
UNIT 3 GANDHIAN UNDERSTANDING OF MAN

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

The concept of human nature is of vital significance in any system of thought. In fact, it is the different views of human nature which are to a great extent responsible for different ethical and metaphysical systems. Gandhi's indictment of modern civilization, his view of politics and especially of social and individual ethics are firmly based upon his assumptions regarding human nature and his understanding of man. His theory of human nature was closely bound up with his views on God and religion. He had a very definite conviction about what man is in his essential nature and of what he becomes through a false view of himself, of what he should be and can become, and of his place in a law-governed cosmos. The cosmos was a well-coordinated whole whose various parts were all linked in a system of interdependence and mutual service. It consisted of different orders of being ranging from the material to the human, each governed by its own laws and standing in a complex relationship with the rest. Human beings were an integral part of the cosmos, and were tied to it by the deepest bonds. Gandhi considered all life sacred whether human or non-human, for non-human beings too were divine in nature and legitimate members of the cosmos.

The Unit aims to cover Gandhi's views on human nature and seeks

- to understand Gandhi's philosophy of man;
- to know his understanding of the essence of man.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Gandhi fought for the liberation of humanity, and particularly of his countrymen for almost five decades of his public life and in that period he had to deal with millions of people belonging to various social groups. This mass contact provided him with opportunities to study and discover as to how human nature actually expresses itself in day-to-day social life. He developed a very clear concept of self and of human nature which forms an integral part of his world-view.

Despite his belief in the 'consciously-divine', rational and sociable nature of man, he realized that its manifestation in social life often betrays its distinctive

characteristics, that is, that there is an apparent gulf between God and man owing to the immersion of the latter's soul in ignorance. Because of this, he declared that man is an imperfect and a fallible being. He felt that man takes in vice far more readily than virtue. He believed that there is no human being in this world who is wholly good or wholly bad. The difference between human beings is after all a difference only in the degrees of virtues possessed by them and not the fundamental difference between the wholly good and the wholly evil as such. Human nature, he repeatedly asserted, will only find itself when it fully realizes that to be human it has to cease to be bestial or brutal. He claimed to be a fairly accurate student of human nature and "vivisector of my own failings. I have discovered that man is superior to the system he propounds." In his autobiography, he declared that the brute by nature knows no self-restraint, and man is man because he is capable of, and only in so far as he exercises, self-restraint. Elsewhere, he states that the duty of renunciation differentiates mankind from the beast. Man becomes great exactly in the degree in which he works for the welfare of his fellow men. The differences between men are merely those of degree, not of kind.

Gandhi never isolated man from society primarily because he finds no distinction between man and man. To him all men are equal because all men are divine. This serves as the fundamental principle of the essence of man from Gandhian perspective. That he wants a radical change in the society from the point of view of this fundamental principle of the essence of man is undeniable. When a society shares a conjoint, communicated and disciplined vision of man, the essence of man as a divine entity finds its positive avenue of exposure. As Gandhi embraces everyone in the society as his constant divine partner in the total efflorescence of man, he shows an altogether radical and different avenue of conquering social maladies like fanaticism, superstitions, hatred, ill-will, anger, fear, falsehood and so on by honoring the inner divine essence of man. That Truth, Goodness and Beauty must come out effective and victorious in man, because man alone knows how to overcome all constraints related to the advancement of humanism, is the *sine qua non* of the Gandhian philosophy of man.

An iconoclast in the concept of man and radical visionary, Gandhi shows the avenue of respecting woman and eliminating differences between men and women. He draws our attention to the invaluable words of Swami Vivekananda who regards and adores every man and woman as a brother and a sister and teaches the age-old Indian lesson of humanism in the right perspectives of respect and nobility. He strongly believed that the souls of mankind are one and inseparable. The absolute oneness of humanity also encouraged him to purify his imperfect soul along with the purification of all the souls of mankind, for he strongly believes in the struggling spirit in man to be divine in essence and excellence. The practical consequence of this awareness of the divinity of the individual is that it compels one to look upon other individuals as ends in themselves and not as means to serve the purpose of others. This ensures the dignity of the individual. In fact, human dignity is grounded in human divinity. As the human individual partakes of the divinity of God, Gandhi believed that man is inherently and basically good. This provides the master key to Gandhi's concept of human nature.

3.2 HUMAN NATURE

This ‘wonderful piece of work, noble in reason and infinite in faculty’, man, engaged the attention of Gandhi too. In fact, implicit in any world-view is the concept of self and human nature and Gandhi paid considerable attention to it. His autobiography is full of observations about the manifestations of human nature. Therein, we find him stating that “a man often succumbs to temptation”; that “Selfishness turns them blind”. In *Harijan*, he says that “people find the easiest of things oftentimes to be the most difficult to follow”; that “we are all thieves”; that “listlessness is common to us all”; and that “Love of power is usual in man and it often only dies with his death”. We also find him observing that habit gets mastery over men; that they “follow the authority of one man like sheep”. Notwithstanding his pronouncements on the darker side of human nature, it should, however, not be construed that Gandhi was always confronted with the darker side of human nature, he did come across its purely moral expressions as well. Recording such reminiscences, he wrote that “man is both matter and spirit, each acting on and affecting the other”; that “however bitter a man might be, he is sure to come round if we bestow upon him pure love in thought, word and deed”; that “generally those who believe in taking a tooth for a tooth, after a time forgive one another and become friends”; and that somehow he was “able to draw the noblest in mankind” and that is what enabled him to maintain his “faith in God and human nature”.

Gandhi continued to maintain that man possesses an inborn, though limited, capacity of correcting his mistakes and of cultivating his special virtues. He believed that human nature is- infinitely modifiable; that is, “it was also given to human beings to learn from the mistakes and not to repeat them”. In other words, he thought that “there are chords in every human heart, If we only know how to strike the right chord, we bring out the music”. In this connection it should be mentioned that, *Bhagavad Gita* had taught Gandhi that man can only strive to cultivate his special virtues, he cannot command results. Secondly, he believed that man’s capacity to cultivate his special virtues is limited and that, therefore, his nature could not be changed “in a moment”. In other words, he was not so naive as to think that men could be transformed overnight. Further, he recognized the role that circumstances play in moulding man’s nature, though he could never be sure as to how far a man is free and how far a creature of circumstances.

His belief in the monistic doctrine of the metaphysical unity between God and man enabled him to describe the relationship between man and man as also divine. Believing that “all life in its essence is one”, he declared that we are all children of the same God and that, therefore, potentially human nature is the same everywhere. This is to say that soul is one in all and that its possibilities are the same for everyone. It is interesting to note, in this context, the metaphors of a tree and an ocean with which he often used to describe the divine equality of human beings. Employing the metaphor of a tree he once said: “We are all leaves of a majestic tree whose trunk cannot be shaken off its roots which are deep down in the bowels of the earth, The mightiest wind cannot move it”. And, taking recourse to the metaphor of an ocean he stated that “No one has the capacity to judge God. We are drops in that limitless ocean of mercy”. In his autobiography, he observed: “We are all tarred with the same brush, and are children of one and the same creator, and as such the divine powers within us are infinite”. It was this belief that enabled him to declare Truth to be “a social virtue”.

His recognition of “conscious-divinity” as the important feature led him to include the virtues of moral-progression, non-violence, and benevolence, Subscribing to the view that there is nothing in this world which is not subject to change he regarded human nature also to be dynamic, and not static. He declared that “Human nature either goes up or goes down”. And, this virtue of moral progression, he thought, distinguishes man both from the God and the beast. He argued that for them the question of progression just does not arise, as God is already perfect and the beast is essentially dormant. Distinguishing man from God he observed that “No one can remain without eternal cycle unless it be God himself “. And about man’s distinction from the beast he declared that “Progress is man’s distinction, Man’s alone, not beast’s”. This distinction enabled him to regard man as “a special creature of God, precisely to the extent that he is distinct from the rest of His creation”.

Emphasizing the need for cultivation of virtues, he opined that striving alone can enable man to bridge the apparent gulf between God and man’s soul and thereby, to realize his self (that is soul or *atman*). And Self-realization was regarded by him to be the only vocation of man’s life, something which is absolutely desirable. In other words, he firmly believed that “that alone is worth-having or worth-cultivating which would enable us to realize our Maker and to feel that, after all on this earth we are merely sojourners”. In *Harijan*, he insisted that “Man’s ultimate aim is the realization of God, and all his activities; social, political, religious, have to be guided by the ultimate aim of the vision of God.” In other words, man is born in order to know his Maker and’ he should live to that end. The natural course of man’s evolution he, thus, thought is “From beast, through man, to God”. Unlike the sages of India’s great past who suggested the path of withdrawal from the struggles of social life, Gandhi suggested that the’ only way through which man could attain the ultimate state of *Brahmanirvana* (self-realization) was the way of involvement in the struggles of social life, that is the way of the service of God’s creation.

Check Your Progress I

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1) What are the important features of human nature?

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3.3 PHILOSOPHY OF MAN

Based on his metaphysical presuppositions, Gandhi believes in the essential goodness of man. This conviction that man is inherently good is so fundamental in Gandhian thinking that one may even say that Gandhi's entire attitude and approach to the questions related to life was based on this belief in the innate goodness of the human individual. The unique weapon of *satyagraha* and his revolutionary agenda for social transformation were all based on this belief. Although Gandhi put his implicit faith in the goodness of the individuals he was not unaware of the element of error and evil in him. With his deep insight into human nature Gandhi knew that just as there is the divine spark in man there is also the brute in him. Gandhi makes a distinction between the 'higher self' and the 'lower self' and at the *nadir* of the lower self he identifies the 'brute'. The very fact that man has a body brings in with it certain natural limitations which cannot be ignored or under estimated as insignificant. But one shall not identify man with his lower nature, nor shall the ideal of life be identified with the attainment of the needs of the body. Man, Gandhi contends, is a mixture of good and evil, and the upward and downward tendencies are inherent in him.

But as man is essentially good, goodness being his basic nature, Gandhi argues that man is also perfectible. "Godliness implies that it is more natural for man to be good than to be evil, though apparently descent may seem easier than ascent". This is the ground for Gandhi's optimism. Of course, to err is human but to try to overcome error is divine. "There is no one without faults, not even men of God", wrote Gandhi. They are men of God not because they are faultless but because they know their own faults and are ever ready to correct themselves. One hears in these words of Gandhi an echo of the famous saying that every saint has a past and every sinner a future. Man must choose either of the two courses; the upward or the downward but as he has the brute in him he will more easily choose the downward course than the upward, especially when the downward course is presented to him in a beautiful grab. Although the downward course is easier than the upward as we are born with brute strength, "we are born in order to realise God who dwells in us. That is the privilege of man, it distinguishes him from the brute creation". He is more concerned with how to bring out the divinity that is already there in human nature. For this, Gandhi believed, human individuals have to be trained to extricate themselves from the pulls and pressures of the lower nature. He propounded a set of rules and vows for facilitating this upward impulse to perfect himself and to realise his ultimate end.

Entering deep into the genesis of man, Gandhi believes that the inner worth of mankind lies not by exhibition of external force but by silent and struggling endeavor to rise to the ascent and excellence of man the unknown. The striving for perfection is, therefore, one of the inner adventure always thrilling, pulsating and poignant. The concept of man in relation to the society as Gandhi formulates has no parallel in the contemporary times. He says, "I value individual freedom but you must not forget that man is essentially a social being. He has risen to his present status by learning to adjust his individualism to the requirements of social progress. Unrestricted individualism is the law of the beast of the jungle. we have learnt to strike the mean between individual freedom and social restraint" (*Harijan*, 1927). A perfect synchronization between man and society is the fundamental requisite to the march of man and society as a living and dynamic

force of civilization. Man marches ahead not because he excels in scientific marvels or in utilitarianism but he continually makes an adventure for inward excellence. This inward excellence always encompasses everyone in and around him. He forsakes himself for others in and around him to be nearer to himself by embracing all. The more he is dedicated to this mission for self-sacrifice, the greater is the possibility of better efflorescence of the vision of man within him. In fact, he is reborn with this vision that promises him to be an ideal partner and sympathizer of the society to which he belongs. Society, then, becomes an indispensable part of his very being, -the existence, worth and fullness of man.

Side by side with socialization as the essence and excellence of man, Gandhi reminds man of cultivating the true spirit of religion which guides and directs man towards the avenue of purity and perfection. This true spirit of religion can be exercised through prayer. Only a prayerful heart, as he ardently believes, can make a bridge between man and man. It should be the 'vital concern' of every human being who cares for discipline and orderliness. Gandhi is concerned more with the excellence of man than with customs, principles, rites and rituals which serve as mandatory components of one's so-called religion. That man is the only essence of religion and divinity is the radical approach to religion which he time and again highlights in the vision of man and religion. Moreover, he emphasizes on environment of oneself by means of exercise of the nobler qualities that contribute to the excellence of man and his religion. These are love, truth and non-violence in particular. Love as Gandhi considers, truly reveals man as man. The essence of man is the essence of love. Bereft of the inner spirit of love, man degrades himself down to the level of an animal. An ardent optimist in the fullness of man, he awaits better days of purer efflorescence of man.

The quest for Truth is the quest for the inner essence of man. It is the quest that calls forth means for synchronization between Truth and non-violence. As the core of religion is prayer, so is Truth that constitutes the highest and noblest prayer that leads to the harmonized essence of Truth and Ahimsa. And as prayer is the core of the lift of man so is his endeavor at making a fusion between Truth and Ahimsa that becomes a part and parcel of the essence of man. Gandhi banks upon Ahimsa essentially because it is a means—a very effective means which shakes hands with Truth, the end or the goal of man. To arrive at this goal, one must, as Gandhi emphasizes, continually strive even in the face of repeated failures. He is more interested in visualizing God in the quest for Truth than in anything else, and so, he takes recourse to Ahimsa which serves as a certain and definite means for Truth.

When Gandhi advocates for cultivation of Truth as the essence of man, he also advocates for practice of patience. The lesson learnt through cultivation of patience is the lesson of love and mutual understanding between man and man. Therein lies the fountain of greatness that leads man towards unison with Truth. To be baptised with the spirit of patience is to be baptised with the training of how to purify oneself amidst sorrows and sufferings, obstacles and constraints. The path of Ahimsa is, therefore, the path of patience and suffering, the path of continual crystallization for whatever is good for mankind.

For adherence to true idealism which conforms to the practical and living aspects of religion, Gandhi makes inroads to the concept of inwardness in man. This means that man must strive hard to be worthy of an ideal which has its close

alliance with Truth. He allows man to keep open the doors of consciousness in order to celebrate the essence of religion in idealism not in a narrow compass but in a wider context of the religion of boundlessness. To orient oneself with this spirit of idealism is to orient one's faith in religion in the right perspective of perfection. Herein lies the virtue of an ideal that coordinates religion in the spirit of boundlessness. Otherwise, man becomes a victim to imperfection and parochialism. What, therefore, contributes to the excellence of man is the continual assessment of an ideal he so enriches on or sticks to it for crystallization.

Gandhi is aware of crystallization further beyond man by means of aesthetics. This means that in the process of continual advancement, man must practice the aesthetics of Truth, Goodness and Beauty. A continual process of refinement of sensibilities will allow him to see into the purity and perfection of everything in which he is involved. He cannot, therefore, but evaluate himself in terms of Goodness awaiting better exploration and identification with Truth and Beauty. The aesthetics of soul-force as Gandhi visualizes in his concept of non-violence forewarns man against demolishing conscience which hinders him from being led astray. It is also an acid test for every person in the face of violence, when the aesthetics of serenity and calmness of mind elevates him from man the animal to man the divine and a part inseparable of the All Beautiful. Gandhi also heightens the concept of man in his aesthetic role in negotiating violence by non-violence from two other vital perspectives. First, to err is human and to forgive and forget, divine. Herein lies the beauty of non-violence that enables man to rise above petty self-interest and self-glory. Second, violence replaced by non-violence shows the indomitable power of man who knows how to win over erudities and littleness in his very approach to evaluating the antecedents and consequences of violence. Moreover, it also indicates that by dint of application of the aesthetics of goodness for one and all in course of following the principles of non-violence; he restrains himself from being unjust and indecisive by means of violent actions and even of contemplation.

That focal point of interest in Gandhian religion is man. Bereft of man, religion as Gandhi considers, turns out to be a dogma. Here, too, he adorns man not merely as a religious being, but obviously as an aesthetically religious being. Religion, therefore, becomes an aesthetics life force for man with inner poignance of Truth. The religion of man, as Gandhi advocates, is the religion of compassion, of living together, and never torment the orgy of irreligion in apathy and hatred for man. Gandhian religion also re-ensures the fact that man is never brutal but always friendly and benevolent. 'Brutalization of human nature', as he thinks, can be encountered most successfully not by brutal force or violence, but by admitting the divine essence of man, which is beyond destruction and, therefore, always alive and inspiring and stimulating to anyone who cares for the muse of the glory of man. Man, the apparently brutal being, frantically seeks an antidote to his animal passion, which is always to be had within himself only when he is allowed to identify and eliminate his brutal behavioural designs and spurts. Gandhi also reminds man of the fact that as a human being each man is an indivisible part of God. All men are, according to him, the sons of God and, as such, the wrong committed by one man is also the wrong of the other.

Man: A manifestation of God

In keeping with his religious beliefs he modestly accepted the Hindu view which states that "man is a complex, multi-dimensional being including within him

different elements of matter, life, consciousness, intelligence and the divine spark”. But Gandhi did not rest content with accepting blindly the Hindu concept of man. He gave it a revolutionary thrust by uncovering the dynamism inherent in it. Basic to Gandhi’s concept of the human self is the belief that man is essentially a manifestation of God. Gandhi understood and acknowledged the physical, psychological, intellectual and moral dimensions of the human self. But underlying all these, as the informing principle, is the spirit or the soul which is ‘original and co-eternal with God’ though part of God and as such dependent on God. It is clear that this view is logically connected to his view of the world also. As everything in the universe is a manifestation of God man cannot be otherwise. He says, if the world is but a reflection of *Brahman*, the individual self is but a spark of the Universal effulgence. Indeed both are one, but for the limiting conditions. For quite some time this *Upanishadic* vision that *atman* the individual self, and *Paramatman*, the Imperishable, Unmanifest, Exhaustless and Supreme Brahman, are not two but one. So, in order to describe his concept of the self especially the relationship between God and the individual soul, Gandhi used to quote an Urdu couplet which means “Adam is not God, but he is a spark of the divine”. But later the *Upanishadic* vision became clearer to him and he whole-heartedly subscribed to that view of non-dualism between the universal self and the individual self. In a letter to Mira Behn, Gandhi confessed that the meaning of the last two lines of the first verse of the morning prayer in the Ashram, which means: “I am that immaculate *Brahman* which ever notes the states of dream, wakefulness. and deep sleep, not this body, the compound made of elements”, upset him. He wrote, “Formerly I used to shudder to utter this verse, thinking the claim made therein was arrogant. But when I saw the meaning more clearly. I perceived at once that... we are the Being, the witness pervading the countless bodies”.

What actually Gandhi wants man to have it to undergo trying transcendence in order to be a global partner of One World. One man, one great family of man. Let the *Upanishadic* spirit, the spirit of oneness of mankind, be the guiding spirit of man. Let man march ahead to fulfill the global mission of man: *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*-the endearing relationship between man and man.

3.4 IMPLICATIONS

The doctrine of man’s oneness with God and humanity has several implications. First of all, this doctrine is incompatible with the belief that an individual may gain spiritually and those that surround him suffer. Gandhi believed that if one man gains spiritually, the whole world gains with him and, if one man falls, the whole world falls to that extent. There is not a single virtue which aims at or is content with the welfare of the individual alone. Conversely, there is not a single moral offense which does not, directly or indirectly, affect many others besides the actual offender. Hence, whether an individual is good or bad is not merely his own concern, but really the concern of the whole community, indeed of the whole world. Secondly, the monistic doctrine implies that all human beings are working consciously or unconsciously towards the realization of that identity. Thirdly, what one man is capable of achieving is possible for all to attain. The soul is one in all. Its possibilities are the same for everyone. Fourthly, it is quite proper to resist and attack a system, but to attack and resist the author is tantamount to resisting and attacking oneself. Fifthly, man’s ultimate aim is the realization

of God, and all his activities, social, political, religious, have to be guided by the ultimate aim of the vision of God. The immediate service of all human beings becomes a necessary part of the endeavor, simply because the only way to find God is to see God in creation and be one with it. This can only be done by service of all, as he says, "I am a part and parcel of the whole, and I cannot find Him apart from the rest of humanity."

Oneness of man and of all life:

Another implication of the conviction that man is the manifestation of the Supreme is the belief that all life is one. And like an *advaitin*, Gandhi did believe in the essential oneness of everything, sentient and non-sentient. This belief further implies that the universe is a harmonious whole whose parts should naturally and spontaneously function together. So everything and everyone has its role or duty, value and significance. Thus equality comes up as a natural corollary to this belief. It follows that inequality, segregation, discrimination, violence or exploitation of any sort is unnatural and against the law of God, world and man. Gandhi's proclaimed stand against exploitation and injustice of any kind, whether it be untouchability, racism, or suppression of women, is in keeping with this belief that all life is one. In short, a whole set of new attitudes and values are born out of this vision and they serve as the foundation on which a new order in tune with the perception of oneness is to be evolved.

The sense of oneness of the entire humanity and non-human nature has another insight to offer regarding the impact of human action on society and the natural environment. Since all life is one and man is gregarious every single act of the individual whether intentional or otherwise, exerts its impact on society. So Gandhi considers it the bounden duty of every one to exercise his reason and will carefully and cautiously and modulate his behaviour in such a way that the whole community, nay, the whole world gains out of it.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) How are Man and God related ?

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2) Reflect on the implications that flow from Gandhi's concept of human nature.

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3.5 LET US SUM UP

We have attempted to have a bird's-eye-view of Gandhian understanding of human nature and its essence. The significance of the Gandhian views on the condition of man is the preparedness for error in our endeavors and the readiness to take large risks, checked by a continuous exercise of self-analysis and the willingness to make amends for mistakes made through weakness of will. Such involvement in the affairs of the world combined with the discipline that comes with the cultivation of inwardness merges the ideal of individual enlightenment and collective welfare. One should strive towards this awareness which can only be the outcome of one's realization of self and its nature.

3.6 KEY WORDS

- Cosmos** : a well-coordinated whole whose parts were all interdependent.
- Brahmanirvana** : self-realization through the service of men.
- Consciously-divine** : endowed with the potential of divinity.

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