
UNIT 3 RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND ASHRAM LIFE

Contents

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Gandhi's Religious Experience in its Preparatory Phase
- 3.3 Religious Experience in its Maturity
- 3.4 The Ashram Life: A Historical Overview
- 3.5 Ashram Life and the Rules
- 3.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.7 Key Words
- 3.8 Further Readings and References

3.0 OBJECTIVES

Undoubtedly Gandhi's whole life and work was fundamentally spiritual. One reason for his spiritual outlook was the religious atmosphere in which he was brought up at home. Another important reason is the religious experience he cherished all through his life. Above all, his Ashram life played a key role in the making of his religious experience. That in turn prepared him to involve himself in his various political activities in a saintly way. It is of supreme significance for you to identify what his religious experience is, and specify the role ashram life in Gandhi's life and mission. So this Unit will help you

- To understand the different stages of his religious experience
- To grasp the core aspect of that religious experience
- To know the role of his ashram life in his religious experience
- To appreciate the value of the vows of his ashram life

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Gandhi was deeply a religious person, showing keen on spiritual pursuit. The many liberation- struggles he undertook in South Africa as well as in India were steered by his spiritual outlook only. Even the reform programmes he initiated in the Indian society before the Independence were all guided by his spiritual ideas and ideals. The spiritual vision of life will be clear from his words found in the Introduction of his *Autobiography*: "What I want to achieve – what I have been pinning and striving to achieve these thirty years – is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain 'Moksha', I live and move and have my being, in the 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 end."

However, Gandhi's religious experience was not a single and specific experience that occurred at one moment of life. It was rather a life-long experience that permeated into all aspects of life: family, profession, politics, policies, programme etc. He had a scientific bent of mind so as to experiment anything that came on

his way. He would not simply accept any events or experiences without assessing each one of them. Whatever he studied about religion, say about God, religion, plurality of religions etc. was all put to test by Gandhi in his life. Whatever he learnt from various kinds of Holy Scriptures was put into practice. The sole aim of all these experiments was to transform his life and of improve the life of humanity, to see God face to face.

Thus, he developed a constantly evolving set of beliefs and principles that guided his behavior not only in his personal and family life but also in all his social and political activities. When Gandhi happened to go to South Africa, he was touched by the deepest sorrow of the Indian laborers. He became so restless that he plunged into action to remove the injustice they were suffering the colour discrimination by the British. Gandhi's heart was burning with such a living flame of God's love that he decided to light up not only the hearts of the oppressed but also the heart the oppressors. Hence, he discovered a very new way of fighting for justice, which he called Satyagraha. It is the same method that he would use later during the freedom struggle to get not only the political independence but also bring about socio-economic reforms in India.

Gandhi was thus able to apply the soul-force to the removal of all sorts of problems at the political, social and economics because he had already realized a personal synthesis of all that he had learnt about religion, religions with all aspects of life. But Gandhi was able to arrive at such a profound synthesis only because many factors of his early life had prepared him for it. Unless you know those factors, you will not be in a position to understand the unique religious experience of Gandhi. Further, of course you will have to analyse the specific features of that religious experience which Gandhi manifested in later part of life. Apart from these two broad phases of his religious experience, it is also important to study the significance of his Ashram life separately.

3.2 GANDHI'S RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN ITS PREPARATORY PHASE

In this section, you are going to analyze the various factors that were at work in the making of Gandhi's religious experience. First, it was his family background contributed to the religious experience of the later Mahatma. Gandhi's father Kaba Gandhi was the Prime Minister of the state of Porbandar, one of the small princely states of Kathiawad in Gujarath. He was known for uprightness of character and strict impartiality of administration. So there prevailed in his home an atmosphere of discipline. The mother, Putlibai, was a pious and devout woman. Going to the temple was one of her daily duties. She would not think of taking her meals without her daily prayers. She was known for ascetic practices of faith, too. She would take the hardest vows and adhere to them unflinchingly. For instance during the four months period of rainy season she would vow to herself not to take meals without worshipping the sun-god and having a *darshan* of his. Sometimes for days the sun may not appear. In addition, she would go fasting on all those days. The sons would stand outside the house to see whether the sun appears. When it appeared, they would call out the mother. By the time, she came, if the sun was hidden by clouds again, she would simply say: "May be, Lord does not want me to eat today". Thus, the boy Mohandas grew in a religious atmosphere. He understood the meaning of prayer, self-control, and discipline.

Besides there were two plays which left an indelible mark on the young boy. Once he happened to watch the play “Shravana Pitribhakti Nataka”. He was so much impressed by Shravana’s sacrificial devotion towards his blind parents that Gandhi developed a great attachment to parents. Thus he imbibed many of their good qualities of the parents unconsciously. Another play that influenced him very much was the Harichandra Story. After watching the play of Harichandra, he asked himself: “Why should not all be truthful like him? He thought about it day and night. Finally as for himself, he decided he would always play the role of Harichandra. His one ideal was to follow the path truth and go through all the ordeals Harichandra went through. Thus there arose gradually but definitely a quest for truth, and ardent desire to see the role of the Spirit within self.

There were quite a few painful things that the boy had to face in his early life but each event taught him a great lesson which enabled him to understand life better. One such painful thing was that he got into a bad friendship with a fellow student. In fact his elder brother, his mother and wife warned him about him. But Gandhi assured them that he would change him into good by his friendship with him. He never knew that “one takes in vice far more readily than virtue”. In his company, he took to meat-eating. His argument was English men were strong because they eat meat. Therefore, he thought that it was his duty, as patriot, to become strong through meat-eating. But, since his family was practicing vegetarian orthodox culture, his friend helped him to eat meat secretly. However, Gandhi could not continue the practice for long because whenever he took mutton outside he was not inclined to take his meals at home. When his mother asked for the reason, he had to lie to her that he was not hungry or that he had some indigestion problems. However, it was very painful for him to deceive his mother in that way.

Another painful experience was the habit of smoking. It all began with his wonder how his uncle could emit clouds out of his lips. He would pick up the stumps of cigarettes thrown away by him and imitate him secretly. Then he began smoking with his friend. Not satisfied, he stole from the servant’s pocket money to buy more. On another occasion, Gandhi stole to pay off the debt of his brother by chipping off a bit of gold armlet of another brother. All this resulted in a lot of prick of conscience in the tender boy. On the other hand, he and his friend thought that their freedom was curtailed by the varied restrictions imposed by the elders. They felt that they could not do anything of their own choice. So they even attempted at suicide. However, even to do it they needed a lot of courage. So Gandhi went to a temple nearly first to pray and then drink the poisonous juice.

Nevertheless, there he was moved by an inner voice that if he made confession of his sins to his father, things would be all right. He too responded to that call positively. He made a sincere confession to his father, by writing everything, along with the promise never to commit a sin again. Having read this, his father burst into tears and forgave Gandhi unconditionally. This not only changed Gandhi completely but also became the foundation for his later discovery of the path of truth and nonviolence. He understood that truth is the essence of nonviolence.

Apart from these factors that contributed to his religious upbringing, the young boy was in a sense prepared for an interreligious experience too. They belonged to Vaishnavite family which was open to Saivism, as well as to Jainism and Buddhism. He kept a very open household in terms of religion. Men of many religious traditions Jain monks used to visit his house and even have meals in

their house. His father had some Muslim and Parsi friends with whom he engaged himself in dialogue on religious topics. In addition, the boy, as he was nursing the father would be listening to them all. He gained a good knowledge of all these religions except Christianity. These things combined inculcated in the young Gandhi a tolerance for all faiths. He would respect them all as seekers after truth, all in their own ways. The Jain tradition was particularly strong in the area, and its emphasis on *ahimsa* (doing no harm) and its doctrine of *anekantavada* the many-sidedness of truth became very important to Gandhi later in life.

The only religion that he learned to think poorly of, during his youth, was Christianity. Once he happened to hear some Christians missionaries who preached in a street corner, abusing Hindus and their gods. He also heard a rumor in the town that a well known Hindu after conversion to Christianity, had to eat beef, drink liquor and wear European costumes and had already abused Hindu gods and customs. All these things created in him a dislike for Christianity. However, he changed his opinions when he went to London for his barrister studies. Gandhi's real contact with Christianity began in England during his law studies in 1888, where he was introduced to various books including the Bible by a good Christian from Manchester. As he was reading the Bible he did not come across any passage that advocated meat eating and drinking. Gandhi read the whole of the Bible. He could not relish reading the Old Testament but the New Testament produced a different impression, which lasted till his death.

This contact with Christianity was much deepened in South Africa. He had to work with Muslims. In fact he went there on a contract to work for the Muslim's firm only. Thus in his friendship with good Muslims, he came to know about Islam. At the same time Gandhi came in contact with many excellent Christians who also influenced him to get converted to their religions. At one point, Gandhi thought of even embracing another religion. 'But to which religion?' was the question he was unable to settle, easily. He consulted certain Jain merchant by name Rai Chandbai who, Gandhi thought, was a highly spiritually enlightened person. He wrote to him about his dilemma. He wrote to Gandhi whether he had really studied about his own religion and whether there was anything, it could not be fulfilled. In addition, he had sent several books on Hinduism. He began to study them all deeply. Because of a deeper study he, finally arrived at certain conclusion regarding what religion means and religions are.

Gandhi's basic insight on the meaning of religion is this: Religion is really that which changes our very nature, by binding us indissolubly to the truth within. It goes on purifying us and making us perfect. Religion 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. It enables one to strive after Truth. It makes us follow morality, at its minimum, but really, it trains us to go through a self-purification process in thought, word and action.

So according to Gandhi the core of religion is morality. He said that true religion and true morality are bound up with each other. Morality is the essence of religion. When morality incarnates itself in a living person it becomes religion, because, it binds, it holds, it sustains him in hours of trial. Religion is to morality what water is to the seed that is sown in the soil. Gandhi would even say that religion

and morality are identical. A religion is religion only because it has evolved out of a person or persons who realized the Truth and because it continues to teach fundamental morality to its followers and to provide them with means for self-purification.

As regards religious plurality, Gandhi realized that it is a human necessity arising out of the differences in temperaments of the person of the Attainment. When he grasps the Truth, and explains it to his followers, he will be able to do it only in the language he knows, using the cultural moulds and according to the climatic conditions of the place and historical contexts of the peoples. Further, it is explained and interpreted by commentators; it would have its own accretions added to the original truth. Thus every religion is imperfect while being true as well. There is no one religion, which is all-true. Nor is any one religion, which is all-false. There is no question of superiority / inferiority between religions.

Every religion is valid to its own followers in as much as it fulfills the felt need of humanity, but every religion also has the obligation to move from imperfection to perfection constantly. And that they are all fundamentally the same. Moreover, that his own native religion was not only as good as any other religion, but even more helpful because of the hereditary influences and congenial atmosphere. In other words, he became clear that there was no need of conversion in the accepted sense of the term. Thus he became confirmed Hindu by convictions.

3.3 RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN ITS MATURITY

After taking his decision to remain a Hindu, Gandhi stuck up to it, until the end of his life. He remained a Hindu. He even openly confessed his devotion and attachment to Hinduism. “I can no more describe my feeling for Hinduism than for my own wife. She moves me as no other woman in the world can”. Not that he was not aware of its faults. Even so he felt for and about Hinduism with all its faults and limitations. Nothing else elated him so much as the music of the *Gita* or the *Ramayana* of Tulsidas.

That did not mean that Gandhi’s religious experience was restricted to the sources of Hinduism only. His was a highly personal synthesis of diverse elements to which his reading of the Bible and contact with Christians had contributed substantially. His contact with good Christians during the most impressionable years of his life in London had such a long lasting effect on his personality. “The spirit of the Sermon on the Mount competes almost on equal terms with the *Bhagavad Gita* for the domination of my heart,” he said in 1916. Later in 1920, he said, “Christ’s Sermon on the Mount fills me with bliss even today. Its sweet verses have even today the power to quench my agony of the soul.” He had many intimate friends from all religions but especially from Christianity. Mr. Paul, a Roman Catholic, a court interpreter, Mr. Subhan Godgrey, then a teacher under the Protestant Mission. Rev. Joseph D Doke, a Baptist minister, who had sympathetic outlook on Gandhi’s Passive Resistance movement, and who became Gandhiji’s first biographer, Mr. A W Baker who, besides being an attorney, was a staunch lay preacher. He had Gandhi to attend for a prayer meeting in Mr. Baker’s office during lunch break attending the prayer meeting for some time. There he met many Christians. One of them was Plymouth Brethren. Rev. C.F Andrews was another Christian to whom Gandhi developed a lasting friendship, who called him ‘Charlie’. They met towards the end of the passive resistance

struggle in Natal. Their friendship grew with mutual admiration and affection, and lasted until the sudden death of Andrew's in 1942. Gandhi learnt some favorites Christian hymns: 'Lead Kindly Light', 'When I Survey the Wondrous Cross', 'nearer my God to Thee', 'Abide with Me', and 'Rock of Ages'.

Gandhi was not only convinced of the fact that his reading of other sacred books had enriched him, but also others would be equally enriched likewise. So he held that "it is the duty of every cultured man or woman to read sympathetically the Scriptures of the world. If we are to respect others' religions as we would have them to respect our own, a friendly study of the world's religions is a sacred duty. As he had to work with people of different religions, he began to cultivate interreligious collaboration not only for pragmatic reasons but also at the very fundamental level of religious experience. That in turn enabled him to develop deep trans-religious experience as well as formulate a trans-religious concept of God, spirituality

Thus, Gandhi derived inspiration from both Hindu and Christian traditions, without being exclusively dominated by either of the two. Gandhi's study of Christianity had influenced his idea about God, soul and nature. For Gandhi, however, this knowledge was the goal of the quest rather than its beginning. His religious conviction grew not through study and reflection but under compulsion of action. He went to the scripture to seek guidance whenever he was in his moral and ethical perplexities and accepted from them only so much as helped him to see his path in life.

Gandhi was critical of certain features of Christianity as practiced in the West, which, he thought, were denial of the true spirit of Jesus. He could not accept the view that Christianity was the only true religion or that the Bible was the only true revelation. He could not accept the narrow understanding of Jesus as the only begotten son, unique savior etc. He criticized the humanitarian work of missionaries as baits for conversion. He condemned the conversion of Harijans in particular. However, Gandhi maintained that conversion in the sense of self-purification and self-realization was vital for every religious community.

Gandhi had a deep reverence for Jesus Christ. He was indeed the unfailing inspiration for humankind and a supreme exemplar of *satyagraha*. Jesus' teaching on the universal love, and forgiveness even of the enemies were the core of human progress. Especially the Kingdom of God appealed to him in a very great deal. On the personal side, the ideal of Kingdom of God inspired him to work for it as a means of personal salvation. So Gandhi said, I am not fighting for any earthly kingdom. "For me the road of salvation lays through incessant toil in the service of my country and humanity. Gandhi was very much touched by Jesus' words: "It profited nothing if one gained the whole world and lost his soul". Therefore, he attached importance to soul, as the governing principle of human nature and the hallmark of the truth of human beings. To live up to the dictates of the indwelling spirit was indeed the 'truth' of human beings at the personal level.

On the social side, Gandhi viewed 'the kingdom of God' as the ideal society based upon justice even unto this last. He did not believe that his spirituality consisted in simply in turning away from poverty, misery, ignorance but in fully facing the unjust structures that produced them and fighting against them. Moreover, even in fighting against them, Gandhi thought, one has to use love as

the main principle, pray for those whom one fights against, and transform the existing customs, institutions and making them into true vehicle of love. In fact, the Sermon on the Mount awakened in Gandhi the value of Passive Resistance. Though I cannot claim to be a Christian in the sectarian sensed of the term, the example of Jesus' suffering is a factor in the composition of my undying faith in non-violence which rules all my actions – worldly or temporal... Jesus lived and dies in vain if he did not teach us to regulate the whole of life by the eternal law of love." It is the potency and practicability of the method of the cross that Gandhi demonstrated in his Satyagraha method. In addition, he made it into such an irresistible political instrument for obtaining social justice that even the most unscrupulous enemy had to reckon with it a great soul force of love.

Even as Gandhi appreciated the truth in other religions, and learn from it, yet he also related those truths to his own Hindu basics. He saw in the Cross an explication of the Hindu concept of Ahimsa. It was simply a negative concept of non-killing or non-violence, but positively love. That love, according to Gandhi, was to be shown even to the enemies because he too is created in the image of God, and is possessing soul-dimension, which indeed constitutes the truth of human being. Gandhi began to see this truth dimension of the humans in terms of the Hindu terminology *satya* which itself derived from 'Sat' the principle of Being, the one all-embracing Ground of Being, either in the form of personal God, *Ishwara*, or the eternal Law that governs the whole of the cosmos. In this perspective, then, it was easy for Gandhi to reject such evils of caste system, Untouchability, gender discrimination, the passive understanding of *karma* theory, leading to fatalism, as simply degradations of the true religious spirit. Whatever contradicted morality and purity was to be rejected although a *sastra* may sanction it.

Gandhi loved to be called a Hindu. He had to even stake his claim that he was a Sanatani Hindu, because he believed in the Vedas, Upanishads, *Puranas*. He even wrote a commentary on *Gita* like any major reformer. He believed in *Varnashrama dharma* of the pure type, not in the popular and degraded form. He believed in the protection of the cow in its much larger sense of itself being the symbol of ecological one-ness, became an able reformer of Hinduism. However, he did not observe the Hindu ceremonials or holy days. He rarely visited temple except for courtesy. However, he did not disbelieve in idol worship. Gandhi did not consider that religion was to be practiced on a mountain top in a cave of the Himalaya, or in the banks of the river Ganges, but as it manifest itself in all the actions of humans in society. Though he accepted the value of such props as idol worship and going to temple object for those people who find them useful, he was himself not keen on using them.

Gandhi was trying to be *karmayogi*, as described in the *Gita*. Accordingly he was keen on performing all the good works in the spirit of sacrifice to the 'God of humanity' particularly serving the *Daridranarayana*, the God of the poor and the downtrodden, without attachment, without hankering after the desired results and with equanimity. The core of religion consists in morality. Religion and Morality for Gandhi were interchangeable terms. Similarly, God and Truth in the sense of moral law are interchangeable. Therefore, he could easily convert the usual understanding 'God is truth' into his own formulation 'Truth is God'. The basic principles of this morality were truth and non-violence. These two principals were elaborated into eleven principles. Which we will see later section in this Unit itself.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Did Gandhi have any religious experience at all? If so, specify what sort of religious experience it was?

2) What were the factors that contributed to Gandhi’s religious experience?

3) Discuss the core of Gandhi’s religious experience.

4) How does Gandhi distinguish religion and religions?

3.4 THE ASHRAM LIFE: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

By ‘ashram’ in the Hindu tradition is meant ‘a house where a true Guru is living and teaching God-seekers seeking spiritual advice and help’. It is a simple community-living, oriented to spiritual discipline and God-realization. But Ashram, as founded by Gandhi, meant a residential work centre for those who have dedicated themselves for an integral life of *satyagraha*, and were totally committed to the principles of non-violence as a creed.

Right from the beginning of his public ministry that he started in South Africa, he had been living an ashram life. For, besides the members of his family, there were Gandhi's friends and fellow workers who were living with him and whose relation with him was spiritual from the first or became such later on. This went on unconsciously for quite some time. However in the course of time Gandhi founded formally four types of Ashrams.

1) Phoenix Settlement

When Gandhi in South Africa read Ruskin's *Unto This Last*, in 1904, he was so much impressed by the contents of the book that he decided to live with the workers of *Indian Opinion* as members of his family. He purchased 100 acres of land and founded Phoenix Settlement. Neither he nor others called it an ashram. It had a religious basis, but the visible object was purity of body and mind as well as economic equality. The coworkers would live as family men and have children. This was the first step.

In 1906, when he launched out formally the Satyagraha, movement, he made it clear that it was based on religion and implied an unshakable faith in the God of Truth. Here religion did not mean the narrow and sectarian sense, but as that which acts as a link between different religions and realizes their essential unity. Gandhi says that he learnt from experience that *brahmacharya* was a sine qua non for a life devoted to service. From that time onward Gandhi looked upon Phoenix deliberately as a religious institution. Thus it was progressing as an ashram though he did not call it by that name. This went on till 1911.

2) Tolstoy Farm

In 1911 as a part of the Satyagraha movement, Gandhi and his coworkers felt the need of an ashram where *Satyagrahi* families could live and lead a religious life. Gandhi's close friend a German architect by name Kallenbach who was also very religious minded, and who was living a sort of ashram life, leading a comparatively a simple life purchased a farm of 1,100 acres for settling the *satyagrahi* families. The whole institution was managed from a religious point of view. Among the settlers there were Hindus, Mussalmans, Christians and Parsis. And each was staunch in his own faith. Yet they had never quarreled with one another. They respected one another's religion and tried to help everybody to follow his own faith and thus to make spiritual progress. Even this institution was not called Ashram but as Tolstoy Farm. They both were followers of Tolstoy, trying to practice his doctrines.

In 1912, when the Tolstoy Farm was closed, the farmers were sent to Phoenix, which was no longer meant for the Indian Opinion workers only. As at Tolstoy Farm, here also Gandhi established a common kitchen which some joined, while others had private kitchen. But congregational prayers in the evening was introduced. And the final Satyagraha campaign in 1913 was started by the inmates of Phoenix Settlement. And the struggle ended successfully in 1914. And it was decided that all settlers who wanted to go to India should be enabled to go there.

3) Satyagraha Ashram

According to the decision taken early, Gandhi on his return to India early in 1915, came with a view to establish an ashram life so as to continue the

communal life commenced in South Africa. And as Gandhi toured all parts of India for a year, he was invited by several cities to establish the ashram in their neighbourhood with a promise of assistance. Finally Ahmedabad was selected. That was the fourth and the last step. With full discussion and correspondence with friends, finally he decided to call the institution Satyagraha Ashram, because his life was devoted to the quest of truth, and he was wanting to live and if need be die in the pursuit of the same with as many fellow pilgrims as he could get. It was on May 25, 1915 the Satyagraha Ashram was established in a rented house at Kochrab because of the volunteering help to finance it. Later on account of his unwavering attitude to Removal of Untouchability, he had to vacate it all of a sudden, relying only on the Providence. And God too was kind to the Ashramites. They moved to banks of the Sabarmati River in Ahmedabad, where the ashram life became stable and steady, destined to steer the destiny of the nation.

The ashram life at the beginning consisted of hand weaving as the main industry, and carpentry as accessory to it. No servants were engaged. So cooking, sanitation, fetching water everything was attended to by the Ashramites. Truth and other observances were obligatory. Eradication of Untouchability, emancipation of women from the age old discrimination, Respect of religions, vegetarianism not only as a means of control of palate but also as a mark of identification with the poor and as the experimenting on the best way of perfect health.

In fine, the Ashram set out to remedy what it thought were defects in our national life from the religious, economic and political standpoints. It may not have embarked on all possible activities that Gandhi thought of. However, Gandhi did not go in search of new spheres of activity, but if any activity naturally suggested itself to our minds, he should go in for it without accounting the cost. Gandhi was also keen on managing with what funds were placed at his disposal by friends without any special effort in collection. These were certainly 2 limitations of the Ashram.

However, these two limitations sprang from the religious attitude Gandhi. As such therefore they reveal the religious experience of the Ashram life too. It implies a strong faith in God, i.e. doing everything in dependence upon and under the inspiration of God, conducting such activities as are sent by God with such resources as God places at his disposal. God never lets us see that He Himself does anything. He achieves His aims through men inspired by Him. When help was received from unexpected quarters or from friends without our asking for it, his faith led him to believe that it was sent by God. Similarly when some activity came to them unsought Gandhi thought it was a Godsend. Not to take it up would have been sheer cowardice, laziness or the like.

Similarly Gandhi applied the same principle to coworkers, material resources and to activities. We may have the funds and know how they were to be used, but we can do nothing in the absence of coworkers. They too should come unsought. Gandhi and other Ashramites did not merely imagine but had a living faith that the Ashram was God's. If therefore He wished to make the Ashram His instrument as regards any activity, it was for Him to place the requisite men and munitions at the Ashram's disposal. Phoenix Settlement, Tolstoy Farm and Sabarmathi Ashram have all been conducted more or less according to these principles consciously or unconsciously.

4) Sevagram

The last of the Ashram that Gandhi founded was *Sevagram* Ashram. When Gandhi was 67 years, he reached the village called Shegaon, near about 8 km from Wardha on the 30th April, 1936, remained here for about five to six days. He called the villagers and sought their permission to settle down here. He had no intention to keep anybody with him except his wife Kasturba. However slowly pressure of work necessitated permission to more colleagues until *Sevagram* Ashram also became a full-fledged institution. Seth Jamnalal Bajaj of Wardha, a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi, made available to the ashram about 300 acres of land in the outskirts of the village when barely 1,000 people lived. The small homes which were built in the ashram for Gandhi and Kasturba, and his followers were similar to the typical village homes. The ashram employed some Harijans in the common kitchen to break the caste barrier. It was in the year 1940 that he renamed the village as '*sevagram*'. In Hindi it meant "A village for service".

With meticulous planning different huts were built. Meera Ben, formerly called Miss Madelene Slade, daughter of an English admiral, who had become the disciple of Gandhi, was already settled in *Sevagram* before Gandhi. She herself built a hut for herself. Gandhiji's hut, now known as *Adi Niwas* was to be built, not more than Rs.500/, and with material available to serve food to inmates and then used to take his meals. Gandhi lived in one corner of the hut built. When the number of residents in the *Adi Nivas* increased, Gandhiji and Kasturba shifted to live in Meeraben's hut. Meeraben constructed one more hut on the eastern side for herself. However, later on she left this hut also for Gandhiji's office and shifted to a nearby village. These huts are known today as 'Bapu kuti' and 'Bapu's office'.

Kasturba had to live in Bapu Kuti in the midst of so many men. Looking to her difficulty, a new hut was constructed for her. Kasturba lived in this new hut with a few inmates and sometimes with occasional women guests. This hut is known as '*Ba Kuti*'. The roof of this hut is covered with bamboos, mats and country mud-tiles. The walls are neatly plastered with white earth. Meeraben had decorated the walls with folk art symbols like Oum, palm tree, peacock and the Charkha symbolising God, nature, living beings and human activity. The windows and doors are also made of bamboos and decorated with local designs. The village craftsmen prepare the palm tree mats, which are spread on the floor. The bamboo almirah hanging by the wall is a specialty. There is one shelf made of bamboo for keeping articles.

He used to sit on simple palm leaf mats. His office was also nearby. Next to him, his secretary Mahadev Desai or Pyarelal or someone else who would assist him used to sit. The visitors also had to sit on the ground. In Gandhiji's office hut a telephone installed at behest of the then Viceroy of is also displayed. Gandhiji's correspondence went on increasing. Naturally, one Secretariat committee was formed to help him. Mahadev Desai was its chief. Others were Pyarelalji and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur. More people used to help whenever needed. Replies to all the letters were invariably sent, sometimes in detail and sometimes in very brief, according to the importance and of the time.

Prayer was essential for Gandhi's religious experience. Morning and evening prayers became a part of life in *Sevagram*. The place for community prayer should

not be expensive. It should be such that it is freely accessible to all. So Gandhiji created one open space under the sky surrounded by bamboo lining. To keep the place dry and free of mud during the rainy season, it is paved with stones and spread over thick sand. Even today evening prayers are held here daily. After the prayer Gandhiji used to speak his thoughts on the Ashram problems or on some burning problem facing the country, or answer questions.

Another important hut was Parchure Kuti. There was a social worker & Sanskrit Pandit, by name Parchure, but he was somehow afflicted with leprosy disease. In those days people used to shun leprosy patients. Therefore, Parchure was thinking of committing suicide. He came to Gandhiji. Gandhiji himself started nursing and cleaning his wounds. It is in this hut where Gandhiji served the leprosy affected Parchure. Under Gandhiji's instructions Shri Manoharji Diwan devoted his whole life to this cause. He started an institution to serve leprosy patients near Sevagram viz. Dattapur village. Parchure then shifted to Dattapur and lived there till his death.

Then you have Mahadev Kutti: Mahadev Desai was Secretary & very close to Gandhiji. He lived with family near Bapu Kuti in a hut called 'Mahadev Kuti'. Mahadevbhai had good command on English and Gujarati languages. He had a pious character. He died on 15th August, 1942 while in prison with Gandhiji at the Agakhan Palace in Pune. His absence was deeply felt by Gandhiji. There was another hut, called 'Kishore Kuti'. Kishorebhai Mashruwala was scholar and studied Gandhian thought. He acted as a Secretary to Gandhiji for sometime. He was suffering from asthma. Therefore, the hut built for him is more comfortable and free from wetness during rainy season.

3.5 ASHRAM LIFE AND THE RULES

Ashram life of Gandhi was governed by Eleven Vows as a basis of the Ashram Life. Gandhi had formulated them already when he started formally the Satyagraha Ashram in Sabarmathi. Afterwards when he was in Yerawda Jail, Pune, he had been sending week after week explanations of each vow, as a sort of weekly exhortation to his ashramites. All those explanations have been compiled into a booklet called *From Yerwda Mandir*. For details you may read that book. But here some of the salient points may be mentioned.

1) Truth (*Satya*)

Ashram owed its very existence to the pursuit and the attempted practice of Truth. Devotion to this Truth was the sole justification for its existence. So Gandhi said to the Ashramites: All our activities should be centred in Truth. without Truth it is impossible to observe any principles or rules in life. Generally speaking, observation of the law of Truth is understood merely to mean that we must speak the truth. But Gandhi understands the word *Satya* or Truth in a much wider sense. There should be Truth in thought, Truth in speech, and Truth in action. It should be practiced with single-minded devotion (*abhyasa*) and indifference to all other interests in life (*vairagya*.)

Even in spite of such devotion, what appears as truth to one person may often appear as untruth to another person. But that need not worry the seeker. Where there is honest effort, it will be realized that what appear to be different truths are like the countless and apparently different leaves of the same tree.

God Himself appears to different individuals in different aspects. Yet He is one. Hence there is nothing wrong in every man following Truth according to his lights. Indeed it is his duty to do so. Even if there is a mistake on the part of any one so following Truth, it will be automatically set right, when there is only *tapas* — self-suffering, and no trace of self-interest, there is no problem. It is this that Gandhi succinctly put in the distinction between Absolute Truth and the Relative Truth.

2) Non-violence (*Ahimsa*)

Ahimsa is not simply abstaining from inflicting injury on others. Not to hurt any living thing is no doubt a part of ahimsa. But it is its least expression. More than that, it implies abstaining from every evil thought, from undue haste, from lying, from hatred, from wishing ill to anybody. Positively it is love for all.

Such a wider meaning of ahimsa flows from the meaning of truth itself. Given the distinction between Absolute Truth, Gandhi now says, it is impossible for us to realize perfect Truth, to see face to face Truth which is eternal so long as we are imprisoned in this mortal frame of this ephemeral body. If we regard even those who do harm to us as our kith and kin, we will make them to realize the kinship, only by voluntarily taking suffering on ourselves for vindicating what we perceive as truth, rather than punishing others for holding a different perception of truth. This is exactly what is called the path of ahimsa. It may entail continuous suffering and the cultivating of endless patience. But if we persevere in this path of self-suffering, the enemy is bound in the end to turn away from his evil ways. Our peace of mind increases in spite of suffering; we become braver and more enterprising; we understand more clearly the difference between what is everlasting and what is not; we learn how to distinguish between what is our duty and what is not. Our pride melts away, and we become humble. Our worldly attachment diminishes, and the evil within us diminishes from day to day.

It is true that it is impossible to have a total non-violence. In the place where we stand there are millions of micro-organisms to whom the place belongs, and who are hurt by our presence there. So what is required is to give up all attachment to our body. Our body does not belong to us. While it lasts, we must use it as a trust handed over to our charge. Treating in this way the things of the flesh, we may one day expect to become free from the burden of the body. Realizing the limitations of the flesh, we must strive day by day towards the ideal with what strength we have in us.

3) Chastity (*Brahmacharya*)

Granted that realization of Truth requires utter selflessness, then self-gratification through marriage is untenable for one who wants to pursue after Truth. Granted that Ahimsa means Universal Love, it is impossible to fulfill the vow if a man gives his love to one woman, or a woman to one man. As a faithful wife must be prepared to sacrifice her all for the sake of her husband, and a faithful husband for the sake of his wife, it is clear that such persons cannot rise to the height of Universal Love, or look upon all humankind as kith and kin. Hence, one who would obey the law of ahimsa cannot marry, not to speak of gratification outside the marital bond.

Then the question may arise cannot people who are already married attain Truth and Nonviolence? Gandhi suggests a way out for them. If they think of each other as brother and sister, they are freed for universal service. Their love becomes free from the impurity of lust and so grows stronger. The thought of all the women in the world as his sisters, mothers or daughters will at once ennoble a man and snap his chains.

Brahmacharya must be observed in thought, word and deed. If one controls his body, but is nursing evil thoughts in his mind, it is not only a vain effort but also harmful to suppress the body. So while the body is subject to our control, we must put forth a constant endeavour to bring the mind under control. Again, Brahmacharya does not mean for Gandhi mere control of animal passion, but control of all the organs of sense. He who attempts to control only one organ, and allows all the others free play, is bound to find his effort futile. To hear suggestive stories with the ears, to see suggestive sights with the eyes, to taste stimulating food with the tongue, to touch exciting things with the hands, and then at the same time to expect to control the only remaining organ is like putting one's hands in the fire, and expecting to escape being burnt. Perhaps the palate is the chief culprit to be controlled. That is why Gandhi made control of the palate as a separate vow. Gandhi reiterates it by the root meaning of brahmacharya. If the whole (charya) 'course of conduct' is to be adapted to 'the search of Brahma', i.e. Truth, then control of all the senses, not merely sexual aspect, is necessary for fulfilling this vow.

4) Control of Palate

Control of the palate is very closely connected with the observance of *brahmacharya*. Gandhi elevated it to the rank of an independent observance in the Satyagraha Ashram though it is not included in the traditional list of Mahavratas. For, he says that he found from experience that the observance of celibacy becomes comparatively easy, if one acquires mastery over the palate. Food has to be taken as we take medicine. Just as medicine is taken whether it is palatable or not, and in too small a dose. So too food must be taken not for its pleasant taste, neither in large quantities. Even putting salt in one's food, in order to increase the taste or modify its flavor was forbidden for the ashramites. So the ashram gave up many things that people we have been enjoying, as they are not needed for nutrition. One must resolutely avoid that food which gives mere pleasures. The Ashram kitchen cooked only such food as helps us to keep the body a fit instrument for service

Parents, out of false affection, give their children a variety of foods, ruin their constitutions, and create in them artificial tastes. When they grow up, they have diseased bodies and perverted tastes. The evil consequences of this early indulgence dog us at every step; we waste much money and fall an easy prey to the medicine man. The body is injured every time that one over-eats, and the injury can be partially repaired only by fasting.

5) Non-Stealing

Ordinarily we think of theft only as taking things belonging to another without his knowledge and his permission. But Gandhi says that it is theft to take anything belonging to another without his permission, even if it be with his knowledge. It is equally theft to take something from another even with his

permission if we have no real need of it. Gandhi's meaning of stealing goes much further so as to cover it as theft to take even what belongs to ourselves, if not really needed. If a father, for example, eats something secretly, keeping his children in the dark about it, more than necessary, and just for the same of taste, he is according to Gandhi committing the act of stealing.

We are not always aware of our real 'needs, and most of us improperly multiply our wants, and thus unconsciously make thieves of ourselves. If we devote some thought to the subject, we shall find that we can get rid of quite a number of our wants. One who follows the observance of Non-stealing will bring about a progressive reduction of his own wants. Much of the distressing poverty in this world has arisen out of breaches of the principle of Non-stealing.

Apart from the external or physical theft, Gandhi points to another kind of theft subtler and far more degrading to the human spirit. It is theft mentally to desire acquisition of anything belonging to others, or to cast a greedy eye on it, or if one egotistically claims to have originated some good idea, which, really speaking, did not originate with him.

6) **Non-possession**

Non-possession is allied to Non-stealing. It demands one not to have private property; nor storing things for the future. God never creates more than what is strictly needed for the moment. If therefore we repose faith in His providence, we should rest assured, that He will give us every day our daily bread, meaning everything that we require. The rich having superfluous store of things which they do not need is indeed the cause of the millions starving to death for want of sustenance. If each retained possession only of what he needed, no one would be in want, and all would live in contentment. So the rich should take the initiative in dispossession with a view to a universal diffusion of the spirit of contentment. If only they keep their own property within moderate limits, the starving will easily be fed.

Perfect fulfillment of the ideal of Non-possession requires that man should, like the birds, have no roof over his head, no clothing and no stock of food for the morrow. Gandhi agrees that it is impossible for ordinary seekers to follow it. But we must keep the ideal constantly in view, and in the light thereof, critically examine our possessions, and try to reduce them. This alone promotes real happiness and contentment, and increases the capacity for service. Civilization, in the real sense of the term, consists in the deliberate and voluntary reduction of wants, not in their multiplication. If we possess things the necessity for which cannot be proved then you tempt our neighbours to thieve.

In the opinion of Gandhi our body too is a possession. So the best way of observing the vow of non-possession is to have a total renunciation of it by using the body for the purposes of service. We eat and drink, sleep and wake, for service alone.

The vow of Non-possession is to be practiced not only with reference to things. But it is applicable to thoughts, as well. So we need not fill our brain with useless knowledge, thoughts which turn us away from God, or do not turn us towards Him.

7) Fearlessness

Gandhi during his long tours throughout India understood that people were seized with a paralyzing fear. Political situation also was a main reason for such a fear. So to remove it from the heart of the people he included Fearlessness also as a vow. It primarily meant freedom from all external fear, fear of disease, bodily injury and death, of dispossession, of losing one's nearest and dearest, of losing reputation or giving offence, and so on. The easiest way to be fearless is to cultivate non-attachment to body. And he set the example of Harishchandra. Just he did, the seeker after Truth should be ready to sacrifice his all in the quest of Truth. Then fearlessness will automatically flow.

Fearlessness means only giving up all external fears. But we must rightly fear the internal foes like the animal passion and anger. Once we have conquered these traitors within the camp, the external fears will automatically vanish. All fears revolve round the body as the centre. So the best way to cultivate fearlessness is to get rid of attachment for the body, and attachment for wealth, for family and for the body. Wealth, family and body will be there, just the same; we have only to change our attitude towards them. All these are not ours, but God's. Nothing whatever in this world is ours. So you may 'enjoy the things of the earth, but by renouncing them.'

8) Removal of Untouchability

Untouchability, meaning pollution by the touch of certain persons by reason of their birth is an excrescence of Hinduism. It is wrong to treat certain human beings as untouchables from birth. A mother may be 'untouchable' so long as she has not washed her hands after cleaning up her child's mess. But Bhangis, Dhedhs, Chamars are involved in cleaning work and so for that reason they are not to be contemptuously looked down. They must only be taught to bathe after their cleaning work. Hence it is the bounden duty of every Hindu to combat it. Every Hindu, therefore, who considers it a sin, should atone for it by associating with untouchables in a spirit of love and service, deeming himself purified by such acts, redressing their grievances, helping them patiently to overcome ignorance and other evils due to the slavery of ages, and inspiring other Hindus to do likewise.

9) Bread Labour

First by quoting sacred writings like the *Gita* and the Bible, Gandhi brings out the need of sweating to eat. Then he says reason also leads to the same conclusion. A millionaire cannot carry on for long, and will soon get tired of his life, if he rolls in his bed all day long, and is even helped to his food. He therefore induces hunger by exercise, and helps himself to the food he eats. Now, why should not that exercise be in some shape or form of productive. That is precisely Bread labour. No one asks the cultivator to take breathing exercise or to work his muscles. And more than nine tenths of humanity lives by tilling the soil. How much happier, and more peaceful would the world become, if the remaining tenth followed the example of the overwhelming majority at least to the extent of labouring enough for their food!

If such people begin to work, then many hardships, connected with agriculture, would be easily redressed. Again unpleasant distinctions of rank would be abolished. The world-wide conflict between capital and labour will be resolved. The rich would still be there, but they would deem themselves only trustees of their property and would use it mainly in the public interest.

Bread labour need not be related with agriculture alone. Those who are not in a position to take to it, can therefore spin or weave, or take up carpentry or smithery. Every one must be his own scavenger. Evacuation is as necessary as eating; and the best thing would be for every one to dispose of his own waste. Scavenging, thus intelligently taken up, will help one to a true appreciation of the equality of man.

10) Equality of Religions

It is an important virtue to be practiced in a multi-religious society, like India. It only means a follower of a religion should be able to respect the other religions as useful to its followers. You will learn more about this vow in the next unit.

11) *Swadeshi*

Swadeshi simply means dedicating oneself to the service of his immediate neighbours. This does not mean disservice to those who are far away, but rather the contrary. ‘As with the individual, so with the universe’ is an unfailing principle, which we would do well to lay to heart. On the other hand, a man who allows himself to be lured by ‘the distant scene,’ and runs to the ends of the earth for service, is not only foiled in his ambition, but also fails in his duty towards his neighbours. Take a concrete instance. In the particular place where I live, I have certain persons as my neighbours, some relations and dependents. Naturally, they all feel, as they have a right to, that they have a claim on me, and look to me for help and support. Suppose now I leave them all at once, and set out to serve people in a distant place. My decision would throw my little world of neighbours and dependents out of gear, while my gratuitous knight-errantry would, more likely than not, disturb the atmosphere in the new place.

There may be an occasion for a votary of *Swadeshi* to sacrifice his family at the altar of universal service. Such an act of willing immolation will then constitute the highest service rendered to the family. “Whosoever saveth his life shall lose it, and whosoever loseth his life for the Lord’s sake shall find it” holds good for the family group no less than for the individual. Take another instance. Supposing there is an out-break of plague in my village, and in trying to serve the victims of the epidemic, I, my wife and children and all the rest of my family are wiped out of existence; then in inducing those dearest and nearest to join me, I will not have acted as the destroyer of my family, but on the contrary as its truest friend. In *Swadeshi* there is no room for selfishness; or if there is selfishness in it, it is of the highest type, which is not different from the highest altruism. *Swadeshi* in its purest form is the acme of universal service.

It was by following this line of argument, that Gandhi hit upon *Khadi* as the necessary application to Indian society. the teeming millions of India and the

crores of our semi-starved countrymen can live by the universalizing of *Khadi* or the spinning-wheel alone. Let no one suppose, that the practice of *Swadeshi* through *Khadi* would harm the foreign or Indian mill-owners. Wearing *Khadi* is the first indispensable step. One should not stop with wearing *Khadi*. One must carefully study one’s environment, and try to help his neighbours wherever possible, by giving preference to local manufactures, even if they are of an inferior grade or dearer in price than things manufactured elsewhere without of course nurturing hatred to Multi National Corporations.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Explain the meaning of Ashram and how does it contribute to religious life?

2) Mention the major ashrams founded by Gandhi?

3) State the most basic of Gandhi’s vows ?

4) Specify the most important vow for the Indian society to bring about a classless society?

3.6 LET US SUM UP

From the foregoing it is clear Gandhi had a deep religious consciousness with far reaching consequences on one’s transformation and transformation of society and of environment. It is high time that we realized the importance of Gandhi’s religious experience and made it our own. The ashram life may be too big an ideal for us.

But if we can set that as an ideal and try our best to go nearer and nearer to it, we may be able to find an alternative to the malaise of today’s civilization. The people who are in the mad rush today, increasing their wants senselessly suppose that they are enhancing their importance and real knowledge. A day will come when they will exclaim, “What have we been doing?” Also the many civilizations have risen one after another, flourished, declined and disappeared and in spite of their big boast of human progress If the moral height of humankind hasn’t increased even an inch, then we cannot but exclaim: To what end all this? What’s the purpose? This is the basic question Jesus, Buddha, Prophet Mohammed raised and gave answers each in his own way. In our times, Gandhi has asked the same question and tried to put his answer in the form of ashram life. Shall we at least set our eyes on that ideal and desire to strive after it in our own limited way?

3.7 KEY WORDS

“Shravana Pitribhakti, Harichandra Story, confession of his sins , Anekantavada, Rai Chandbai, Essence of Religion, Plurality of religions, ‘Lead Kindly Light’ Supreme exemplar of Satyagraha, ‘the kingdom of God’ Sanatani Hindu, Daridranarayana, ashram, Unto This Last, Tolstoy Farm, Sabarmathi Ashram, Sevagram, Adi Nivas, Meera ben, Parchure Kutu, From Yerwda Mandir, Abhyasa, Vairagya, Tapas, Brahmacharya

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