

# QUINTESENCE OF GANDHIAN IDEOLOGY AND ITS PERENNIAL RELEVANCE

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**Research Abstract :** Gandhian Ideology was, in fact, a perfect amalgamation of the East and the West. The ideas propounded by the masters like Ruskin, Tolstoy and Thoreau gave organic unity to the long maturing ideas in Gandhiji's mind but Gandhiji responded to the inspiration that came from the West from the deep well of India's wisdom. His faith in the essential verity of the faith of his birth gave him the desired impetus and prompted him to give a practical shape to his dreams and visions. Gandhiji was a strange combination of a mystic, moralist, politician, reformer and practical idealist who gave the Indian people the weapons to carry on their fight, weapons that guaranteed eventful victory. His Hinduism was Hinduism in all its pristine purity, re-born and practised under modern conditions. His belief in the inexorable law of *Karma*, his faith in the postulate of *Vasudhaiv Kutumbkam*, his doctrine of *Ahimsa*, his idea of *Swaraj*, a utopian state to be won by non-violence, in which all religions would be treated equally and all the communities would enjoy equal rights and all privileges - are in fact as relevant today as they were during his lifetime, if not more. The modern world is today vexed with intolerance, weary with wars, extremism and consistent destruction. Gandhian postulates of harmonious co-existence and mutual respect, his message of the power of truth and universal brotherhood, his integrated approach to all round development have even more relevance today than ever before. The present research paper seeks to analyze the basic precepts of Gandhian ideology and also to point out that what we know as 'Gandhism' is perhaps the only solution to the pestering problems of the world today that are gnawing into the very vitals of the so called 'civilized' society'.

**Keywords:** Ruskin, Tolstoy, Thoreau

Gandhi's entry into the Indian independence struggle brought about a mighty upheaval of the nation. From a callow young Indian who wore frock coats and top hats and nourished a long-cherished ambition of becoming a barrister, Gandhi changed himself into not merely, "a politician or a reformer, not a philosopher or a moralist but someone composed of them all..." (Radhakrishnan 2). In between these two positions there was also a time when Gandhi severely chided for almost everything Western. He condemned the civilization of the West calling it Satanic, the Golden Fleece. He was forced to opine that no interaction was possible between India and the West – "Our geography is different, our history is different, our ways of living are different" (Narasimhaiah 120). But soon came a realization that human nature is essentially the same everywhere. Then he resiled from extreme position and showed a positive eagerness to profit from the light that came from the West. He decided to open his doors and windows for the breezy freshness of the thoughts and philosophies of the West.

It was in March 1904 that Gandhi discovered *Unto This Last* – an essay on economy by Ruskin. The book gave an organic unity to the long maturing ideas in Gandhi's mind. He translated the essay into Gujrati in 1908 under the title 'Sarvodaya' (i.e. well-being of all). Ruskin was among the first of the modern thinkers who brought emotions and ethics into the dismal science of economics. Endowed with a passion for reforming what he considered his 'blind and wandering fellow men', with his moral fervour, his high aims, his unselfishness, his keen insight and wisdom, Ruskin traced all the ills of the English society to the pillage of the labourers. The profit, Ruskin averred, is legitimate only if it can be made by not harming the greater good of society. Ruskin borrowed the title of the book from Matthew's Gospel, chapter 20. He had chosen the title

because the parable specifically undermines conventional attitudes about wages and suggests the need for an ethical dimension in economic transactions. Ruskin's discussion of wealth as power raised an issue that economists usually do not touch upon – the moral obligations of wealth. He advocated filial loyalty from the employee and fatherly benevolence from the master. The influence of this book on Gandhi was marvellous. It clung to him; he decided to do everything possible to realize the dream and the result was the Phoenix Settlement in South Africa – almost a rematerialization of St. George's Guild, which Ruskin had founded earlier in England. Ruskin put a lot of emphasis on the personal character of the reformer and just like him Gandhi also became a staunch believer of the fact that the task of reforming ought to begin with the reformer's own self.

When Gandhi was still a young protester in South Africa, when he was passing through a severe crisis of scepticism and doubt, he happened to read Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is within You*. This book overwhelmed him and left an abiding impression. Tolstoy has, here, vehemently pleaded for the dissolution of armed forces and for the ownership of the land by the peasantry. He had borrowed the title of his book from Luke 17:21 and advocated the principle of non-resistance as taught by Jesus. Tolstoy's prescription for all the woes and ills of society was non-violence. He felt that mechanization threatened to substitute the rhythm of nature by the pulsing of machines. Just like Ruskin, Tolstoy also lived nobly and simply. Though born a Count who inherited huge property of several states with a whole train of subordinates, he renounced all the pleasures and engaged himself to the working for others. In 1908, he wrote *A Letter to a Hindu* which outlined the notion that for the native Indians the only possible way to overthrow the yoke of the British empire was to use love as weapon through passive resistance. With Tolstoy's permission, Gandhi republished the letter in Gujrati. It was certainly the inspiration that came from Tolstoy that made Gandhi organize nationwide non-violent strikes and protests during the years from 1918 to 1947. The stimulus for Gandhi's theory of trusteeship also came from Ruskin and Tolstoy. The theory is derived from three basis concepts of Gandhian philosophy – Non violence, Swaraj and equality which are all interlinked with one another.

Why do men live mean and sneaking lives, lives of quiet desperation? Is it really necessary? Why do men degenerate ever? What is the nature of the luxury that enervates and destroys nations? Have we become slaves to a mediocre existence? Is there no way out, no remedy for the ills, no medicine for the disease? – These and several other similar questions drove Thoreau to leave his house and to go to live in the Walden forest. It was certainly not an act of escapism but an attempt to “to drive life to a corner and suck the marrow out of it, to see what it is like to live according to the dictates of one's conscience and then proclaim the results to the world.” (Narasimhaiah 133) In his romantic memoir *Walden* there is not even a tinge of self-pity or nostalgia but a saucy, cheery, triumphant note. On the blurb of the book Thoreau explicitly asserted that it was not his intention to write an ode to dejection but to shout his views loud and clear like a chanticleer in the morning, to wake his neighbours from their deep slumber of mediocrity and ignorance. It was his “attempt at acquisition of a new dimension, the extension of the inner frontier, the enrichment of the life of the mind and the soul.” (Narasimhaiah 141) Gandhiji himself confessed his debt to Thoreau more than once. Though when he read Thoreau in 1907, he was already busy in his struggle of passive resistance against injustice in South Africa. Thoreau's essay *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*, however, left an indelible impression upon him. He translated a portion of the essay for the readers of his paper *Indian Opinion*, adopted some of the ideas and later recommended that all his supporters in Indian independence struggle read the treatise. In fact the name for his movement came from the essay. Gandhi studied *Walden* and according to his own testimony, derived “a great pleasure and equal profit” (Joshi 77) Thoreau's ideas about man's relation to nature, man's dilemma in society and man's capacity for elevating his spirit helped Gandhi a lot and made a significant contribution in the formation of what is known as Gandhian philosophy. Like Thoreau Gandhi was also opposed to the technological civilization because after sometime technology starts riding upon us instead of the other way round.

No one, thus, can gainsay the significance of Ruskin, Tolstoy and Thoreau in the life of Gandhi but at the same time, one would have to point out the fact that all these three writers suffered from a terrible shortcoming i.e. their desire for action was not commensurate with the intensity of their thoughts. Though Ruskin tried to translate his vision into practical reality through St. George's Guild, it was in a state of quandary in Ruskin's own life time. Though his treatises on political economy and sociology stand at par with Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy, he was not meant to start a movement. He certainly could not help his insanity in later life and the fact remains that his book *Unto This Last* also could leave a potent effect on the socialist movement only after about half a century of his death. In the same way Tolstoy also exhorted his countrymen to rise up

against the capitalists but he himself could not be the leader of the revolution – that was reserved for Lenin. Tolstoy's work remained confined to protests, passionate addresses and speeches at peace-conferences. Moreover, the revolution that took place was not quite the one that Tolstoy would have liked. Among the three writers under consideration, it was only Thoreau who evinced a passionate desire for action but he never claimed to reform the world. His obligations were primarily to his own self. Gandhi, on the other hand, successfully turned his dreams and visions into practical and concrete reality. This strangest combination of a mystic, saint, moralist, politician, reformer and practical idealist gave the Indian people the weapons wherewith to carry on their fight, weapons that guaranteed eventful victory and finally won it for his motherland during his own life-time.

The question that now arises is- what was it in Gandhi that made him go farther than his English, Russian and American inspirers. What were the special factors that made Gandhi succeed, where the others were not able to. The answer lies in the fact that Gandhi responded to the inspirations that came from the West from the deep well of India's wisdom and regarded action as the central sustaining principle of the universe. The *Gita* declares that one who performs his duties by serving his fellow men, worships the Lord and attains the highest perfection. "It is an inspiring call for a dedicated life. It teaches an art of living by which even the humblest of daily tasks are ennobled and spiritualized." (Lal 1) In the book the Mahayogi Krishna elaborates to Arjun that no one has attained his goals without action. Gandhi was a true devotee of the *Gita* and he staunchly believed in the inexorable law of *Karma*. This faith in the essential verity of the faith of his birth gave him the desired impetus and prompted him to translate his thoughts into action.

One pregnant postulate from Sanskrit literature was engraved on the memory of the young Gandhi and his whole life had been consecrated to the ideal expressed in it:

**"Udarcharitanam tu vasudhaiva kutumbakam."** (Mahopanishad: 4/71)

The crux of this sloka is that men of noble minds regard the whole world as their family. A sanatani Hindu as he was, Gandhi left practically no aspect of Hindu life or conduct untouched by his searching survey. His Hinduism was, in fact, "Hinduism of old in all its pristine purity, reborn and practised under modern conditions." (Kumarappa vii) His novel method of *Satyagraha* was nothing else but an extension and application of the fundamental Hindu doctrine of '*Ahimsa*' to all national and international problems. His idea of '*Swaraj*' - a utopian state to be won by non-violence, in which all religions would be treated equally and all the communities would enjoy equal rights and privileges – was only an extension, in political terms, of the Hindu principle- '*Ekam sad, viprah bahudha vadanti*' (*Rigveda*: 6/4/12) – (i.e. Truth is one: the scholars, however, assign it different names) and also of the precept—

**"Sarvey bhavantu sukhinah, sarvey santu niramayah,  
Sarvey bhadrani pashyantu, ma kashchid dukhabhagbhavet."** (Shantipatha)

(i.e. All should be happy and healthy. All should see welfare all around. No one should be afflicted with sorrow or woe).

Gandhi's great movement in the concern of untouchability removal was, in fact, an attempt on his part, directed towards restoration (in its original purity) of *Varnashrama Dharma*. In his view this '*Ashrama-Vyavastha*' was the greatest communism on earth. He, said B. Pattabhisitaramayya, "... (had) evolved a new synthesis in his own life and... (had) combined in himself the four *Varnas* and the four *ashramas* of Hindu society. He (fulfilled) the role of a *Brahman* and ... (was) the lawgiver, he...(was) *Kshatriya* and ... (was) the Chief Constable of India. As a *Vaishya* he... (mobilized) the wealth of the country and as *Sudra* he ... produced food and raiment... And then although a *Grihastha*, he... (led) a life of celibacy like a *Brahmachari*, ... (served) mankind along with his wife like a *Vanaprasthi* and ... (was) finally a true *Sannyasi*, having given up his all in his ministry to mankind." (Pattabhisitaramayya 163). It was Gandhiji's avowed aim to restore the culture of the nation and charge it with all that is worth copying in modern life. He wanted that the original character of Indian civilization must be preserved at all costs, hence his insistence upon the revival of the spinning-wheel, khadi, cow-protection, fasts, penances and his life of renunciation. *Vairagya* (detachment), *Tapasya* (asceticism), *Asteya* (non-stealing), *Aparigraha* (non-possession) and so on, are all aspects of Hinduism at its best and Gandhi embodied all of them in his personality and through his conduct preached their value to the whole world.

Gandhi succeeded in his efforts because India had the requisite religious background for the extension and implementation of the great doctrine which aims at releasing the divinity in man. What he said was nothing new to the Indians. A true incarnation of Hindu spirituality that he was, in the direct line of descent from the ancient *Rishis*, what Gandhi did was merely revive India's native culture, reinterpret the eternal truths of Hinduism and apply them in a marvellously original manner to the conditions of the modern world. "What Gandhi did was to invoke... (the mythical) imagination, to tap those hidden reservoirs of psychic energy and make them flow in our veins." (Narasimhaiah 145)

After Gandhiji's assassination on 30<sup>th</sup> Jan, 1948, *London Chronicle*, while paying tribute to this great *Sthitapragya* – (i.e. one who subdued his passions in selfless pursuit of the Divine) and *Karmayogi* (i.e. one who did his duty irrespective of pleasure and pain), remarked that no country but India and no religion but Hinduism could have produced a man like Gandhi. Beauty of Hinduism lies in its all-embracing inclusiveness. "There is in Hinduism room enough for Jesus, as there is for Mohammad, Zoroaster and Moses" (Gandhi). Gandhi, the greatest Hindu ever born, a man who was absolutely true to the ideals, doctrines and philosophy of this great religion, could, therefore, strike a chord in every one's soul, could become a saint "to the Mohammedan no less than to the Hindu," (Brown) and could also teach the Christians how to make the principles of Christ really operative in the affairs of man. Though a sage belonging to an essentially contemplative country, he accomplished the remarkable feat of teaching action to the action-oriented West and has left behind a philosophy that has been universally compelling and has now become an enduring legacy for all the peace studies and protest movements around the world. "Gandhi", to borrow the words of John Haynes Holmes, "is great among all the greats of ages past. He is great with Alfred, Wallace, Washington, Kosciusko, Lafayette, as a national leader. He is great with Clarkson, Wilberforce, Garrison, Lincoln, as an emancipator of the enslaved. He holds his place with Lao-tse, Buddha, Zoroaster, Jesus, as one of the supreme religious prophets of all times." (Holmes 85)

The question that raises its suspicious head in the minds of many is-whether what we know as 'Gandhism' has lost its authority, significance and practicability. The fact, however, is that in this world, vexed with terrorism and intolerance, weary with wars, extremism and consistent destruction as it is, Gandhian postulates of harmonious coexistence and mutual respect, his message of the power of truth and universal brotherhood, have even more relevance than they have ever had before. The veracity of the assertion is borne out by the fact that people of the modern arena too, irrespective of the confines of nationality, time-period or field of action – be it the Tibetan leader Dalai Lama or Japanese Buddhist philosopher Daisaku Ikeda, South African cleric and theologian Desmond Tutu or one of the greatest physicists of all times Albert Einstein, Nelson Mandela or the 44<sup>th</sup> President of U.S.A. Barack Obama, Burmese democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi or African folk singer and human rights activist Joan Baez, American social civil rights activist Cesar Chavez or environmental activist Joanna Macy, the non-violent Palestine leader Mubarak Awad or the American business magnate Steve Jobs (Oh! the list is almost endless!!!)- people from almost everywhere, all over the globe, besides millions of native Indians, have vouched for their indebtedness to Gandhiji and have showered boundless eulogies on this great Indian Mahatma. Gandhian ideology is perhaps the only panacea for all the monstrous evils besetting us, for all the ills that are gnawing into the very vitals of our so called 'civilized' society.

"If humanity is to progress, Gandhi is inescapable. He lived, thought and acted, inspired by the vision of humanity evolving toward a world of peace and harmony. We may ignore Gandhi at our own risk." (King)

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