

Gandhi On Ends And Means

Dr. Abha Chauhan Khimta

Assistant Professor of Political Science, Department of Political Science,
H.P. University, Shimla-5, Himachal Pradesh, India.

Abstract

Ends and means assume significance in the periods of rapid socio-economic changes. In the present world, everybody thinks of quick results in an atmosphere of unpredictability and insecurity. There is a sharp dichotomy between ends and means. Gandhi rejected this sharp and rigid dichotomy between ends and means. He mentioned in *Hind swaraj* that even great men who have been considered religious have committed grievous crimes through the mistaken belief that there is no moral connection or interdependence between the means and the ends. Gandhi believed that progress towards the attainment of the goal is in exact proportion to the purity of means. Gandhi was impressed with the theory of detached action as expounded in the *Gita*. *Bhagavad Gita* states that man has control only over his act, but none over the goal of it. The truth about whether the result of a particular means will coincide with a particular goal in a given situation can be discovered only through empirical investigation and inductive reasoning and not from theoretical formulation on the subject. The present paper explores Gandhi views on ends and means and their significance in the present world.

Key Words: Dichotomy, Empirical Investigation, Inductive reasoning, Theoretical.

“I feel that our progress towards the goal will be in exact proportion to the purity of our means”. Mahatma Gandhi

The relationship between ends and means assumes added significance in the present period of rapid socio-economic and political changes. The present world situation has to some extent become unpredictable and insecure. Politics in the modern world has virtually degenerated into a game whose governing rules are cunning and craft, expediency and unscrupulousness. End is considered as a matter of supreme consideration and no attention is paid to the choice of appropriate means for the attainment of the end. It is felt that if the end is noble, it justifies

application of any means, however ignoble. When such a principle is accepted as the governing rule of public conduct or statecraft, politics becomes immoral. In such a scenario, ends (results) and sanctity of actions to attain those ends (means) cannot be ignored.

Kautilya, Machiavelli, Hitler and Stalin are known to have held the view that the end justified the means. On the other hand, humanitarian thinkers and philosophers like the Buddha, Karl Marx, Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru insist that ends cannot and should not be attained by evil means. In India, the doctrine that end justifies the means goes back to Kautilya and to Machiavelli in the West. It is connected with the notions of self-preservation and of *raison d'état*. In recent times it is connected with the attainment of a secular millennium through revolutionary action.¹

The end is something to be secured and the means represent the way to attain it. Ends and means are convertible terms and they are interconnected. Means are selected simultaneously with ends and the means are chosen because it is appropriate and suitable to the end in view. It is suitable because it leads to the desired goal. Any means cannot be employed to secure a specific end. It must be effective and capable of securing the end. Otherwise, it ceases to be the means.²

Gandhi wanted to salvage politics from amoralism and Machiavellism and spiritualize it. He conceived politics not only inseparable from ethics but as simply an extension of ethics to the domain of public affairs and hence he could not accept any divergence between the end and means. For him means were as important as the end or still more important than the latter and politics was no exception to it. Accordingly he said, "They

¹ Raghavan N. Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1973, p. 369.

² K. Damodaran, 'Ends and Means', *Gandhi Theory and Practice: Social Impact and Contemporary Relevance*, Golden Jubilee Series, Shimla, 2015, p. 103.

say 'means are after all everything'. As the means, so the end There is no wall of separation between means and end."³Gandhi firmly rejected the rigid dichotomy between ends and means. He laid emphasis on the nature, quality and purity of the means for the attainment of the end. To him the nature of the means used for the attainment of the end shall determine the nature and character of the end and application of immoral and impure means may distort the end in view. The end however noble may get tainted and perverted if the means used for its attainment are morally indefensible. Accordingly Gandhi wrote, "Realisation of the goal is in exact proportion to that of the means. This is a proposition that admits of no exception."⁴ In *Hind Swaraj* Gandhi wrote that even great men who have been considered religious have committed grievous crimes through the mistaken belief that there is no moral connection or interdependence between the means and the ends. According to Gandhi, "The means may be likened to a seed, the end to a tree, and there is just the same enviable connection between the means and the end as there is between the seed and the tree."⁵

Similarly, in *Hind Swaraj*, the Editor tells the reader, "Your belief that there is no connection between the means and the end is a great mistake. Through that mistake, even men who have been considered religious have committed grievous crimes. Your reasoning is the same as saying that we can get a rose through planning a noxious weed. If I want to cross the ocean, I can do so only using a vessel; if I were to use a cart for that purpose, both the cart and I would soon find the bottom...I am not likely to obtain the result flowing from the worship of God by laying myself prostrate before Satan... we reap exactly as we sow."⁶ He

3 Benudhar Pradhan, *The Socialist Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, GDK Publications, Delhi, 1980, p. 211.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Raghavan N. Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1973, p. 361.

6 Jayantanuja Bandyopadhyaya, *Social and Political Thought of Gandhi*, Allied Publishers, New York, 1969, p. 377.

further said, “Means and end are convertible terms in my philosophy of life.”⁷ Gandhi believed that in politics as in all spheres of human action we reap exactly what we sow.

Gandhi based his view of ends and means on a metaphysical faith in the moral law or his account of the necessary as well as the contingent connection between *Satya* and *ahimsa*, truth and non-violence, tolerance and civility. According to Gandhi, truth and love were the essence of all religions. Even though Gandhi is said to have formed his creed of ahimsa largely independent of Hindu scriptures, including the Bhagavad Gita, he later did base the very foundation of his moral philosophy in his interpretation of this work. He acknowledged his chosen spiritual path of karma yoga, the path of selfless service and work, as inspired by the Gita. To Gandhi, the Gita taught that total commitment to social action regardless of consequences to oneself was the moral law that was consistent with his principles of Truth realization through Love. According to Raghavan N. Iyer, Gandhi regarded *Satya* as the supreme common end for all men and like ancient Greeks; it refers to the highest human activity for Gandhi rather than an imposed and predetermined target. Gandhi evolved his political and social ethics in terms of a theory of action under which all thinking and activity can be corrected and justified only by reference to *Satya* and *ahimsa*, which are good in themselves and not merely the means to a higher good.⁸ He said, “Impure means result in an impure end... One cannot reach Truth by untruthfulness. Truthful conduct alone can reach Truth. Are not non-violence and Truth twins? The answer is an emphatic ‘No’. Non-violence is embedded in Truth and vice versa. Hence, has it been said that they are faces of the same coin. Either is inseparable from the other. Read the coin either way. The spelling of words

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Raghavan N. Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1973, p. 369.

will be different the value as the same. This blessed state is unattainable without project purity. Harbour impurity of mind or body and you have untruth and violence in you.”⁹

Gandhi regards suffering essential for life and the criterion of progress. The purer the suffering and sacrifice, the greater is the progress. He insists that a person who resolves to adhere to truth cannot remain silent at the sight of violence which is a negation of truth. Thus it is incumbent upon a person to oppose it. Truth functions in the form of non-violence or love. Such opposition would mean ‘fight the civil (wrong-untruth), while loving the evildoer.’¹⁰

Gandhi was deeply influenced by Gita's message of Nishkama Karma or performing one's duty without any desire for fruit. This strengthened his resolve to fight injustice. It can be claimed that Gandhi's devotion to the *Bhagavadgita* and his commitment to non-violence demanded reconciliation. Gandhi believed that the superiority of non-violence over violence can be easily deduced from the teaching of *Bhagavadgita*.¹¹ Gandhi admitted that *Gita* was not written to establish *Ahimsa* which was already an accepted norm of Hindu ethics. According to Gandhi, the conflict between the *Pandavas* and *Kauravas* represents a battle between good and evil which is personified in humans as virtues and vices. Similarly, according to Gandhi, the author of the *Mahabharata* has not established the necessity of

⁹ Shriman Narayan (ed), *the Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 6, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1968, p. 150.

¹⁰ Pooja Kataria, ‘Gandhian Approach to Conflict Resolution’, *Journal of Gandhian Studies*, Vol. IV, Nos. I & II, 2006, p. 87.

¹¹ S.L. Malhotra, ‘Gandhi and the Problem of Violence and Non-violence in the Gita’ in Dr V.T. Patil (ed.), *Studies on Gandhi*, Sterling Publishers Private Limited, New Delhi, 1989, p. 19.

physical warfare but on the contrary futility of war has been proved as he has made the victors shed tears of sorrow and repentance.¹²

According to Gandhi, the main teaching of the *Gita* is the attitude of renunciation of the fruits of action and this cannot be cultivated without *Ahimsa*. He observed, "... after forty years of unremitting endeavour fully to enforce the teaching of the *Gita* in my own life, I have in all humility, felt that perfect renunciation is impossible without perfect observance of *Ahimsa* in every shape and form."¹³

Gandhi stressed that non-violence emerged out of the teaching of the *Gita* is not confined to refraining from causing physical injury. According to Gandhi, non-violent man is free from attachment and aversion from which springs all kind of violence in society. It is not merely the act of cutting someone's head or a limb, which constitutes violence but it is determined by the motive behind the act. Through *Gita*, the message of disattachment has been conveyed. The objective in *Gita* is not to exhort Arjuna to fight. However, through *Gita*, it has been conveyed that Arjuna is asked to shed cowardice which had overpowered him because of his attachment to his relations.¹⁴

According to Gandhi, the discussion between Krishna and Arjuna has nothing to do with war. It mainly relates to religion, ethics and spiritualism. Gandhi felt that *Nishkama Karma* and *Ahimsa* were so closely knit together that one cannot separate the two. Since the object of the *Gita*, according to Gandhi, was spiritual, that is stating qualities, the frame of mind and attitude towards life essential for self-realisation, *Ahimsa* naturally follows from its

¹² Mahadev Desai, *The Gita According to Gandhi*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1956, pp. 127-128.

¹³ S.L. Malhotra, "Gandhi and the Problem of Violence and Non-violence in the *Gita*" in Dr V.T. Patil (ed.), *Studies on Gandhi*, Sterling Publishers Private Limited, New Delhi, 1989, p. 20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

teaching.¹⁵ Most often, Gandhi preferred to use the term ‘Dharma’ for religion. According to Gandhi, this *Dharma* was composed of ethical-moral lessons. Gandhi’s interpretation of Gita was his own and he gave centrality to the practice of non-violence in it. He insisted that his religion was to seek ‘*moksha*’ in trying to show the real nature of non-violence. Thus an infinite capacity for suffering was part of this *dharmā* of non-violence.¹⁶ According to Gandhi, the relationship between means and ends is organic. The moral quality of the ends being causally dependent upon that of the means.

According to Gandhi moral life was not for Gandhi mainly a matter of achieving specific objectives. Similarly, nor was politics like a field game in which a concrete objective is given in advance and known to all.

The ultimate objective of Gandhi was the attainment of an ideal society or *swaraj*. But he regarded the preparation of a detailed and foolproof blueprint of the goal as a relatively fruitless job because however perfect the blueprint might be, it would not be realized unless the right means were adopted. He was mainly concerned with the selection of the means.¹⁷

He said, “They say ‘means are after all means’. I would say ‘means are after all everything’. As the means so the end... There is no wall of separation between means and end. Indeed the Creator has given us control (and that too very limited) over means, none over the end. The realisation of the goal is in exact proportion to that of the means. This is a proposition that admits of no exception.”¹⁸

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Letter to Maganlal, in T.K. Mahadevan, *Duja – A Prophet Unheard*, East-West Press, New Delhi, 1977, p. 105.

¹⁷ JayantanujaBandyopadhyaya, *Social and Political Thought of Gandhi*, Allied Publishers, New York, 1969, p. 377.

¹⁸ SrimanNaryan (ed.), *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 6, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1968, p. 149.

According to Gandhi, *Satya* (truth) is the perfect name for God. He felt that the condemnation of evil should not be spared. Gandhi said, "one who resorts to untruth with any end in view whatsoever and is full of likes and dislikes can never attain the supreme."¹⁹ He further elaborated, "To tread the path of truth implies an active life in the world of men. In the absence of such activity, there is no occasion for either pursuing or swerving from the truth. The Gita has made it clear that a man cannot remain inactive even for a single moment. The difference between one who is a devotee of God and another who is not is that the former is active in the service of others, never gives up truth in the midst of activity and gradually overcomes his likes and dislikes, while the other is active for selfish reasons, and has no scruples whatever as regards the means he employs in order to achieve his selfish ends. This world is not something evil in itself, for only an active life in the world can help us to attain the goal of God-realization. This activity must be directed to the good of others. Selfish activity is fit only to be condemned and should be given up."²⁰

Gandhi firmly believed that truth and non-violence are convertible terms. He stressed that if a man dedicated to truth commits violence, he will sacrifice truth. He further stressed that even if a man refuses to reply, out of fear, he will be violating the vow of non-violence. He said, "You cannot teach Ahimsa to a man who cannot kill. You cannot make a dumb man appreciate the beauty and the merit of silence. Although I know that silence is most excellent, I do not hesitate to take means that would enable the dumb man to regain his speech. I do not believe in any Government – but Parliamentary Government is perhaps better than the capricious rule."²¹

¹⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 383-384.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 384.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 386.

Gandhi believed that *Ahimsa* is a renunciation out of strength and not out of weakness. He pointed out that all killing is not *ahimsa* and the practice of *Ahimsa* may even necessitate killing. He said, "It is clear that he who has lost the power to the bill cannot practice non-killing. *Ahimsa* is a renunciation of the highest type. A weak and an effeminate nation cannot perform this grand act of renunciation, even as a mouse cannot be properly said to renounce the power of killing a cat. It may look terrible but it is true that we must, by well-sustained, conscious effort, regain this power, and then, if we can only do so, deliver the world from its travail of *himsa* by a continuous abduccion of this power."²²

Gandhi holds that the way to achieve a wider love is to pay attention to the 'means' applied in relations with others. He holds the view that our partial understanding of the truth should remind us of our fallibility and restrain us from taking our fragments as the whole truth. In asking us to recognize our partiality and fallibility, Gandhi pushes beyond mere tolerance of diverse conceptions of the truth. He claims that both he and those who grasp different fragments of the truth are deserving of mutual respect.²³ According to him, "I know that we are both rights from our respective points of views. And this knowledge saves me from attributing motives to my opponents or critics... I very much like the doctrine of the meanness of reality. It is this doctrine that has taught me to judge a Mussulman from his standpoint and a Christian from his."²⁴

Gandhi made a distinction between legal ownership and moral ownership by saying that legally wealth belongs to the owner and morally it belongs to the whole society. Thus, in this sense of moral ownership, the labourers and the peasants are also owners of the wealth

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Ronald J. Terchek, *Gandhi Struggling for Autonomy*, Vistaar Publications, New Delhi, 2000, p. 189.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

possessed by the millionaires and the landlords. According to Gandhi, trusteeship means the joint ownership of capitalists and laborers over the wealth of society. He declared that legal ownership of the wealth must vest in the trustee himself. This point seems to be central to the entire idea of trusteeship.²⁵ The means proposed by Gandhi for bringing about the state of affairs envisaged by him must be the voluntary conversion of the exploiting class. Gandhi aspired for the socio-economic justice by moral appeal to their conscience. His emphasis on moral conversion includes the moral transformation of the exploiters. Gandhi considered that the awakening of the workers and peasants into a realization of their moral strength, the realization that exploitation could take place only with the cooperation, and that non-cooperation on their part would at once deprive the exploiter of his power to exploit.²⁶

Thus Gandhi's object is to eliminate not class division, but also class conflict. Gandhi emphasized that this mutual realization of the importance and needs of the conflicting interests, judged from the moral point of view, will lead to the establishment of moral equality between them.²⁷

Gandhi condemned the nineteenth-century doctrine of *Laissez-faire*. Gandhi was opposed to capitalism and the dominating factor for his hostility was that it was based on violence. According to Gandhi, the concentration and centralization of capital resulted in strengthening the engines of violence of the richer section and they intensify the process of exploitation of labourers. Secondly, he criticized the accumulation of capital as immoral. According to him, the amassing of commodities and the concentration of capital was bound

²⁵ Jayantanuja Bandyopadhyaya, *Social and Political Thought of Gandhi*, Allied Publishers, New York, 1969, p. 132.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ N.K. Bose, *Selections from Gandhi*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1957, pp. 97-98.

to result in injustice and coercion and considered accumulation as a kind of theft. It was also an indication of one's lack of faith in the encompassing goodness of the supreme divine being.²⁸

According to Gandhi, another basic evil of capitalism is the intensification of social polarization between the two opposed social classes – the capitalists and the labourers. This results in strikes, lockouts, sabotage and there is a marked decline of social spirit. Thus Gandhi felt that in his ideal state this social antagonism would be replaced by increasing cooperation and mutual reciprocity.²⁹

The economic foundations of Gandhian political philosophy are inspired by a moral orientation. According to Gita, those who eat without working are parasites. Thus, Gandhian theory of bread and labour strikes at the root of the unjust distinction between mental labour and manual labour.

Bandyopadhyay mentions that in any long-term programme of social engineering, there is not just one goal and one means, but a hierarchy of goals and means. Thus, the whole of Gandhian thought and Gandhi's numerous experiments in social control are in a sense a long study in the end-means relationship. Also, in the Marxian programme of the socio-political reconstruction of the world, the ultimate goal is represented by a conception of justice, reducible to certain ultimate values, which seem to be liberty, equality and fraternity. In the same way, in the Gandhian programme of the socio-political reconstruction of human society, there is the ultimate value-goal of justice, reducible to the ultimate values of non-

²⁸ Vishwanath Prasad Verma, *The Political Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi and Sarvodaya*, Lakshmi Narain Agarwal, Agra, 1981, p. 110.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

violence, freedom and equality. Constructive programme and Satyagraha are the common means for the realization of these values.³⁰

Gandhi's way of countering the doctrine that the end justifies the means was by asserting not merely that unworthy means could belittle a great end but also that evil means can never lead to good ends. Thus, it can be argued that Gandhi demonstrated the practicability of ethical and spiritual life in social and political spheres. In the present time, the teachings of ancient philosophers on ethics of self-perfection becomes meaningful in the pursuit of social and political goals. Personal virtues can be transformed into social and political weapons to challenge outmoded systems and to raise the human individual to a higher level.³¹ The struggle for the emancipation of man and search for truth continues. With unprecedented technological and scientific development and the richness of the inherited human values, it has now become possible to realize the age-old dreams of man for a better and fuller life, to end oppression and exploitation of man by man by establishing on earth a classless and casteless social order based on the unity of the human race, on love, truth, justice, brotherhood and cooperation.³² Gandhi always stressed that progress towards the goal should be in exact proportion to the purity of means. Self-seekers, opportunists, liars, men lacking in character, honesty and integrity are incapable of building a good society. The instinct of self-preservation is inherent in all living beings. What distinguishes man from other living beings is human nature, his awareness of himself as a human being and his

³⁰ Jayantanuja Bandyopadhyaya, *Social and Political Thought of Gandhi*, Allied Publishers, New York, 1969, p. 380.

³¹ K. Damodaran, "Ends and Means" in *Gandhi Theory and Practice: Social Impact and Contemporary Relevance*, Golden Jubilee Series, Shimla, 2015, pp. 116-117.

³² *Ibid.*

capacity to distinguish between good and bad. In this respect, Gandhian philosophy on ends and means has become even more relevant in the present context.