

**Gandhi, His worldview and the Hindu Philosophical Tradition:
Contextualizing Truth, *Satyagraha* and Non-Violence**

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Abstract

This paper is an engagement with the sources of morality in Gandhi's worldview. It tries to trace the genesis of the conceptual categories of Gandhi's worldview and the structures of meaning involved in it. It categorically accentuates the role of Ancient Hindu philosophical tradition as a source of derivation for Gandhi. His worldview sets a unique template in logically integrating the traditional values to design a pragmatic life philosophy. The conceptual categories *inter alia* truth, non violence, *satyagraha*, *sarvodaya* and trusteeship could be understood in its etymological connection with different sources of Ancient Hindu Tradition. Besides exploring the literary sources that shaped young Gandhi's conceptual universe, the paper navigates the sacrosanct conceptual resources of *Vedas*, *Upanishads* and other sources of Hindu philosophical tradition and its sister religions that had had imprint on Gandhi's articulation of Truth, *Satyagraha* and *Ahimsa*.

Key words: Truth, Satyagraha, Non-Violence, Hindu Philosophical Tradition

Introduction

There are not many people in the World as widely rhapsodized about as Gandhi. Gandhi is being figured out as 'pacifist, satyagrahi, nationalist, anti-colonial, Luddite, Hindu, moralist, vegetarian, Scientist' (Visvanathan, 2006). The writings on Gandhi appear as a smorgasbord of interpretations based on Gandhi's own writings, events pertaining to national freedom movement and other contemporary literatures studied with historical approach as well as hermeneutical exercise. Gandhi's contribution is enormous across wide range of fields making it viable for readers to discover him in newer dimensions. This is apparently visible across disciplines and these studies make Gandhi appear as more than a cult figure. It is appropriate to believe that scholars have always found a new way of inventing Gandhi in a new context with renewed vigour. On many grounds, the increasing moral crisis and the unsteady collective consciousness of our time call for a moral and humane solution. Amid all

these, many claim the ideals of Gandhi would be a suitable remedy for our collective crisis. In the light of contemporary world view, starting from the issue of peace and public hygiene to that of non violence and ecological concern, we may always attribute an element of resonance of Gandhi in the socio political discourse of our time. The compelling speculation on Gandhian ideas as a plausible remedy for collective humanitarian crisis validates the reading of Gandhi in the 21st century.

Contextualizing the root of Traditional values in Gandhi

The moment we immerse in the writing on and about Gandhi, essentially the normative elements *inter alia* morality, spirituality and other traditional values creep into the context. It is worth mentioning that Gandhi was as pragmatic as normative in making the best utilization of values in the real world. The elements pertaining to morality, spirituality and tradition had been ubiquitous throughout all of Gandhi's writings. He went onto the extent of explicitly claiming to have the desire for spiritualizing politics and economics (Kesavulu, 2004). The lasting impression of normative elements in Gandhi is evident throughout. His conceptualizations like non violence, truth, satyagraha, trusteeship and sarvodaya are reflective of the moral and spiritual dimension of this thought. Not merely in his conceptual universe and writings, but, even in his day to day activities, Gandhi dared to inculcate the normative codes. Moreover, the articulation of the political issues and their solutions in Gandhi had definite impact of the moral and the traditional.

This article is an attempt to trace the sources of moral concepts in Gandhi and the structures of meaning involved. It is being widely acknowledged that many of the religious traditions and their values have had lasting impression on Gandhi and that his life practices essentially replicated it. However, the specific extent to which the particular traditions influenced his thought is a matter of ongoing debate. In this context, Joseph Doke is said to have remarked, 'I question whether any system of religion can absolutely hold him. His views are too closely allied to Christianity to be entirely Hindu, and too deeply saturated with Hinduism to be called Christian, while his sympathies are so wide and catholic that one would imagine, he has reached a point where the formulae of sects are meaningless' (Kripalini, 1968). This assessment on Gandhi of deriving his ideas from different sources and making a judicious fusion is worthwhile. However, a nuanced reading of Gandhi enables us to believe that by and large, his concepts essentially had an intonation

pitched in the Hindu philosophical tradition, informed in the context of knowledge system of other religious sects. This necessitates a proper understanding of the sources and root in the making of Gandhi. It is in this light that this work seeks to understand the *modus operandi* in Gandhi's attempt of utilizing some of the concepts (more particularly Truth, *Satyagraha* and non-violence) and making a statement of frugality while segregating the influence of Hindu tradition from the one which is Western.

Shaping a lasting Trajectory: Early life Literary Influences on Gandhi

There is hardly a need to tell that Gandhi initially was named Mohan Das Karam Chand Gandhi. The story of becoming the Gandhi we commonly know is a reincarnation of Mohan Das within his own lifespan. However, this understood reincarnation is somehow the outcome of a peculiar evolution of Gandhi set within particular sets of moral guidelines dictated in turn by the early life literary influences. The articulation and application of metaphysical realization into material reality and practical context helped Gandhi in rising above the mundane mortal confinement. This story is one of becoming Mahatma from Mohan Das. It was the story of a 'timid and diffident, mediocre in studies and undistinguished in general' Mohan Das becoming the revered and worshipped Mahatma (Kripalini, 1968). Mahatma in general means 'the great soul', '*maha*' implying great and '*atma*' meaning soul, having its root in Upanishads, used in reference to the Supreme Being, and through communion of Knowledge and Love, of those who become one with him (Rolland, 2018).

The story of an average Mohan Das becoming Mahatma could be deciphered from his own anecdotal narrative recorded in the form of his autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Besides providing the details of his life, his account (Gandhi would rather use the word *atmakatha for autobiography*), also 'Indianized Autobiography' as it carefully avoided the tendency of 'ontological dignity to individuality' in the form of self glorification and presented it in 'morally innocent manner', placing soul at the centre of discussion, which is essentially an element of Hindu philosophical tradition (Parekh, 2006). In it, Gandhi documented all the relevant information from his childhood including the lasting impression that the literary texts of the Hindu philosophical tradition had had. The very fact that he dissociated himself from the western style of autobiography embedded in 'self-assertion', 'self-display' and 'self-glorifications' needs to be attributed to the inculcation of moral values rooted in the Ancient Hindu literary Tradition.

The early life literary influence of Hindu philosophical tradition was possible because of the eclectic spiritual environment in Mohan's family. A reference to his parents in the first chapter of the autobiography is testimony to their unbridled devotion. In Gandhi's own words, his father acquired the religious etiquette of a Hindu devotee, along with the training to read the *Gita* and remember its verses. His mother was an absolute devotee with observance of all religious festivities, daily visiting *Haveli*, the Vaishnava Temple and holding fast on a regular basis with specific focus on the *Chaturmas*(Gandhi, 1940). His mother was of *Pranami Sect*, with an essence of religious harmony and respect for both *Vaishnava* sacred texts as well as Koran of Islam (Parekh, 1997). Moreover, frequent visits of believers of Jainism to their house also exposed young Gandhi to the teachings and codes of Jainism. Within this cultural proximity, Gandhi got the grounding in toleration for all branches of Hinduism and sister religions(Gandhi, 1940). This gave a subtle momentum in shaping the mind of Gandhi with positive outcomes in his later social and political discourse.

In his early years, Gandhi was moved to the core by the lasting impression of *Shravana Pitribhakti Nataka* (a play about Shravana's devotion to his parents) and *Harishchandra*; both these plays falling within the genre of Hindu mythology. Gandhi believed in the story of *Harishchandra*, and in his own admission, he would be inspired by the ideals to follow truth and to go through all the ordeals *Harishchandra* had to undergo(Gandhi, 1940). Similarly, another determining factor in Gandhi's evolution of moral dimension that was to have a lifelong impression on Gandhi was the implantation of *Ramanama* in his mind by his nurse Rambha. *Ramanama* for Gandhi continued to be an infallible belief till the last breath. The belief had been further strengthened with the reading of *Ramayana* and recitation of *Ram Raksha* which left a deep imprint on Gandhi. The performance of *Dohas* (couplets) and *Chopais* (Quatrains) were also equally instrumental in planting the root of Gandhi's deep devotion to the Ramayana(Gandhi, 1940). Gandhi's autobiography also confirms the huge impact that the reading of *Bhagawat* had had on him since childhood, which was further augmented after he had heard Madan Mohan Malvya reading it at a later stage of his life. Gandhi asserts that these literatures brought Gandhi a firm realization that 'morality is the basis of thing, and truth is the substance of all morality'(Gandhi, 1940). It is noteworthy that Gandhi had an aversion towards the *Manusmriti*; it didn't impress him to any extent; rather it confused Gandhi and made him incline somehow towards atheism(Gandhi, 1940).

Thus, the literary tradition of different branches of Hinduism as well as its sister religion laid a strong foundation on Gandhi. Gandhi himself stated that barring Christianity, his childhood had been embedded in the positive cultivation of knowledge based on these traditions. The layer of moral fabric in Gandhi was not an artificial veneer; it had been nurtured since childhood amid an environment of spiritual religiosity, communal harmony and unalloyed devotion. However, the fact that Gandhi didn't have a good impression of Christianity in early life can't be accepted on a face value as the eventual making of the Mahatma was to a large extent the outcome of his proximity to Christianity during his stay in England. A.L. Basham says that Gandhi's reading of Sir Edwin Arnold's work *The Song Celestial* (Translation of Bhagawad Gita), the poem *The Light of Asia* (on the life of Budha) and the Sermon on the Mount inspired him to realize the essence of the verses of Hinduism he had heard in his childhood and he could confirm his faith in the teaching of both the trends (Basham, 2006).

Mahatma, his ideals and the Ancient Hindu Tradition

In reference to Gandhi, Literary giant Rabindranath Tagore quoted the following stanza

“He is the one Luminous, Creator of All, Mahatma,

Always in the hearts of the people enshrined,

Revealed through Love, Intuition, and Thought,

Whoever knows him Immortal becomes...” (from Rolland, 1947)

The stanza above refers to Gandhi as Mahatma. Tagore conferred the title Mahatma upon Gandhi as a tribute to his extraordinary persona, the aura of love, innocence, pure thought and the kernel desire for truth that Gandhi embodies. In a way, Gandhi transcended the elementary confinement of mortals and emancipated himself with the extraordinary qualities that humans generally fail to replicate in most of the occasions.

It is important to note that the making of Gandhi and his relevance in the contemporary world needs to be understood not merely in terms of his contributions to the freedom movement of Indian subcontinent; rather Gandhi's stature as a cult figure is embedded in his world view. His ideas were the foundation of Gandhi's world view and they were in many ways eccentric, novel, nifty and path breaking. Notwithstanding his immediate concern for liberation of the

Indian masses from the yoke of colonialism and its political, economic and cultural exploitation, Gandhi's bigger concern was to deal with the issues in a larger world of reference with implications for Indian masses in the material as well as moral sense. As such, Gandhi's ideas do not merely form a distinct identity; it also embodies a full-fledged worldview (Gaubha, 2016).

Gandhi apprehended a degenerated culture embedded in western, industrialized civilization and modernity as the worst imminent danger for India. Gandhi had been constantly in search for an alternative against the modernity based orientation for bodily pleasure. Rather he was looking for spiritual redemption of human consciousness (Gandhi M., 2009). He accentuated cultural revivalism of Hindu philosophical tradition as the best form of remedy. Gandhi, an ardent believer of Hindu tradition believed that there was a need to redefine the meaning of Dharma to include notions of citizenship, equality, liberty and fraternity (Parel, 2009). Parel views this as Gandhi's attempt to actualize the potential of *Ramayana* and *Bhagavadin* materializing what could be termed as civic humanism.

Gandhi essentially tried to heal a wounded world and he believed he could do this by revisiting many of the concepts of Hindu philosophical traditions, fine tuning them in the context of contemporary times and applying them as effective remedy for the current degeneration of society. Gandhi's widely acknowledged conceptual categories like truth, non-violence, *satyagraha*, *sarvodaya* and trusteeships need to be understood in this line of thought. Thus, it is appropriate to say that Gandhi was addressing a much larger audience with much higher concern than merely addressing the issue of exploitative colonial regime in India and the aspiration for political freedom.

Gandhi, Truth and Satyagraha

Consideration for truth encapsulates the core of Gandhi's life experiment and his world view. In his own admission, Gandhi considers experiments with truth as his search for personal liberation. Truth for Gandhi had the same kind of significance that can be attributed only to the ultimate reality, what he describes in the capitalized 'Absolute Truth' (Ambler, 1989). His concept of truth approaches ultimate reality, the *Brahman* of *Advaita* Philosophy, which believes in single entity underlying all things (Basham, 2006).

As discussed earlier, Gandhi's firm belief in and adherence to the principle of truth had been rooted in his love for the righteous behaviour of *Raja Harishchandra*; Gandhi noted he

would go through all the ordeals that *Harishchandra* had undertake for holding onto truth (Gandhi M. , 1940). Gandhi himself confessed that his familiarity with *Raja Harishchandra*, *Shravana Pitribhakti Nataka*, *Ramayana* and *Bhagawad Gita* were at the root of his realization of morality; Gandhi stated, ‘morality is the basis of things and truth is the substance of all morality’ (Gandhi, 1940).

It is worth mentioning that Truth in Indian context is understood as *Satya*, which is rooted in Vedic literature. However, in Vedic texts the word *Rta* appears as the core of *Satya*, which is being understood as ‘binding truth’. *Rta* here implies ‘law’ or ‘cosmic law’ with an existential obligation which binds man, God and world together in a direct way (Rothermund, 2017). This implies the binding nature of truth from both physical and metaphysical perspective of epistemology. Gandhi took upon himself this binding nature of truth in the moral and material sense. On the other hand, from another perspective, *Satya* comes from the word *Sat*, meaning ‘to exist’ and as such in Gandhi’s opinion *Satya* is not only existent, but also true (Ramchiary, 2013). Truth had naturally been a driving force for Gandhi and it held wide range of connotations for him. Although discussion of truth is to be found in different genre of literatures across the globe, it is appropriate to say that Gandhi’s articulation of truth as factual truth, truthful speech, honesty and the resolute carrying out of vows, promises and plans as well as its understanding as ultimate reality has to be essentially counted as being cultivated in Indian philosophical tradition (Basham, 2006). Gandhi had been massively influenced by the tradition of *Satya* nurtured by the heretical schools of Indian Philosophical tradition like Buddhism, Jainism and Tantrism.

Gandhi takes the regime of truth to another level with his articulation of Satyagraha. Satyagraha for him is civil insistence on or tenacity in the pursuit of truth, aimed to penetrate the barriers of prejudice, ill-will, dogmatism, self-righteousness, and selfishness, and to reach out to and activate the soul of the opponent (Parekh, 1997). It is a synthesis of ‘method of action’ and ‘method of inquiry’ (Bajpai, 2007). It activates the soul and mobilizes the head and heart of individuals and creates mutually conducive climate for peaceful resolution of conflict in the direction of truth. Against brute force, it is the force of love which is same as the force of soul (*atmabal*) or truth (Gandhi, 1940). It is appropriate to note that the doctrine of soul force (*atmabal*) is derived from the Indian conceptions of *punya* or spiritual merit, and *tejas*, the supernatural power accumulated from asceticism and meditation (Basham, 2006). By taking a philosophical turn, Gandhi tries to make a judicious combination of the elements,

Rta, *Satya* and *Dharma* to conceptualize the idea of *Satyagraha*. The Vedic concept *Rta* implying 'binding truth' in many ways overlaps with the concept of *Sat* or *Satya*. It may be noted that the concept *Sat* has been understood as the trans-individual self or the Brahman in the *Upanishads* and Gandhi seems to have derived the principle 'Satya is God' from the roots of *Upanishad*. Another Vedic concept *Dharma* has also found place in Gandhi's moral grammar- *dhr* implying to be firm, to uphold, support, sustain. Gandhi comes with the best utilization of these elements from Vedic roots by asserting that search for truth is *dharma* of Hindu Tradition and that truth is God (Rothermund, 2017).

Gandhi insists, while doing passive resistance, a true *satyagrahi* would hold onto the four crucial elements; chastity, poverty, courage and truth to assert his/her moral and soul energy (Gandhi, 1940). This would be a firm test of one's tenacity and temperament to hold onto truth and also to change the heart of an opponent who resorts to lies, injustice and brute force. As a point of reference one may talk about *dharna* as an instrument of Passive Resistance and it also has definite resonance of Hindu Philosophical Tradition. *Dharna* has been understood as *prayopavesa* in Sanskrit as an ancient custom of recovering debt through the creditor sitting with determination, for many days at debtor's door. This tradition referred in the texts of Apastamba, Manu and many others sources have been appropriated by Gandhi to use as a potential tool of *Satyagraha* (Basham, 2006).

Non- Violence (*Ahimsa*)

Gandhi's worldview sets a unique template in logically integrating the traditional values to design a pragmatic life philosophy. With his objective of moralizing politics, Gandhi tried to establish an equation involving God, Truth and Non Violence. Gandhi's philosophy of Truth (*Satya*) and Non Violence (*Ahimsa*) was guided by his faith in the reality of God which he defined as Truth; in turn he asserted that God or Truth can be realized only through non violence (Chandel, 2017). In a way, *Satyagraha* has also been understood by Gandhi as 'non violent resistance' (Klitgaard, 1971). It is worth mentioning that not everyone agreed upon the idea of non-violent resistance, and some openly held the idea in deep contempt (Lal, 2009). However, Gandhi was in a constant search for cultivating higher values to draw the roadmap for a better world and *non violence* found a prominent place in his scheme of things. For him, Truth is God and non-violence is fundamental to the discovery of Truth.

It may be noted that Gandhi's concept of *Ahimsa* or non-violence is based on two contrasting aspects; in its narrow sense it means avoidance of acts harming others; in its positive connotation, *Ahimsa* epitomises 'the unselfish self' which is an embodiment of infinite love, sympathy and promotion of well being of even the enemies and most violent persons(Chakrabarty & Pandey, 2017).

Gandhi perceived *Ahimsa* or non-violence in its absolute proximity to Truth and thus recognized its lineage to the *Advaita* monistic identification of *Brahman* (Reality, Being) with *Atman* (the self)(Allen, 2003). Gandhi himself remarked, "The impossibility of full realization of Truth in this mortal body led some ancient seeker after Truth to the appreciation of *ahimsa*"(Desai, 2003).Gandhi realized that Truth was to be found within oneself and hence the more one took to violence, the more he moved away from truth. He says, "Truth or *satya* is God and *ahimsa* is God's love, and Truth is hurt by every evil thought about anyone, therefore, *ahimsa* is fundamental to the discovery of Truth" (Gandhi, 1949).

According to A.L. Basham(2006), the doctrine of *Ahimsa* in Hinduism had been initially referred to in the light of *varna* and *ashrama* in terms of meat eating, forcible apprehension and punishment of criminals and self defence. In classical Hinduism (including many *smritis*), *ahimsa* had been understood in respect of not killing animals for food in reference to the *grhastha*.For the ascetics, Manu laid down strong codes of absolute *Ahimsa*. In Basham's opinion, this principle had been further accentuated in Jainism. Moreover,on a deeper note, Gandhi also draws a lot from the Buddhist tradition while conceptualizing and articulating *ahimsa* as a life philosophy. *Ahimsa* through the maxim 'Love of humanity and moral life' was accentuated by Lord Buddha and this inspired Gandhi. Again, Gandhi adopts the Buddhist tenet '*ahimsa parama dharma*' (Non-violence is the highest duty) and applies it in the context of contemporary world to establish *Ahimsa* as a guiding principle of human life. Gandhi's plead for *ahimsa* also had another philosophical justification. While engaging with Tilak's interpretation of *Gita* and his assertion that one ought to be involved in *Karmayoga* embedded in non attachment to the results of one's actions, Gandhi pondered over alternative attachment to sustain one's non attachment to the results and his solution were Truth and *Ahimsa*(Rothermund, 2017).It could be argued that his engagement with *ahimsa* on a philosophical ground was pretty much an engagement with the issue of (*a*)*himsa* deliberated upon in the *Bhagawad Gita*.

As such, the discussion makes it clear that Gandhi's articulation of *Ahimsa*, which finds a prominent place in his worldview alongside Truth, *satyagraha* and other concepts had been articulated and utilized in the light of a plethora of conceptual categories scattered across different literary sources of Ancient Indian Philosophical Tradition. Starting from the understanding of Truth or *Satya* to that of *Satyagraha* and *Ahimsa*, Gandhi had been navigating the literary sources of *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Smritis* and *Shrutis*. However, Gandhi had been intelligent enough to make a judicious revisit to the sources and pick the most appropriate elements to rekindle the essence of Ancient Indian Philosophical Tradition and make it a potential moral weapon to deal with the spiritual and material issues in the contemporary times.

Conclusion

A proper understanding of Gandhi is incomplete without an engagement with his worldview. However, Gandhi's worldview is not simple reflection of the material realities of contemporary period and his reaction to it. Gandhi went through a rigorous process of reflection rooted both at the realities of the events and a plausible solution in the normative spiritual domain of Ancient Indian Philosophical Tradition. However, Gandhi was not an unadorned devotee of one religious sect or a single trend of Philosophy. His familiarity with multiple philosophical traditions of Hinduism and also its sister religions and the rendezvous with non Hindu tradition afforded him the luxury to churn out the best values out of all and manoeuvre it in the context of the material urgency of his time. His worldviews work as a philosophical bridge between the ancient values and the contemporary crisis.

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