process of acceptance or rejection and acted accordingly. And so long as my acts satisfy my reason and my heart, I must firmly adhere to my original conclusions.

If I had only to discuss academic principles, I should clearly not attempt an autobiography. But my purpose being to give an account of various practical applications of these principles, I have given the chapters I propose to write the title of *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. These will of course include experiments with non-violence, celibacy and other principles of conduct believed to be distinct from truth. But 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. There are innumerable definitions of God, because His manifestations are innumerable. They overwhelm me with wonder and awe and for a moment stun me. But I worship God as Truth only. I have not yet found Him, but I am seeking after Him. I am prepared to sacrifice the things dearest to me in pursuit of this quest. Even if the sacrifice demanded be my very life, I hope I may be prepared to give it. But as long as I have not realized this Absolute Truth, so long must I hold by the relative truth as I have conceived it. That relative truth must, meanwhile, be my beacon, my shield and buckler. Though this path is straight and narrow and sharp as the razor's edge, for me it has been the quickest and easiest. Even my Himalayan blunders have seemed trifling to me because I have kept strictly to this path. For the path has saved me from coming to grief, and I have gone forward according to my light. Often in my progress I have had faint glimpses of the Absolute Truth, God, and daily the

conviction is growing upon me that He alone is real and all else is unreal. Let those, who wish, realize how the conviction has grown upon me; let them share my experiments and share also my conviction if they can. The further conviction has been growing upon me that whatever is possible for me is possible even for a child, and I have sound reasons for saying so. The instruments for the quest of truth are as simple as they are difficult. They may appear quite impossible to an arrogant person, and quite impossible to an innocent child. The seeker after truth should be humbler than the dust. The world crushes the dust under its feet, but the seeker after truth should so humble himself that even the dust could crush him. Only then, and not till then, will he have a glimpse of truth. The dialogue between Vasishtha and Vishvamitra makes this abundantly clear. Christianity and Islam also amply bear it out.

If anything that I write in these pages should strike the reader as being touched with pride, then he must take it that there is something wrong in my quest, and that my glimpses are not more than a mirage. Let hundreds like me perish, but let truth prevail. Let us not reduce the standards of truth even by a hair's breadth for judging erring mortals like myself.

I hope and pray that no one will regard the advice interspersed in the following chapters as authoritative. The experiments narrated should be regarded as illustrations, in the light of which everyone may carry on his own experiments according to his own inclinations and capacity. I trust that to this limited extent the illustrations will be really helpful; because I am not going either to conceal or understate any ugly things that must be told. I hope to acquaint the reader fully with all my faults and errors. My purpose is to describe experiments in the science of Satyagraha, not to say how good I am. In judging myself I shall try to be as harsh as truth, as I want others also to be. Measuring myself by that standard I must exclaim with Surdas:

Where is there a wretch

So wicked and loathsome as I?

I have forsaken my Maker;

So faithless have I been.

For it is unbroken torture to me that I am still so far from Him, who, as I fully know, governs every breadth of my life, and Whose offspring I am. I know that it is the evil passions within that keep me so far from Him, and yet I cannot get away from them.

But it must close. I can only take up the actual story in the next chapter.

M. K. GANDHI

The Ashram, Sabarmati

26th November, 1925

1. Literally freedom from birth and death. The nearest English equivalent is salvation.

**THE STORY
OF
MY EXPERIMENTS WITH TRUTH**

PART I

1. BIRTH AND PARENTAGE

The Gandhis belong to the Bania caste and seem to have been originally grocers. But for three generations, from my grandfather, they have been Prime Ministers in several Kathiawad States. Uttamchand Gandhi, *alias* Ota Gandhi, my grandfather, must have been a man of principle. State intrigues compelled him to leave Porbandar, where he was Diwan, and to seek refuge in Junagadh. There he saluted the Nawab with the left hand. Someone, noticing the apparent discourtesy, asked for an explanation, which was given thus: 'The right hand is already pledged to Porbandar.'

Ota Gandhi married a second time, having lost his first wife. He had four sons by his first wife and two by his second wife. I do not think that in my childhood I ever felt or knew that these sons of Ota Gandhi were not all of the same mother. The fifth of these six brothers was Karamchand Gandhi, *alias* Kaba Gandhi, and the sixth was Tulsidas Gandhi. Both these brothers were Prime Ministers in Porbandar, one after the other. Kaba Gandhi was my father. He was a member of the Rajasthanik Court. It is now extinct, but in those days it was a very influential body for settling disputes between the chiefs and their fellow clansmen. He was for some time Prime Minister in Rajkot and then in Vankaner. He was a pensioner of the Rajkot State when he died.

Kaba Gandhi married four times in succession, having lost his wife each time by death. He had two daughters by his first and second marriages. His last wife, Putlibai, bore him a daughter and three sons, I being the youngest.

My father was a lover of his clan, truthful, brave and generous, but short-tempered. To a certain extent he might have been even given to carnal pleasures. For he married for the fourth time when he was over forty. But he was incorruptible and had earned a name for strict impartiality in his family as well as outside. His loyalty to the State was well known. An Assistant Political Agent spoke insultingly of the Rajkot Thakore Saheb, his chief, and he stood up to the insult. The Agent was angry and asked Kaba Gandhi to apologize. This he

refused to do and was therefore kept under detention for a few hours. But when the Agent saw that Kaba Gandhi was adamant, he ordered him to be released.

My father never had any ambition to accumulate riches and left us very little property.

He had no education, save that of experience. At best, he might be said to have read up to the fifth Gujarati standard. Of history and geography he was innocent. But 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. Of religious training he had very little, but he had that kind of religious culture which frequent visits to temples and listening to religious discourses make available to many Hindus. In his last days he began reading the Gita at the instance of a learned Brahman friend of the family, and he used to repeat aloud some verses every day at the time of worship.

The outstanding impression my mother has left on my memory is that of saintliness. She was deeply religious. She would not think of taking her meals without her daily prayers. Going to *Haveli*-the Vaishnava temple-was one of her daily duties. As far as my memory can go back, I do not remember her having ever missed the *Chaturmas*¹. She would take the hardest vows and keep them without flinching. Illness was no excuse for relaxing them. I can recall her once falling ill when she was observing the *Chandrayana*² vow, but the illness was not allowed to interrupt the observance. To keep two or three consecutive fasts was nothing to her. Living on one meal a day during *Chaturmas* was a habit with her. Not content with that, she fasted every alternate day during one *Chaturmas*. During another *Chaturmas* she vowed not to have food without seeing the sun. We children on those days would stand, staring at the sky, waiting to announce the appearance of the sun to our mother. Everyone knows that at the height of the rainy season the sun often does not condescend to show his face. And I remember days when, at his sudden appearance, we would rush and announce it to her. She would run out to see with her own eyes, but by that time the fugitive sun would be gone, thus depriving her of her meal.