
UNIT 1 **GANDHIAN CONCEPT OF GOD**

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

The basic objective of this unit is to give a brief idea about the notion of God in Gandhian thought. The influences that shaped his idea of God are dealt in brief in the beginning of the unit. Gandhi's theism as well as the influences of Advaita Philosophy are mentioned. How Gandhi related God to Truth is also explained in this unit. Different proofs for the existence of God as given by Gandhi are also provided. Finally, Gandhian views of the way to God and his explanation for the existence of evil in the world are included. By the end of this unit, you will be able to:

- to have an understanding of the influences that shaped Gandhian concept of God;
- know about Gandhi's theism though he was an Advaitin to some extent;
- understand about Gandhi's transition from God is Truth to Truth is God;
- to have a basic knowledge about the different proofs put forward by Gandhi for the existence of God; and
- comprehend about the Gandhian views on liberation and the existence of evil in the world.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The basic conviction of Gandhi is that there is one reality-that is God, which is nothing else but Truth. His religious ideas are derived from that conviction. If Truth is God sincere pursuit of Truth is religion. Religion is ordinarily defined as devotion to some higher power or principle. Gandhi is not against such a description of religion. He only qualifies it further by saying that, that higher principle being Truth, devotion to Truth or God is religion. Again, Gandhi could

not find God apart from humanity. Therefore he believed that one could reach God by service to man. Hence he dedicated his entire life to the cause of the human race. In this unit, we are dealing with the Gandhian concept of God which he considers to be the devotion to Truth.

1.2 GANDHIAN CONCEPT OF GOD

As a multi-faceted thinker, Mahatma Gandhi gave a new world-view for reconstruction of new society. His thinking was not confined to any one aspect of human being. His conceptualization about human being and their relationship with the society involved many philosophical concepts. Gandhi cannot be regarded as originating any new system of philosophy or any new religion in the academic sense of the term. He learned simply the principles or eternal truths from the greatest traditional philosophical and religious teachers of the world. But Gandhi’s contribution lies in the fact that he tried to assimilate in his own way the teachings that appealed to him and to apply these not only in his personal life but also to the social, political and economic problems of the day.

1.3 INFLUENCES THAT SHAPED GANDHI’S IDEA OF GOD

It is true that Gandhi’s thought has originality and freshness about it. But it carries on it the stamp of a number of influences. His family belonged to the traditional theistic faith called *Vaishnavism* which believed that salvation could be attained by devotion to God and service to humanity. Being brought up in a *Vaishnava* household, *Ahimsa* (Non-violence) was in his blood. At a very early age, Gandhi had studied the Gita and the Ramayana. Gita was the main source of inspiration for him and he referred to the Gita as his mother. For him, it was a book par excellence for the knowledge of Truth. Gandhi strongly appreciated and he himself practiced the doctrine of ‘*anasakti*’ as advocated by the Gita in all aspects of his life.

Jainism and Buddhism had a profound influence on the life and thought of Mahatma Gandhi. Jaina influence was clearly visible in his conception of *satyagraha* and practice of non-violence. Similarly his respect for other religions could be attributed to the teachings of *Anekanta Vada*. Gandhi refers to this in his writings. Like Buddha, Gandhi also recognized the futility of caste distinctions, rites, rituals and dogmas. Gandhi was moved by the emphasis on morality by Buddhism. He was also deeply impressed by the teachings of Buddhist philosophy which preached universal love, non-injury to living beings, sacrifice and renunciation for the sake of promoting the welfare of all. Buddha stressed on purity of means which in turn influenced Gandhi who constantly maintained that there is indissoluble relationship between pure means and noble end.

Gandhi had great respect for the teachings of Jesus Christ also. According to him, the cross is the symbol of sacrifice and *satyagraha* stands for supreme sacrifice. It infuses the spirit to suffer and to overcome any dangerous situation. Thus *satyagraha* can be taken to be the practical application of the teachings of the Christ. Like Christ, Gandhi was also concerned with the individual’s inner purity and perfection. Gandhi was also influenced by the Islamic teachings to a great extent. He learnt the message of universal brotherhood from it. He accepted

Quran's faith in a Supreme God. God is infinite Power and Truth. According to Gandhi, Mohammed taught the religious principle of toleration, the brotherhood of man and absolute self surrender to God. Thus, we see that Gandhi was greatly influenced by the religious heritage of India and he borrowed considerably from Hinduism, Jainism Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. In his notion of God also we see a thorough influence of all these religions.

1.4 GANDHI'S THEISM

Even though it is difficult to reduce Gandhi's philosophy of God to any accepted philosophical models, it can be said to some extent that his theistic beliefs were more or less of the *Vaishnava* type. His early initiation into the *Vaishnava* cult and the influence of the family atmosphere in which he grew, implanted on his mind the rudiments of the idea of a theistic God. *Vaishnava* thinkers conceive God in a theistic manner and as such, God becomes a personal God. Gandhi's philosophy of God is also strictly theistic in character and he feels that God is not merely for the satisfaction of reason or intellectual curiosity, but also for providing strength and solace. According to Gandhi, faith in God must enable an individual to be in peace with the world and it is possible only where an interpersonal relationship is possible and when God is conceived as a person. Gandhi was deeply impressed by the life and practices of the saints of the *Bhakti*-cult, and, therefore, it was not difficult for him to arrive at the conception of a personal God. He was helped in arriving at this notion of God by his studies of the Bible and Quran also.

The nuclear element of Gandhi's thoughts and activities was his belief in God. His idea of God is largely the product of the Hindu conception of God. God, according to him, is the vital force which is all pervading and all embracing. God is vast and boundless as an ocean and it is therefore impossible for man to imagine what He is like. Man can only conceive God within the limitations of his own mind. According to Gandhi, God is invisible, beyond the reach of the human eye. In his opinion, Ram, Rahim, God or Krishna are all attempts on the part of man to name that invisible force which is the greatest of all forces. Man can describe God in his own way, in accordance with his belief and understanding of reality.

Though in accordance with the traditional *Vaishnavism* Gandhi shows his leaning towards *Visitadvaita*, at other times he appears to be an *advaitin* like Sankara, believing that everything in this world as the manifestation of one ultimate principle or reality. The Supreme reality, according to him, is the non-dual *Brahman*, and here Gandhi declares himself to be an *Advaitin*. He, like Sankara, says that nothing exists except Truth which Sankara calls *Brahman*. Again for Gandhi the primary connotation of the term 'God' is not personal. He describes God as the essence, pure consciousness, as force, as truth, goodness and love. God, according to him is undefined power pervading all life, the spirit, and the indefinable, formless and nameless. These descriptions point out to the idea of impersonal ultimate Reality or Absolute like the *Brahman* of Sankara.

At the same time, Gandhi also mentions that God is personal to those who feel his presence and embodied to those who need his touch. God is personal in the sense that He is approachable to man and is in close relation with him. Gandhi is not much concerned whether the devotee conceives God as personal or

impersonal, so long as he is true to his devotion. For Gandhi, the best way to describe God’s power would be to call it Truth or *Satya*, which is derived from ‘*sat*’, which means being or to exist. Here he wants to say that God in reality is formless. But he assumes forms of a person for the good of his devotees. Hence he says that God is that indescribable entity which is unknowable but can be experienced. He is the source of light and life but transcends all. For those who need his presence, He is a personal God.

Again, according to Gandhi, it is not very important to know the attributes of God. They may be many and varied. All those attributes are parts of God. He is the law and the law giver at the same time. He is also truth, love, ethics and morality. He is the source of light and life and a million other things. He is the greatest living force or law that governs the whole universe or the entire human life.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your Answers.

1) What are the major influences that shaped the Gandhian Concpet of God?

2) ‘The Hindu tradition has created in Gandhi settled notions about Reality.’ – Discuss.

1.5 GOD AS TRUTH

In Gandhi, we find the age old teaching of the Upanishad that God is ‘*sat*’ or Truth. In saying that God is Truth, it does not mean ‘is truthful’. Truth here is conceived not as a mere attribute of God. But since it is derived from ‘*sat*’ which means ‘being or is’ nothing exists in reality except truth. Therefore the more truthful we are, the nearer we are to God. This concept of God as Truth, although not a new invention, is a some what unique approach to the meaning of God. Gandhi considers devotion to truth to be the only reason for our existence. Truth should be the very breath of our life. There should be truth in thought, word and action and one who has realized it becomes perfect, as all knowledge is included in it. He often used to quote a Sanskrit verse ‘*satya nasti paramo dharma*’ which said that there is no religion higher than truth. He repeatedly asserted that all his activities whether, social, political or humanitarian is directed to the end of the

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search of Truth. In his autobiography he claimed “My uniform experience has convinced me that there is no other God higher than Truth”. Gandhi’s assertion that God is Truth carries with it a great value in religions and practical life. As the object of devotion is Truth, the end for which we should strive for is Truth. This will help us to create a sort of universal brotherhood in respect of religion. It can do away with the rivalries in the religious field to a great extent because worship of Truth can unify persons belonging to different castes, creeds and religions. The theistic current of Gandhi’s thought meets with a difficulty when God and Truth are sought to be identified with each. Truth is an impersonal principle and God as conceived by Gandhi is a person. Let us see how Gandhi has found a solution to this problem.

1.6 TRUTH AS GOD

Gandhi was aware of this difficulty and therefore he tried to make his own stand point clear. He, instead of asserting the previous statement ‘God is Truth’ came to assert ‘Truth is God’. There were very strong reasons for bringing about this change. One reason for this change is that the word Truth is not as ambiguous as the word God. Nobody understands exactly the same thing by the word ‘God’. God may be pantheistic, monotheistic or polytheistic. But, the word ‘Truth’ is always clear in its significance. Again, there is yet another reason for suggesting the change. It is possible to rationally doubt, or even to deny, the existence of God. But it is self contradictory to attempt to deny Truth. Gandhi realized that reason can raise arguments against the possibility of God’s existence. But it cannot reject Truth. There are many skeptics and unbelievers of the God. But even they cannot deny Truth. Truth is the only factor which is completely universal and comprehensive and it provides a common platform for both the theist and atheist. This led Gandhi to assert the primacy of Truth. He said “My uniform experience has convinced me that there is no other God than Truth...” According to him, blind religious notions about God have done immense damage to mankind and therefore he shifted the emphasis from God to Truth.

In the initial stages of his experiments, Mahatma Gandhi was a firm believer in the ultimacy of God. Later he came in association with many sincere and thoughtful persons who honestly believed that the traditional idea of God was open to criticisms on account of its being a defective notion. But, even their rejection of God was based on a sincere desire to know the Truth. So Gandhi realized that reason could reject anything but not Truth. Truth appeared to him as the only force that could unify even conflicting ideas and ideals. This led to day that “if at all possible for human tongue to give the fullest description of God... then we must say that God is Truth... But I went a step further and said Truth is God”. There are certain interesting implications of Gandhi’s’ assertion that Truth is God. These implications have both pragmatic and religious value. Here it is asserted that the object of worship is not God but Truth. This can very well become a basis for a really universal religion as worship of Truth can bring the whole world together as a whole.

Gandhi combines the logical as well as metaphysical meaning of the word Truth and then identify Truth with God. Here Truth is not the relative truth of our conception but the Absolute Truth, the eternal principle that is God. Reality according to Gandhi is Truth and Truth is Reality. Man’s ideal is to achieve God

through Truth and non-violence. But he cannot achieve perfect Truth. Gandhi considered that man is a finite being but God is infinite or the Absolute Truth which he strives to know. The only way to find God, he believed, is to see Him in His creations. One may therefore, strive to find God or the Absolute Truth through the service of humanity. Service of God and service of humanity are therefore one and the same. The greatnesses of man depend on the extent of service one does to others. It is impossible for man to know or realize the whole truth or the Absolute Truth, which is God.

Gandhi was of opinion that even though man cannot achieve perfect Truth, he should always try to achieve it more and more. Even if one can achieve relative truth he should be satisfied because the more he achieve it, the nearer he is to reality. Faith in God or Truth with a purity of soul is all that is required for reaching the full spiritual height that is possible for a man to attain. To Gandhi, God or Truth is an all pervasive presence or existence in the midst of which man has to learn to live and move about, though it is a very difficult task. But that is the only worth while way to be pursued by one who aspires after spiritual and moral elevation.

As a great force for liberation of man, Truth as Gandhi asserts, ought to be a permanent living force of humans. All goodness, all sincerity, all purpose, all welfare of humanity are based on it. Therefore, the freedom of fullness of man entirely depends on how one is justified and dedicated to it. Thus, Truth, raised ultimately to the position of God, constitutes the central theme in Gandhian philosophy upon which the whole of his socio-political and economic philosophy is based.

1.7 PROOFS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

Mahatma Gandhi who was brought up in a *Vaishanava* family adopts the theistic views and believes that God is the creator and also the ruler of the Universe. Gandhi believed that a belief in God is essentially a matter of faith. He was convinced that God can be known only in a state of inner realization, that God's knowledge can only be revealed to an individual in some sincere and sacred inner experience. Even so, at time, Gandhi does talk about evidences of God's existence. The causal proof is based on the view that everything has a cause. Logically, the entire cosmos depends on the ultimate cause which is God. Gandhi says "If we exist, if our parents and their parents have existed then it is proper to believe in the parent of the whole creation". God is thus conceived as the 'parent' of the whole universe.

At various places Gandhi talks of the order and the harmony of the universe. He also says that there is a Law governing the universe. Then he argues that the order, harmony and the law cannot be explained unless an intelligent Law-giver is presupposed and says that it is God. One can find the traces of teleological proof for God's existence here. It is based on the observation that there is an underlying unity and purpose, adjustment and order in the cosmos. It is governed by some law and is moving towards some purpose or goal. Mahatma Gandhi observes "That there is orderliness in the universe, there is an unalterable law governing everything and every being that exists or lives. It is not a blind law, for no blind law can govern the conduct of living beings. That law then which governs all life is God"

But Mahatma Gandhi attaches great importance to the moral proof. In fact, Gandhi values this proof very much and very frequently makes a reference to this. According to him the so called voice of conscience is God's command and direct intimation to man. He seems to be convinced that the voice of conscience carries dependable testimony for God's existence. If moral conscience is accepted as a command then we have to accept the source of this command and this is God. Conscience, according to him, represents the Divine in man. It sanctions the good and condemns the bad. One is constrained to feel the obedience of the dictates of this voice is one's duty. Gandhi clearly says, "I have no special revelation of God's will. My firm belief is that He reveals himself daily to every human being but we shut our eyes to the 'still small voice'".

Then, at times, Gandhi also made a reference to a kind of proof that can be called 'pragmatic proof'. Gandhi believes that a belief in God's existence is necessary because God satisfies a very important aspect of our life. If we survey our life we find that over and above the wants and needs of every day existence, we do have an urge of a different kind which cannot be satisfied with the usual materialistic fulfillments of life, and which demands a spiritual satisfaction. We clearly realize that we are in need of a supreme object of love, by having a faith in which, we can derive strength, solace, peace and even happiness. This supreme object of love is nothing, but God.

Thus, Mahatma Gandhi offers a number of proofs for the existence of God. But above all faith, Gandhi believes, precedes all evidence. There is no argument to convince one who does not have faith in God. Faith transcends reason. Thus, it is apparent that, according to Gandhi, God not only transcends senses, but also defies rational proofs. God is a matter of inner realization and faith.

1.8 GOD AND EVIL

The existence of evil in the world is a fact which cannot be denied. It is difficult for a theist to accept evil along with the goodness of God. Hence Gandhi offers his own explanation with regard to the problem of evil and defined it as good or truth misplaced. He also said that if there is good there must also be evil just as where there is light there must be darkness. Gandhi explained that evils, sins etc are due to the wrong acts of man who are endowed with free will. Gandhi seems to have been influenced by traditional Hindu explanation which gives explanation for evils, sins and sufferings is karma and ignorance. Man suffers because of his own bad action which is due to ignorance about the truth of this universe, God and himself. Gandhi also believed that evils of the world are inspired by some unknown good motives, and not due to any evil intention of God who is all good, all just and all merciful. We have to recognize evil as something permitted by God in the world. Gandhi recognizes that there is a constant struggle between the evil forces and the forces of good in any society. This means that there shall be evil in the non-violent society also and it will be the duty of every individual to fight against it. In this way, society will gain strength from the existence of evil and not be weakened by it.

1.9 THE WAY TO GOD

Gandhi's ultimate spiritual goal is *moksha* or salvation which means freedom from the cycle of births and deaths. He himself confessed that his utmost desire

was to merge himself in the Absolute. The body persists because of egoism. The utter extinction of this egoism therefore leads to *moksa*. This is the basic teaching of Indian philosophy and religion. Gandhi believed in the necessity for ceaseless effort in this spiritual endeavor. This also requires grace of God. With regard to the three paths leading to God-*jnana*, *bhakti*, and *karma*, Gandhi laid more emphasis on *bhakti* and *karma*, of devotion and complete self surrender to God. Here we see that he was influenced by *Bhagavad-Gita*. According to him, God is ready to forgive even the most dreadful sinner if he surrenders himself with the greatest devotion at the feet of God. He also relies on karma in the form of selfless service of the poor as a way to supreme God realization. He believed that to serve the poor was to serve the God. Thus we see that Gandhi realized the fact that karma and *bhakti* are complementary to one another. He was successful in creating a mutual connection among the different paths leading to the realization of God.

To Gandhi, *jivan mukti* or *mukti* while one is still alive is impossibility. A man can attain only ‘*videhamukti*’ or deliverance after death. The cravings of the senses die away only when we cease to exist in the body. The yogi, according to Gandhi, is one who has controlled his mind and is completely free from all desires. Gandhi also asserts that a man of unceasing love is a perfectly enlightened man. By *moksa*, he means liberation from impure thoughts and weakness that are manifested in the form of violence. Thus, the ultimate objective of life that Gandhi aspired to, was achieving the liberation of soul from violence in thought, word and deed that might have enveloped it. Once that covering was removed, the soul or the Devine spark in him would shine in the fullest glory of Truth. The self then would begin to be realize the vision of God. Gandhi thus emphasized that the more truthful we are, the nearer we are to God. He thus wanted to show us that the way to God is through the commitment to truth.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your Answers.

1) What is the difference between ‘God is Truth’ and ‘Truth is God’ in Gandhian philosophy.?

2) What was Gandhi’s explanation with regard to the problem of Evil?

1.10 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we are dealing with the Gandhian concept of God. In the formation of his concept of God, Gandhi was influenced by a number of religious thoughts. They are dealt in brief. Though *Vaishnava* tradition in which Gandhi was brought up formulated a concept of personal God in Gandhi, he was equally impressed by the Advaita tradition also. Hence he defines God as Absolute Truth. ‘God is Truth’, goes the familiar saying, but Gandhi gave the statement an unusual twist. He argued that it is more correct to say ‘Truth is God’ and insisted that the distinction between the two statements is significant. This is also given with due emphasis in the unit. The proofs for the existence of God as given by Gandhi are given as the next topic in the unit. This is followed by Gandhi’s explanation with regard to the problem of evil. The unit is concluded by a brief look into Gandhian conception of way to God or liberation. According to him, it can be attained through commitment to Truth.

1.11 KEY WORDS

Theism	:	Belief in a God or Gods especially as creator of the world
Attribute	:	Characteristic quality
Anekantavada	:	Jaina theory of Reality
Vaishnavism	:	Hindu tradition which considers Vishnu as the Supreme Deity
Advaita	:	The doctrine of the Vedanta school associated with Shankara
Brahman	:	The Absolute Reality or the supreme God-head without qualities or attributes
Jivanmukta	:	One who has realized the self, even while living in this body

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