
UNIT 2 MAHATMA GANDHI AND RABINDHRANATH TAGORE

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit you are going to study the philosophy of two eminent personalities of our motherland in the contemporary times:

- Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi whom the whole world acknowledged as the Mahatma
- Rabindranath Tagore who won world recognition (Nobel Prize) for his contributions to literature.

Neither of them is a philosopher in the usual sense of the term. Neither of them constructed any philosophical system. However, they were so deeply involved in a synthetic perspective of viewing things within a synoptic vision that whatever they said, did and wrote was profoundly philosophical. The new perspective that they offered have led us to a fresh and fruitful way of understanding self-realization, interrelationship of humans with one another and with the environment. What is still more important is that the whole world recognizes the relevance of their thought.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Gandhi (1869- 1948) was born at Porbandar on the 2nd of October 1869. His early education was at Porbandar itself. In 1888, he was sent to England for legal studies. He returned to India in 1891 after qualifying as a barrister-at-law. After staying in India for a very brief period he went to South Africa in April 1893 to instruct the counsel for Dada Abdulla & Co. With his unique experiences of South African social and political adventures, he came to India to make efforts for its Independence by applying the method of *Satyagraha*. The life of Gandhi from 1920 to 1948 has almost become a household story which does not require a repetition here.

Rabindranath Tagore was born in Calcutta as the fourteenth child of his family. He wrote his first verse in his eighth year. He lost his mother in 1873. After two years he gave up going to school altogether. In 1878, he sailed for England to study Law, but in 1880 he returned home without any academic degree. His marriage took place in

1883. In 1901, he settled down at Santiniketan and began his educational experiment with 5 pupils. In 1913, the Calcutta University conferred on him a D.Litt. Degree; in 1914, he received the Nobel Prize for his *Gitanjali*. In 1915, the Government made him a Knight. He visited the United States in 1912, delivered lectures at the Harvard University and returned in September 1913. He sailed for Japan in May 1915. On his return to India he visited Gandhiji's Sabarmati Ashram. On 22nd December 1918, Santiniketan became an International University, and Visva-bharati, a centre of Indian Culture, was formally inaugurated on 23rd December 1921. He undertook lecture-tours in Europe, the United States, Russia, China, Iran, and Iraq. The Oxford University conferred a Doctorate on Tagore in 1940 at Santiniketan.

2.2 PHILOSOPHY OF GANDHI

A voluminous literature has gone into studying the man and his thought. Besides, his own writings have run into 100 large volumes of published materials. They were all written on various occasions, in different contexts with diverse aims. Gandhi never attempted to present his thought in any single treatise. That makes it difficult for many people to know his philosophy clearly. However, he had such an integrated vision which, he used not mechanically (as in the case of the theories of natural sciences), but creatively, i.e. first viewing the context and understanding it as widely as possible and shedding light on it with the help of the eternal principles he had learnt from religious scriptures. This process is not to be thought of as applying a theory to data. Rather the theory illuminates the data and the data get focused in the light of the theory in an intuitive dialectical relationship. The life transformation or state of peace that results from such an application further illuminates the deeper grasp of the philosophical principles and reinforces their value and strengthens the philosophical vision. We begin with Gandhi's concept of Satyagraha.

Satyagraha

For Gandhi, *satyagraha* includes three basic values: truth, nonviolence, and self-suffering. The purpose of *satyagraha* is to bring an end to injustice by changing the heart of the wrong-doer by awakening, through love and self-suffering, one's sense of justice. Traditionally there were two ways to deal with injustice: one either continued being a victim or one fought back with violence. Gandhi's ethical pacifistic nature would not allow him to be passive, and he was convinced that injustice corrupts the soul, both of the victim and the perpetrator. Hence it would be wrong not to do anything. Fighting back with violence is no solution either since violence begets violence. In mutual violence, the original perpetrator of injustice would now feel victimized and thus justified in responding with violence. *Satyagraha* was his alternative to both. He experimented with *satyagraha* both in South Africa and India. Looking at his various *satyagraha* movements, one can discern a specific pattern. It starts with a careful marshalling of all the facts, leading to negotiation and possibly arbitration. One remains open to communication since each side in a conflict has only a partial view. Each side needs the critical perspective of the other to sort out truth from untruth. In case the arbitration fails, the *satyagrahi* prepares the group for direct action without resorting to violence. One has to offer love in response to emotional and physical violence. Now the *satyagrahi*, after announcing his direct planned action, persists in action, accepting all adversity, until the issue is resolved to mutual satisfaction. One can claim to have won only if one's opponent can also say the same thing. In this way *satyagraha* is a new form of conflict resolution which can be applied to conflict between nations, between oppressed minorities and their governments, between social groups, and

even between individuals. Thanks to Gandhi's Gospel of *satyagraha* and *ahimsa*, Great Britain and India had the friendliest transfer of power from the ruler to the ruled in human history.

Truth

Gandhi was committed to truth in the sense of being truthful, seeing that truth covers all ethical action. Unethical action is as much a violation of Truth as making a false statement. Since epistemologically Truth seemed more certain than God, Gandhi converted his position from *God is truth* to *Truth is God*. Since human beings are fallible creatures, they cannot be sure of knowing Truth as such. He accepted the Jain theory of the multidimensionality of truth (*anekantvada*), and emphasized the necessity for open-mindedness and soul-searching. In critical situations, he relied on his 'inner voice,' which was tuned to the call of Truth through long practice.

Love

For Gandhi love is the cardinal virtue, which serves truth. If a person's actions are motivated by love for all, those actions will be conducive to the highest good. According to Gandhi, *ahimsa* is not just refraining from injuring others, but positively enhancing their well-being, or rather, loving them. Genuine love is rooted in egolessness, which is the highest personal virtue. It is *nishkamakarma*, acting without attachment to the fruits of action, which expresses love and self-surrender. Gandhi was extremely modest, unassuming, and owned no property.

Social Reform

Gandhi's social action was aimed at the transformation of society based on two basic convictions: (1) All human beings are brothers because they possess the same *atman*. Hence, to injure another is to do violence to oneself. (2) All human beings are fundamentally good. Given these convictions, one can understand why Gandhi was committed to justice and equality. He fought for equality of women and *harijans* within Hindu society. He aimed at *Sarvodaya*: everyone's self-development. He founded several *ashrams* where he gathered men and women of different castes and religions and encouraged them to lead a life of simplicity.

Religion

Gandhi believed in the equality of all religions since all principal religions are equal and true. The essence of all religions is not dogmas and doctrines, but ethical action based on self-surrender.

Economics

Gandhi's economic views were unorthodox, but he was against unbridled economic liberalization and material prosperity at the cost of human values. Economic policy should ensure that no one in this world goes hungry or homeless. He worked to create cottage industries and cooperatives in villages. The spinning wheel was a symbol of simplicity and self-reliance. He was also against welfarism. No able-bodied person should live on charity. Everyone must work hard to earn one's own bread. But he did not believe in expropriation of the wealth of the rich since that would result in violence. So he evolved the theory of Trusteeship in which the rich should act as trustees of their wealth, which they should use for social uplift.

Politics

He believed in the decentralization of power in which the base of political power should be small community groups patterned after the village *panchayats*. The state must have minimum power consistent with the aim of *sarvodaya*, universal self-realization. *Ahimsa* should be the guiding principle of all political relationships.

God

Gandhi was in the beginning an ardent believer in God, "I have made the world's faith in God my own." And he regarded "that faith as amounting to such experience as to say: "I am surer of His existence than of the fact that you and I are sitting in this room". He even testified to that faith as to confess: "I may live without air and water but not without Him. You may pluck out my eyes, but that cannot kill me. You may chop off my nose, but that will not kill me. But blast my belief in God, and I am dead". Gandhi lamented at the fact many of us "shut our ears to the still small voice. We shut our eyes to the 'pillar of fire' in front of us". On his part he "realized His omnipresence. Even in darkest despair, where there seems to be no helper and no comfort in the wide, wide world, His Name inspires us with strength and puts all doubts and despairs to flight".

Gandhi confessed that he had no argument to convince the existence of God through reason because faith in God transcends reason. In the very nature of things it must be so, he said, because we must ever fail to perceive Him through the senses, because He is beyond them. We can feel Him if we will but withdraw ourselves from the senses. The divine music is incessantly going on within ourselves, but the loud senses drown the delicate music, which is unlike and infinitely superior to anything we can perceive or hear with our senses. Also externally we could feel that there is an indefinable mysterious Power that pervades everything. It is this unseen Power which makes itself felt and yet defies all proof, I do dimly perceive that whilst everything around me is ever changing, ever-dying, there is underlying all that change a Living Power that is changeless, that holds all together, that creates, dissolves, and re-creates. That informing Power or Spirit is God. And since nothing else I see merely through the senses can or will persist, He alone is.

To sum up: (1) God is truth and truth is God. This is not a logical abstract truth, but the spiritual and metaphysical. Truth is the law that supports human and the universe; God is both the law and the law-giver. (2) God is love itself. For God is affectional and affective by nature. (3) Truth prevails one's falsity and falsehood in every conflict between two sides. (4) One should hold fast to truth. Then one will be supported by truth. Falsity leads to non-existence. (5) As truth, God, and love are the same, one should stick to love. (6) One should follow the path of non-violence. The opposite of love is violence (7) Human is finite, not God; one's power, knowledge and will are limited. One may be mistaken in one's own conviction. (8) In sticking to truth, one should not destroy another. (9) When truth wins, falsity will be destroyed. If two parties love each other, the destruction will be the destruction of false convictions. (10) God alone has the right to destroy. God knows what is true and what is false in his infinite wisdom. When God destroys, he destroys in love, not in hatred. As finite beings, we not only cannot be certain of truth, but also cannot destroy in love. Hate is easy, but love is difficult. Our duty is to follow the path of love. When we follow the path of love we shall be like God, the law, ground, support of our being.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) Explain Gandhi's view on Truth.

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2) What is Gandhi's concept of Love?

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2.3 PHILOSOPHY OF TAGORE

Tagore authored about one hundred books of poems, about fifty plays and about forty works of fiction, about fifteen books of philosophical lectures and essays. His best-known poems appear in *Gitanjali* (Song offerings), originally written in Bengali and translated by himself into English. His writings of philosophical interest are *Sadhana: The Realisation of Life* (London: Macmillan 1913), *Personality* (London: Macmillan 1917), *Creative Unity* (London: Macmillan 1922), *The Religion of Man* (London: Unwin Books 1931). Obviously, Tagore did not give any systematic exposition of his philosophy. However his writings are charged with a particular vision of reality and a lot of suggestions of a system of philosophy. Attempts have been made to interpret Tagore's philosophy in the light of its own fundamental principles, supplying the premises, drawing out the conclusions, and giving the setting where necessary. The most famous of such attempts is a big volume *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* by Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan (London: Macmillan 1918). Tagore himself is reported to have appreciated it. The philosophical teachings of Tagore became popular all over the world not only because of literary beauty but also on account of the lofty ideas they contain. Here you are given a synthetic presentation of the essential elements of his thought.

God

Tagore is a non-dualist, but not like Sankara. The absolute in its perfection, living away from all that happens in the world, is of no interest to human. It is the picture with all the richness of its colours, shades, and forms that interests us, but not the canvas on which it is painted. The author of the picture is a person, a spiritual reality. Hence, the absolute is a person, a creative person which acts and creates, whom we can love and be loved. Limitation of the Unlimited is personality. God is everything, but not everything is equally God. To realize God as the Supreme person is our destiny,

our *dharma*. We fulfill it when we know our true nature, which is oneness with God. We do not really know our oneness with God because of our ignorance (*avidya*). We can overcome *maya* and *avidya* only through a genuine love of God. The vision of God is a direct and immediate intuition. We feel God as we feel light. The joy we feel in our vision of the Supreme is the evidence that the Supreme exists.

Love

Love is more important than knowledge. In knowledge, the distinctions are either kept separate or completely dissolved in a rare unity. But in love, the lover and the beloved are distinguished, yet united. Love retains both unity and difference. Love is the consummation of knowledge. The Supreme Person creates human beings in order to realize the bliss of love, which is possible only if lover and beloved are separate beings.

Nature and Human Being

Nature is created both as human's home and also as an instrument which, through its beauty, awakens the human heart and directs it towards the Beloved (the Supreme). Just as an artist creates a work of art both to express and evoke a certain mood (*rasa*), God creates the world of nature to evoke love in the human being. The fundamental fact about human is one's dual nature. Human is both earth's child and heaven's heir. Like the lotus, which has its roots in mud but its flower in clear sunlight, human has a finite pole in the world of necessity and an infinite pole in aspirations towards divinity. Human is the "angel of surplus" since the spirit of human has an enormous surplus far in excess of the requirements of the biological animal in human. Civilization and culture – through the development of art, religion, philosophy, and science – is the product of surplus in human, which enables human to surpass one's biological inheritance. Applying this concept of surplus to the Supreme, Tagore says that the Supreme is boundless in his superfluity, which expresses itself in world process. At his least developed level, the human is a desiring animal, desiring things and people for self-aggrandizement.

Knowledge

Human has three sources of knowledge: senses, intellect and feeling. Senses: Human knows the world through the senses. Intellect: Human discovers science and logic-centred philosophy by intellect. Feeling: Human discovers the Supreme Person by feeling. True knowledge is a knowledge of things in their relation to the universe, a knowledge that retains the distinctions and yet grasps them in their unity.

Sadhna

Sadhna, the true realization of life, leads from love of self to love of others. To love God is to love the entire creation moving from duality to unity. The ideal human being fulfills the demands of life and meets all his social obligations. The path of renunciation is not an ideal. For those entirely engrossed in the world and those who renounce the world are equally doomed.

Religion

Tagore advocated the religion of humanity. A person must live by one's *dharma*. One must respond to the love-call of God with love. Love for God includes love for humanity and all of nature. True religion is love, harmony, simplicity. "While God waits for his

temple to be built of love, men bring stones.” He also wrote against idolatry, superstition, and religious fanaticism. “We must go beyond all narrow bounds and look towards the day when Budha, Christ and Mohammad will become one.”

Social Philosophy

The human must engage both externally in coping with nature and internally in developing spiritually. Tagore did fight against the evils of his society such as poverty, superstition, untouchability and oppression of women. He did not find the West to be the source of all evil. He welcomed Western science and Western beliefs in individual worth, freedom, and democracy. He believed that nationalism deteriorated from patriotism to chauvinism. Nationalism is individual selfishness raised to a higher level. Just as a human must rise above self-centredness to love for all, the nations of the world too must grow to love other nations.

Education

Tagore’s own childhood experiences encouraged his lifelong commitment to education. In his view, the traditional schools imprison children who are born with a power to be happy and to make others happy. But in traditional schools they are like flowers pressed between book leaves. Hence, he started a model-school after the ancient hermitage schools of India: *santiniketan* (the abode of peace). A garden and a handicraft shop were attached to the school. His ecological concerns were manifested in his tree planting programmes. He also widened his educational commitment by founding a university – *Visva Bharati* – where he promoted an international culture of unity in diversity.

<p>Check Your Progress II</p> <p>Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer. b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.</p> <p>1) Sum up Tagore’s teachings on God.</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>2) How does Tagore understand education?</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>
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2.4 LET US SUM UP

You have learnt about the philosophical outlooks of two great personality of our times. Though they are so different from each other yet they both are critical of modernity which promotes materialistic approach to life. They both lay stress on the spiritual dimension of life as the distinguishing mark of human kind. At the same time they both emphasize the need of living in tune with the nature and thus they clamour for environmental protection. They both had enormous influence from other cultures and religions. In fact they both have been criticized that they had borrowed many concepts from other religions. The actual truth is that whatever the influences they were exposed to others, they could assimilate them into their own ancient roots and were able to re-discover from their past. Both are indeed expression of the Indian ideal of philosophy and religion, restated to meet the needs of modern times.

For, it is clear that they both are influenced by the Upanishadic vision of reality. The one aim of the Upanishadic seers was to understand the nature of the ultimate reality that they believed stands behind the mundane world of ordinary experience. What our intellect discovers is the existence of a supreme power which pervades the entire universe. This was named as the impersonal, immanent in the universes, sustaining and regulating it—Brahman or the world soul. But they were not satisfied with it. They knew that ultimate power have their own inner immortal self, present in all the living beings and yet is different from them, who controls them from within without even being known by them. Thus they arrived at central metaphysical truth about ourselves. Each of us is an expression of that universal soul, each of us is the same soul or Atman. If the same Infinite is equally present in all of us, then we ourselves are at bottom identical with each other. This recognition paves the way to our openness to others and generates in us love, concern for our fellow beings, establishes bonds promotes care for others, sacrifice our interests for one's fellow men, and even with the whole cosmos.

2.5 KEY WORDS

Self-aggrandizement : Self- agrandizment is the the act of making oneself more powerful, wealthy, etc., in a ruthless way.

Intuition : Intuition is the act by which the mind perceives the agreement or disagreement of two ideas

2.6 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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2.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

- 1) Gandhi was committed to truth in the sense of being truthful, seeing that truth covers all ethical action. Unethical action is as much a violation of Truth as making a false statement. Since epistemologically Truth seemed more certain than God, Gandhi converted his position from *God is truth* to *Truth is God*. Since human beings are fallible creatures, they cannot be sure of knowing Truth as such. He accepted the Jain theory of the multidimensionality of truth (*anekantvada*), and emphasized the necessity for open-mindedness and soul-searching. In critical situations, he relied on his 'inner voice,' which was tuned to the call of Truth through long practice.
- 2) For Gandhi love is the cardinal virtue, which serves truth. If a person's actions are motivated by love for all, those actions will be conducive to the highest good. According to Gandhi, *ahimsa* is not just refraining from injuring others, but positively enhancing their well-being, or rather, loving them. Genuine love is rooted in egolessness, which is the highest personal virtue. It is *nishkamakarma*, acting without attachment to the fruits of action, which expresses love and self-surrender. Gandhi was extremely modest, unassuming, and owned no property.

Check Your Progress II

- 1) Tagore is a non-dualist, but not like Sankara. The absolute in its perfection, living away from all that happens in the world, is of no interest to human. It is the picture with all the richness of its colours, shades, and forms that interests us, but not the canvas on which it is painted. The author of the picture is a person, a spiritual reality. Hence, the absolute is a person, a creative person, who acts and creates, and whom we can love and be loved. Limitation of the Unlimited is personality. God is everything, but not everything is equally God. To realize God as the Supreme person is our destiny, our *dharma*. We fulfill it when we know our true nature, which is oneness with God. We do not really know our oneness with God because of our ignorance (*avidya*). We can overcome *maya* and *avidya* only through a genuine love of God. The vision of God is a direct and immediate intuition. We feel God as we feel light. The joy we feel in our vision of the Supreme is the evidence that the Supreme exists.

Contemporary Indian Thinkers

- 2) Tagore's own childhood experiences encouraged his lifelong commitment to education. In his view, the traditional schools imprison children who are born with a power to be happy and to make others happy. But in traditional schools they are like flowers pressed between book leaves. Hence, he started a model-school after the ancient hermitage schools of India: *santiniketan* (the abode of peace). A garden and a handicraft shop were attached to the school. His ecological concerns were manifested in his tree planting programmes. He also widened his educational commitment by founding a university – *Visva Bharati* – where he promoted an international culture of unity in diversity.