
UNIT 2 HOLISTIC VISION OF LIFE

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

The entire Gandhian thought rests on a holistic unity of conception. It is grounded in a basic moral vision of the world. Gandhi invoked traditional concepts but he imparted to them a new social content. As in the case of religion, the very word ‘religion’ received a refreshing definition from him; it was not the Hindu religion, but the religion which transcends Hinduism, which changes one’s very nature, which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and whichever purifies. True spirituality was not merely speculation on the Absolute, however profound or philosophical nor was it a quest for personal salvation. It manifests itself according to the extent he realizes his humanity i.e. his oneness with his fellow-men. His religion sometimes looks indistinguishable from humanism. He gave a creative interpretation to several age-old Indian concepts. As for *Maya*, the world being an illusion, he argued that we cannot dismiss the suffering of our fellow creatures and therefore provide a more alibi for ourselves. *Dharma* was the performance of duty not only by the citizen, but by the ruler as well. Fasting had long been part of a spiritual regimen; Gandhi made it a part of the armory of *satyagraha*. An ashram was considered a refuge from the hurly-burly of life for one’s personal spiritual discipline; Gandhi used his ashrams to train social and political workers.

The Unit attempts to discover the underlying holistic vision and perspective that informs his views on a variety of topics. Thus by the end of the Unit you should be able

- to comprehend Gandhi’s vision of holistic unity of concepts;
- to appreciate how different elements meet in Gandhi’s thinking and reinforce one another.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Gandhi’s philosophy has been interpreted from different angles. Some treat it primarily as a political theory. Others approach it as a religious philosophy of great contemporary relevance. Still others see it as an original theory of conflict resolution and non-violence. There are those who regard it as containing ideas extremely relevant for both economic development and for the maintenance of a

sustainable economy. Finally there are those who find in it significant ideas on the relationship of art to society.

There is of course a great deal of truth in what these interpretations have to say. Taken individually, each gives an in-depth, but unavoidably partial understanding of the whole. The fact is that individual themes in Gandhi's philosophy make full sense only when they are seen in their relationship to one another and to the whole. It is the reality of this interaction that needs to be understood. It is not enough to juxtapose a series of different Gandhi's - the political, the religious, the ethical, or any other. It is not enough to know that Gandhi teaches non-violence. To know his doctrine of non-violence really well one has to know how it interacts with his position on war or his theory of the state and the relations between states. Likewise it is not enough to know that he put his religious insights into socially and politically beneficial practice. To know his religious philosophy really well we have to know how it comports with secularism that he also professed. And so on with the other major themes of his philosophy. The point is that there is an inner dynamism that brings the diverse elements into a fruitful relationship with one another. And it is necessary to understand the nature of this inner dynamism if we are to understand his philosophy accurately and fully.

"Being more things than one" is a label that fits Gandhi well. Any study of his thought that aspires to be comprehensive is bound to expose to the comparative perspective that it provides. The ancient and the modern, the Indian and the Western perspectives jointly illumine the substance of his thought. The point is how the different elements come together and constitute a coherent whole. Now, let us look at Gandhi's interpretation of *purusharthas* as a case in point to understand how he brings in commonality between seemingly incongruent themes.

2.2 INTERPRETATION OF *PURUSHARATHAS*

The etymological meaning of the term *purushartha*, made up of *purusha* (spirit) and *artha* (for the sake of) is that which is pursued for the sake of the spirit or the immortal soul. As understood in Indian thought, there are four *purusharthas*: *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha*. *Dharma* is righteousness. *Artha* is material possession. *Kama* is the enjoyment of this-worldly sensuous pleasures. *Moksha* is seeking spiritual liberation, thereby attaining salvation. These classifications establish an account of the individual and his objectives that incorporates both the social and the transcendental. The four *purusharthas* are interrelated and do not operate in isolation. Their relation is hierarchical though, not necessarily unidirectional.

Dharma is of two kinds: *varnashrama dharma* and *samanya dharma*. The former is specifically related to each *varna* and *ashrama* and the latter is general and universal. The universal *dharma* consists of *ahimsa* (non-injury to all living beings) *satyam* (truthfulness), cleanliness, freedom from malice, compassion and tolerance.

The other two, namely, *artha* and *kama*, are not autonomous and are placed under the supervision of *dharma* and are directed towards *moksha*. For instance, *kama*, which is seeking sensuous pleasure, is not ignored. Pleasure is not to be gratified by following individual desires and wants but is related to other

purusharthas. If it is left unsupervised it can relapse into a lower level. It is in fact regulated by *dharma* that allows only ethically sanctioned enjoyment. Whereas *Dharma Sastras* centralizes *dharma*, *Artha Sastra*, while not rejecting the primacy of *dharma*, tends to restore more importance to *artha* and *kama*. *Moksha* is liberation. There are different paths to achieve *moksha*. They consist of: *karma yoga*, *jnana yoga*, *bhakti yoga*, etc.

The mutual relationship between *purusharthas*, whether they share an oppositional relation or a harmonious one, is a matter of contention. But one can say that in most parts of the tradition, there is a radical separation of the spiritual from the political, the economic from the ethical which had cost Indian civilization dearly. Indian religious philosopher-saints are also to be blamed for placing too much emphasis on other worldliness and *Vedanta*, and for not placing equal or greater emphasis on the importance of the active life. Some commentators felt that because of the excessive emphasis on the other-worldly, Indians did not form a permanent state for the whole of India, they did not develop manufacturing and industries, and they were unable to resist successfully external aggression. Indian intellectuals were mostly engaged in mental gymnastics about Logic, Vedanta, Poetics and similar subjects, giving little attention to the means of removing the weaknesses and the defects of the country's political and economic systems.

However, in Gandhi, with his holistic vision of life, one can find a refreshing account of *purusharthas*. He discards the old ways and attempts to creatively reconstitute the four aims of life. As a result there is now a new Gandhian paradigm. It has a specific view of the universe and of human nature, as being composed of perishable body and imperishable soul. Above all, it has a new theory of the *purusharthas*. Whereas the old paradigm saw the *purusharthas* as working in mutually exclusive terms, the new paradigm shows how they may be made to work in interactive terms. The starting point of such rethinking should include a new understanding of the meaning of the theory of the *purusharthas*. He actually demonstrated through his life how mutuality between the four goals of life could be realized. He considered his struggle for political and economic betterment of the masses as the only path to *moksha* available to him. Accordingly, a radical separation of *moksha* from the rest was not justified. The theory as Gandhi understood it was applicable to individuals, nations, and civilizations. It was not aligned to any particular theology or metaphysics. If it needed a theological grounding, Christian and Islamic theology could do as easily as could Hindu theology.

In *Hind Swaraj*, he pointed out for the first time that a dynamic relationship ought to exist between the pursuit of *swaraj* as political freedom and *swaraj* as spiritual freedom, for the pursuit of one assisted the pursuit of the other. He advocated that a moral link ought to exist between the arts and the political life. Even in Sabarmati Ashram, politics and economics were not unconnected matters, being linked to *dharma* and *moksha*. Celibacy was an important part of ashram life, thereby underlining its dynamic relationship to the pursuit of politics, ethics and spirituality.

In his Autobiography, the pursuit of *Moksha* is identified as the pursuit of Truth. Those who aspire to *Moksha* cannot afford to keep out of any field of life. He says, in his case, his devotion to Truth has drawn him to the field of politics. To

maintain the holistic relationship of *moksha* to *artha*, one needs the support of *dharma* as well. That was why those who say that *dharma* had nothing to do with politics did not know what *dharma* meant. Also, the pursuit of *moksha* understood in this way involved a continuous process of self-purification which brings in celibacy too. In his translation of *Gita* also he says, the author of the *Gita* has dispelled the delusion that in activities such as trade and commerce, *dharma* has no place. He also redefined the concept of *purusharatha* to include women as well. He says that the word *purusha* should be interpreted in its etymological sense, and not merely to mean a man. That which dwells in the *pura*, the body, is *purusha*. If we interpret the word *purusharatha* in this sense, it can be equally used for men and women.

In this sense, Gandhi attempted to reconstitute the system of values of Indian civilization and to rehabilitate the principle of mutuality especially between *artha* and *moksha*. One can observe how two Gandhis - the politician and the *sannyasi* (ascetic) - co-exist with internal integration. It was as if the two Gandhis were unable to separate from each other. To the British, Gandhi appeared to be a political representative of Indians, to the Indians he appeared to be a holy man.

2.3 MORALITY AND RELIGION

The dynamic unity between morality and religion in Gandhi accrues from the centrality of Gandhi's moral vision. All of Gandhi's thinking is based on a fundamental moral science of the world. For Gandhi, man is essentially involved in the moral enterprise of getting at the truth-very fundamentally at the truth of himself by overcoming the ego and its self-projection, as also and, consequently at the truth of the other, in one's knowledge of the other. All of life's activity must be based in truth and for this *ahimsa* or love and freedom from ego-projection must inform man's life and action so that man, through his mundane life, actualizes the moral enterprise. For Gandhi, morality has to inform a complete life. It cannot be the domain of just one aspect of man's existence while he lives out the other moments using whatever means he deems appropriate. There is no distinction between means and ends in Gandhi's moral thinking, and the moral life cannot be alienated from the rest of man's existence. The moral vision, if it is to be genuine, is the core of a good life and must be reflected in the whole of life.

For Gandhi, religion is nothing if, not a culture-specific articulation of a community's moral vision, and its spiritual experiments in trying to internalize that vision. Religion for Gandhi is built up around a core moral vision. It is a culture specific articulation of this moral sense and develops in to a religious tradition with the moral and the social and cultural elements interlinked in to a system. Thus it is that Gandhi himself attempts to distinguish the core of a religion which it shares with other religion from the social aspect, which is culture-specific. When religion is grounded in a moral response to the human predicament it is certain to share element of that response with other religion born of other cultures, for the fundamentals of morality and moral consciousness remain the same.

He elucidates the relationship between morality and religion by saying 'I reject any religious doctrine that does not appeal to reason and is in conflict with morality. I tolerate unreasonable religious sentiment when it is not immoral'. As soon as we lose the moral basis, we cease to be religious. There is no such thing as religion overriding morality. Man of instance cannot be untruthful, cruel and

incontinent and claim to have God on his side. He explains what he means by religion, ‘It is not the Hindu religion which I certainly prize above other religions ,but the religion which transcends Hinduism which changes one’s very nature, which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and whichever purifies. It is the permanent element in human nature which counts no cost too great in order to find full expression and which leaves the soul utterly restless until it has found itself, known its maker and appreciated the true correspondence between the maker and itself’. So, for Gandhi, religion articulates a moral vision and it shares the core moral vision across traditions with other religions. The basic point of connection between religion and politics is furnished by morality. For him, religion is to be understood not as the dictates of a transcendent being, but as a spiritual understanding of a moral vision from within particular religious traditions. It is meant to articulate moral and ethical insights within a particular cultural and spiritual tradition. Thus religion and morality are inalienable.

He maintained that there is a core moral consciousness within every religion. Different religions share elements of their basic moral core, for humanity has a common moral response to the human predicament. This has important lessons for religious toleration and for the cross-cultural borrowings for where different religions are culture-specific articulations of a fundamental moral vision, the dichotomy between them is peripheral and secondary. At heart they are all about righteousness and virtue. This is an important lesson in religious toleration and explains Gandhi’s own on the same. Each religion can reevaluate itself from time to time and question its cultural and social periphery in terms of the core moral vision. It can, if it finds certain customs and practices wanting, rejuvenate them by bringing aspects of the moral vision to bear upon their understanding and evaluation. It is the moral vision which is sacred and not the customs and social framework that is simply part of cultural baggage, as it were.

Another interesting point about Gandhi’s conception is that, since morality is the core of religion, moral consciousness and moral ideas can quite comfortably be articulate in religious and spiritual terminology. This is in contrast to the Kantian enterprise which tries to understand morality as independent of religion. Though both the Kantian and Gandhian endeavour have a common opposition to utilitarianism in morality, they differ in this very important aspect. For Gandhi’s moral sense can be undergrounded in religion and use its spiritual and belief framework. Thus, true religion and true morality are inseparably bound up with each other. Religion is to morality what water is to the seed that is sown in the soil.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Reflect on the uniqueness of Gandhi’s interpretation of purusharathas.

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2)	Can Religion be co-terminus with Morality?

2.4 THE POLITICAL AND THE SPIRITUAL

Now, we look at the reconciliation of the political and the spiritual, a moral obligation on every citizen in Gandhian scheme of things, based on the understanding of Truth about politics being a part of a *purushartha* where the ethics of the means had to be as legitimate as the ethic of the end itself.

For Gandhi, politics must be grounded in morality, in the moral vision. As the most important activity which is the condition of ensuring a civilized existence and the possibility for the good life to its citizens, politics cannot be alienated from the moral enterprise. The good man makes politics a part of his moral life. It is the one place where man can be of most service to his fellow men, where he has the greatest opportunity of moral growth. There the overcoming of the self projection of the ego has the best and most far reaching results. Morality is the basis of what Gandhi calls “true politics” in contrast to “power politics” or degenerated ego-centered political action where the political life is alienated from the moral. Further, since politics is grounded in morality and morality can be well articulated, and the moral enterprise lived, in religious and spiritual terms, the whole political enterprise can become moral one.

As long as religion is understood in terms of the moral vision, Politics can be interpreted as a spiritual exercise for moral growth. This can be done by understanding politics in terms of service and social well-being. Contemporaneously, the whole exercise can be done of self-purification and overcoming of ego-aggrandizement by a practical ahimsa interpreted in terms of love and service, beautifully coordinating the political into an enterprise of moral growth and development.

This is the “true politics” of Gandhi which he means by the constructive programme in politics, as in service oriented politics. This is instantiated by the issue in his “constructive programme”. i.e., issues like those of village upliftment, sanitation, education, removal of untouchability, *khadi*, and so on.

Being a *purushartha*, politics belongs to the field of *artha*. As such it is the pursuit of legitimate self-interest, individual and collective, attained through the exercise of constitutionally permitted use of force. Politics is both a mode of life and a mode of activity. As a mode of life, it is life lived in the political community, which today, in most cases, is the civic nation. As a mode of activity, it is the striving for power and wealth within the bounds of ethics (*dharma*) and within the requirements of a healthy spiritual life (the pursuit of *moksha*). Because politics is a *purushartha*, it is necessary for full human development. Again, because it is a *purushartha*, it is by definition, compatible with the other basic ends of life

-*dharma*, *kama*, and *moksha*. The practice of sound politics should therefore be mindful of the need to cultivate the relationship between all the *purusharthas*. Such cultivation should take place in the realm of civil society, however. It therefore forbids the use of the coercive power of the law or other means of coercion to promote spirituality. That is to say, the maintenance of the relationship between the spiritual and the political may not lead to the establishment of a state-religion, persecution, tyranny, or theocracy of any kind. On the contrary, the reconciliation between the political and the spiritual is possible only in a free society.

Gandhi's notion of the "spiritual" concerns the pursuit of truth in all its diversity. More specifically, spirituality is concerned with the eternal in us as distinct from the temporal that surrounds us. In another sense, the pursuit of the spiritual is concerned with the desire for communion with God. In still another sense, the spiritual is what concerns the welfare of the immortal "spirit" - *purusha*, or *atman* - that dwells within. In Gandhi's ordinary language the term used for spirit was soul. This concern expressed itself in many ways: for example, in the exercise of soul-force, as in *satyagraha*. All that contributed to and maintained the welfare of the soul was part of the spiritual life.

Very typically, the spiritual life for Gandhi was inseparable from action in the world, from the active life in the fields of politics, economics, and social reform. In this respect his spirituality differed radically from the spirituality of the yogis and ascetics of the past and the present. Social and political action informed by true spirituality was able to take the true measure of wealth, power and pleasure. In this sense the spiritual life facilitated the 'practice of justice and non-violence.

Finally, true spirituality for him was an indispensable means of overcoming the most evil of all hatreds - hatred based on religion. That was why in his spiritual life respect for all religions was counted as one of the eleven virtues. Gandhi's humanism had a very deep spiritual content. In affirming the intrinsic connection between the spiritual life and the political life, he stands almost alone among the great teachers of India. The spirituality that Gandhi has in mind has nothing to do with sectarianism coming from any quarter. Any spirituality that promotes justice, non-violence, and peace is compatible with Gandhian politics. This left Gandhi with a unique conception of politics and it was this conception which he actualized in his political experiments.

Critique of Civilization

Gandhi articulated his conception of civilization in response to the disturbing features he perceived in modern civilization. His critique of civilization becomes important to the final development of his understanding of politics and spirituality. His work *Hind Swaraj* was a political, economic, moral and cultural response to the colonial experience. In that he opposes industrial revolution, which brought into existence the modern western civilization. Gandhi disliked India turning into a capitalistic country. As he remarked "It would be folly to assume that an Indian Rockefeller would be better than an American Rockefeller." Therefore, culture from Gandhian perspective is based on spiritual, moral and non-mechanical.

Gandhi thinks that that modern civilization is obsessed with 'hunger of wealth and greedy pursuit of worldly pleasure. Here, human being devotes his whole

energy to increase wealth in order to get pleasure and bodily comfort for his live and living. But this sort of life brings cruelty, the oppression, exploitation, and indignity etc. And that we can call the hypocrisy of modern civilization. Therefore in the quest for material comfort modern civilization “takes note neither of morality nor of religion”. And human being’s entire effort is vested in acquiring wealth and material pleasure to satisfy his materialistic life in this materialistic world. According to him modern civilization based on violence and does not respect all life and, in its progress onward, it has not hesitated to resort to wholesale destruction of even human life.

Thus, the quest for material pleasure leads man to ceaseless activity in order to satisfy his unlimited material comfort. So the industrialization took its birth and it becomes the means of satisfying the individual’s hunger for more and more worldly goods. But Gandhi condemns the industrial mode of production. Because industrialization helps pamper the human body through a proliferation of wants and it reinforces the structures of inequity, exploitation and domination. The industrial mode of production brings two types of tendencies towards physical and social mobility. The ‘multiplication of wants and machinery contrived to supply them’ reduce man to a mere cog in the machine. Thus, for Gandhi, modern civilization stands for the emasculation of man, promoting exploitation and dominance and unleashing violence and killing morality. He rejects this sort of industrialization. According to him discontent, unrest and conflict become endemic in modern civilization. There are factors like, machine including railways, professions like those of lawyers and doctors and the institution of modern education, that reinforce the tendency of modern civilization to prefer the pursuit of self-interest against morality and religion. And railways symbolizes man’s attempt to annihilate space and time and thus transgress natural limits. It has several adverse consequences. Mainly it violates the natural rhythm of human body.

Thus, by rushing about from place to place by means of railways and ‘such other maddening conveniences,’ man transgresses natural limits. Secondly it has been instrumental in the rapid spread of disease. Thirdly railways, by joining distance place have made it possible to transport goods in a short time from cheaper markets to dearer markets creating conditions of scarcity at some places that ultimately lead to famine. Gandhi denounces the professions of lawyers and doctors. Apart from the fact those lawyers have a vested interest in advancing quarrels, which for them is ‘one of the avenues of becoming wealthy’. They have also helped in consolidating and tightening the grip of English rule in India by accepting and giving legitimacy to English law for regulating Indian affairs. As far the doctors, they receive Gandhi’s wrath not only because they practice vivisection and use animal fat or spirituous liquors in the preparation of medicines, but also because they encourage indulgence and therefore weaken control over mind.

Gandhi also is very critical of modern education as well. Gandhi argues that knowledge of reading, writing and arithmetic or of geography, astronomy, algebra, geometry, etc., may help in performing the responsibilities of an occupation but it does not help in character building on which depends the performance of one’s main role in life. According to Gandhi true education is something different. Man is made of three constituents, the body, mind and spirit. Spirit is the one permanent element in man. The body and mind function on account of it. Hence,

we can call that education which reveals the qualities of spirit. Having looked at Gandhi's views on education and training, we now turn to his observations on modernity and his critique of materialism and his alternative ideas.

On Modernity

Gandhi has been a staunch critique of the modern civilization based on the modern science and technology. In his *Hind Swaraj* he has outlined the moral bankruptcy of this civilization because of its excessive reliance on the brute force and the materialist values. Gandhi is of the view of that science and technology of the West which have shaken the spiritual foundations of human civilization are pursuing an amoral goal. He rejects the ideal of science and technology which consists in securing human progress and happiness through introduction of machines and other mechanical devices. Science and technology have in fact contributed to the human misery, according to Gandhi, by their relentless pursuit of material progress at the cost of spiritual progress and happiness.

According to Gandhi, introduction of machines and industrialization have resulted in more poverty and misery because man has been displaced from his natural habitat and work. This has made man dependent on the heavy machines and the other gadgets which have replaced human labour. For Gandhi, the industrialized civilization of the West has caused the moral and spiritual sickness in man leading to a total collapse of the moral values. Thus modernity has failed to bring progress to mankind. Modernity has been associated with the material progress and the consequent loss of human values. Hence Gandhi calls for a total rejection of the soulless civilization of the modern West. Gandhi's calls for a return to the simple and ideal village life and the life of the less material; needs and more spiritual aspiration is predicated upon his belief that human spirit is higher than the human body and that the moral and spiritual values are higher than the material values.

Gandhi's critique of modernity is based on his ideal of spiritual progress of humanity which is based on the pursuit of truth and nonviolence. A spiritually enlightened human society will be far more nonviolent and wedded to truth than any other civilization. The foundation of this new society will lie in our total dedication to truth and nonviolence. Modernity is based on the cognitive idea of truth as the foundation of a scientific world-view, not a moral one. Only if truth is so conceived can science become the paradigmatic pursuit of our culture, without it the scientific outlook lacks its deepest theoretical source. It is a mark of Gandhi intellectual ambition that by making it exclusively and exhaustively moral and experiential notion instead, he was attempting to repudiate the paradigm at the deepest possible conceptual level.

He strives to drive home the point that the cognitive ideal of truth is the source of the technological exploitation of man and nature and therefore he pleads for a total replacement of this ideal by the ideal of truth as a moral and spiritual ideal. With truth as cognitive being replaced by truth as moral and spiritual, Gandhi has turned the modern civilization on its head. He envisages the new world-order based on the spiritual grasp of truth through non-violent actions and thus on the actions based on spiritual understanding of life of man and nature. This is predisposed to bring about a moral and spiritual transformation of man thus entailing a transformation in the metaphysics of man and nature.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) How does Gandhi reconcile polity and spirituality?

2) What are the Gandhian criticisms against Western Civilization?

2.5 LET US SUM UP

Gandhi challenged conventional wisdom, broke through traditional categories of thought, stretched the boundaries of imagination in all areas of life, and opened up new philosophical and practical possibilities. He was a man of both thought and action, a rare combination. As a man of thought, he saw through the madness of modernity, and offered an alternative vision that combined the best insights of both the pre-modern and modern world-views while avoiding the self-indulgent individualism and moral complacency of the currently fashionable post-modernism. He also discovered a uniquely moral method of political change in the form of *satyagraha*, and provided an effective alternative to violence. As a man of action he led the greatest anti-colonial struggle in history, encouraged a humane and liberal form of patriotism, showed how to lead a successful political life without compromising one’s integrity, and offered a rare example of morally responsible leadership.

2.6 KEY WORDS

Purushartha

:

Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha are pursued to find meaning or purpose in our life.

Holistic Vision

:

seeks comprehensive understanding aimed at reconciling some of the apparent contradictions.

2.7 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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