

# **Gandhi: Truth and Non-Violence**

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No society can exist if there is no minimum acceptance of truth and non-violence. Every society is built on certain basic moral values like keeping a promise for instance, which is the minimum value of truth and coexisting without causing undue harm to members in society which again is the minimum value of non-violence. One can visualize early society framing some basic rules of conduct for society as a whole so that it can function within a certain amount of law and order. In early society, religion also played a role in framing some basic rules of conduct and in the Indian context Hinduism had evolved this grand concept denoted by the word dharma which stands for "a behavior that behooves a human being" which means that humans have to follow certain basic rules of conduct for society to exist without conflict. It does not mean however, that rules by themselves ensure that individuals follow them necessarily. Most people would conveniently follow the norms when it suits them and otherwise turn a blind eye to them. However, once in a while, history has been witness to extra-ordinary individuals who committed themselves to certain values which they had inherited by virtue of having been born into a tradition that accepted those values and which they considered to be of paramount importance both in their personal lives and in their dealings with other members in society.

One such individual was Mahatma Gandhi whose name, before he came to be given the honorific Mahatma which means 'great person' was Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Born into a devout Vaisnava family i.e. one that believed in devotion to the highest Deity called Vishnu, and who practiced vegetarianism, Gandhi was already familiar with not killing for the sake of food. He was also heir to the five cardinal moral virtues of truth, non-violence, non-stealing, self-control and non-greed preached both by the Jaina path of faith and by the Hindus but visibly present in the Jaina community which had a strong presence in Porbandar/Gujarat where he was born and spent the early years of his life. While all this is the common heritage of a number of people born into the tradition and who were also placed in similar circumstances, there was something unique in Gandhi that made him take these values seriously. Thus, he talks about his first experiment with truth in his autobiography when he was a school lad and his school master wanted him to copy from his class mate in order to impress the visiting inspector of the caliber of his students. Knowing fully well that he would be punished for disobeying his master, Gandhi at the young age of ten refused to obey him and stuck to 'truth' which to his tender mind meant that he had to be truthful to himself and not pretend he knew what he did not in fact know. There would be many more such incidents in his early life. These early lessons would eventually mature into a grand philosophical outlook, wherein Gandhi combined his vision of Truth along with Non-violence or ahimsa, for he clearly understood that truth and non-violence implied each other and are incomplete when not practiced together. Thus he declares in his Autobiography: *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, that ahimsa is the basis for the search for truth. He also went to the extent of equating truth with non-violence and "towards the end of his life ...said that the root of all his activity lay in truth otherwise known to me as non-violence". He considered truth and non-violence as the two sides of a coin, the one being incomplete without the other.

While Gandhi inherited these values of Truth and Non-violence from his heritage, the way he interpreted their psychological implications were his own. He believed that fear is at the root of both fraud (falsehood/untruth) and force (violence) . He also had the firm conviction that one who adheres to truth at all times will be fearless enough which will entail his being

non-violent as well. Psychology tells us that a fearful person is an insecure person and it is such a one who resorts to all kinds of subterfuge in order to surmount his fear. Falsehood or telling lies as well as turning violent are well known defense mechanisms of people who have fear in one form or another or who feel insecure because of fear and it seems Gandhi had hit upon a great psychological fact when he said that fear is at the basis of falsehood and violence. But this discovery did not come about all of a sudden. While the values of truth and non-violence were embedded in his psyche right from childhood, they had to be tested in the fire of apartheid in S.Africa which is where Gandhi got the opportunity to refine these ideas and also test them in the arena of S.African politics. It is the lessons that he learnt in the political struggles in S.Africa that enabled him to later apply the weapons of truth and non-violence in the freedom struggle against the British in India.

That Gandhi was not just paying lip service to the ideas of truth and non-violence, but believed them to be the guiding principles in his life, are illustrated on many occasions both in S.Africa and in India. It is his commitment to truth and non-violence which is at the basis of the Satyagraha concept which Gandhi developed and practiced for the first time in S.Africa and which he then used as guidance not only in all his personal dealings but also in his political life. Politics is the last place one would think in which the principles of truth and non-violence can be applied. But Gandhi demonstrated to the world, in many of his political campaigns, that he would not compromise with these twin principles, even against great odds. The logic for the use of nonviolence and truth, according to Gandhi was that adherence to truth through non-violence would enable the change of heart of even the worst opponent or enemy.

Gaining independence for the Indians from the British colonial power was paramount in Gandhi's mind as colonialism was against all moral and ethical laws and was an act of violence. However, he did not advocate the resort to any means for the gaining of swaraj or self-government/independence. A mere change of government from a foreign to an indigenous one can only be one in form according to Gandhi. True swaraj can only come with a change of one's inner personality, wherein the principles of truth and non-violence guide all one's actions. Thus for Gandhi the means were to be as pure as the end to be achieved and if the means were tarnished the end would be shaky.

Keeping these in mind one could look at the general way in which Gandhi conducted his political campaigns adhering to the twin values of truth and non-violence. Whenever he planned any protests against any of the Government regulations, he would send in advance the reasons for his actions and also the exact plan of action like the date, the place it would start from, the specific item or measure that was the focus of the protest and so on. He was thus adhering to his commitment to truth by not deceiving the opponent by surprise, as to the time and place of action. In the 1920s, when a large number of people were taken prisoners and the government resorted to repressive actions against all and sundry and banned all public demonstrations, Gandhi, under constant pressure from his own Congress party, had to use civil disobedience as a last resort to persuade the government against these extreme measures as he also believed that, committed to truth as he was, it was the duty of every individual to resist unjust rule. At the same time, his commitment to non-violence made him caution them against lawlessness and the resort to violence and he was prepared to call the movement to a halt at any moment, if he thought it had descended to violence.

The Chaurie Chaura police station incident in 1922 is an important test case and reveals the sincerity and honesty of Gandhi in his following his commitment to truth and nonviolence in his actions. Thus when civil disobedience was planned in the district of Bardoli in North India

on an experimental basis Gandhi firstly informed the highest authorities on Feb first 1922 that civil disobedience will be resorted to if the prevailing repressive measures were not withdrawn. When the government rejected his plea for the withdrawal, a number of the residents of Chaurie Chaura went in a procession and resisted the attempts of the police to break up the procession and when it failed the police opened fire against a non-violent procession. When their ammunition was exhausted, the police took refuge in a nearby police station. The fury of the mob resulted in their setting fire to the police station and a number of policemen were burnt alive as a result. Gandhi was furious when he heard the news and in spite of great opposition from his own friends and party ordered the stoppage of the civil disobedience movement and also decided to go on a fast as penance for the violence committed. The lessons that were learnt at Chauri Chaura would lay the foundations of truth and non-violence stronger for future Satyagraha campaigns.

The salt Satyagraha is, perhaps, where the weapons of truth and non-violence were truly tested and proven to have matured into the greatest weapon against political oppression. Common salt got from the sea, which Gandhi argued was the right of every person to possess and which was a poor man's food in India, was subject to tax and anyone taking salt from the sea was subject to punishment. "The salt tax is the most iniquitous of all [taxes] from the poor man's standpoint" says Gandhi and therefore it had no legs to stand on. He therefore, decided to launch a non-violent Satyagraha against this unlawful and unjust tax in the form of a salt march to the sea where the satyagrahis could pick up their own salt from its natural source. This march to the sea led by Gandhi, in order to collect a handful of salt, is immortalized in history as the famous Dandi Salt march of 1930. As was his wont, before the salt march, Gandhi wrote an open letter to the Viceroy Lord Irwin, stating his reasons for starting the civil disobedience and also giving him the exact date and place it will start from.

The salt march witnessed one of the worst sights of brutal repression of the British government when wave upon wave of satyagrahis were beaten and wounded, some fatally. But it also speaks volumes about the maturity of the satyagrahis who, unlike at Chauri Chaura, did not raise a finger against their oppressors, and observed the principle of non-violence in every sense of the term. The world wide publicity that this non-violent protest against the salt tax got, won recognition for Gandhi and his non-violent movement as well as condemnation for the violent tactics of the British power. It is dramatized vividly in Attenborough's famous film on Gandhi in the eighties which won eight Oscar awards. This historic salt march and the brutal scenes of violence against the non-violent salt satyagrahis that accompanied it, spread world wide antagonism against the rulers who were perceived as oppressing a non-violent peaceful struggle for the independence of a country and this, in turn, hastened the departure of the British from India.

It would be proper to speculate on the factors that give rise to people like Gandhi. India has had a long tradition of a number of spiritual leaders using and preaching truth and non-violence for harmony in their personal and communal lives. But using these moral principles in the political arena was probably the genius of Gandhi. There is the great Indian emperor Asoka of the third century BCE, who is reputed to have shunned all violence after witnessing mass killings in one of his battles and who then converted to Buddhism and actively preached non-violence and truth thereafter. After that history is witness only to Gandhi who in the twentieth century almost 2300 years after Asoka applied these principles for a political cause. One needs to ask the question as to what makes individuals like Asoka and Gandhi risk everything and sacrifice all in the service of the highest principles they believe in.

In assessing Gandhi one has to bear in mind that he was a man of action and did not unnecessarily concern himself either with the theoretical aspects or of the practical difficulties in adopting the moral principles he believed in. That in turn was the legacy of the culture he was born into. His was not a fragmented approach to a political situation but in keeping with the holistic world view of the Hindus was subsumed under a grand vision "of the moral responsibilities of the citizen" within the physical and moral order of the universe. This grand moral and physical order was called Rta in the Vedas and later came to be viewed as Dharma and an individual was to live in the world trying to realize his/her exalted goal of liberation by pursuing moral principles in every walk of life which did not exclude the political as well.

Gandhi found a deep contradiction in the moral values that people/politicians proclaim as individuals and their non-application in political and community life. He probably believed that by bringing in religious and moral principles like truth and non-violence into the society as a whole it would be possible to get rid of the prevalent "soulless" politics and power-seeking that characterized all institutions and political institutions in particular. Since all people cannot be expected to live by these exalted standards it is left to the leaders in society and politics to show the way and appeal to the moral dimension of human conscience to be able to reform the political arena as a whole.

For Gandhi truth was the supreme value and the goal of all action. It was not an ideal to be reflected on and achieved in a state of moksa/liberation but to be achieved in action. Since truth is abstract it can only be tested by adherence to non-violence. Raghavan Iyer explains this equation as follows: "We cannot be genuine in our pursuit of truth if we are prepared to harm our fellow men. On the other hand, if we practice non-violence in all our relationships, we promote the common pursuit of truth". Gandhi was convinced that political and social tensions come about because we are more concerned with self interest than with the truth and a scrupulous observance of truth can lead to reducing tensions in the world.

Persons disagree about their ends as they hold to different relative truths, but their common concern for truth requires as a corollary the practice of tolerance and non-violence (ahimsa) towards each other. This led Gandhi to emphasize the twin moral principles of truth and non-violence in every sphere of human activity including that of politics. One can argue endlessly as to whether this is a practical proposition or not but history has again witnessed individuals like Martin Luther King Junior and others applying the same method of non-violence to solve political problems. The votaries may be assassinated in the process but they stand as beacons of light illuminating the darkness of despair and giving hope when situations look gloomy. The fascination that Gandhi still holds for the world is the almost impossible task of adherence to truth and non-violence that Gandhi achieved against great odds to himself and his family. In keeping with the age old dictum in Sanskrit that the whole world is one's family Gandhi truly lived a life possessing the whole world as his own family. It is no wonder that one of the greatest minds in the twentieth century, Einstein, paid him this tribute when he heard of his assassination : "Generations to come, it may be, will scarcely believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth".

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### **About the Speaker:**

Dr. T.S.Rukmani has had a distinguished academic record and has been teaching and researching mainly in the areas of Hinduism, Advaita Vedanta and Sankhya-Yoga for the past 40 years.

She joined the Department of Religion, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada, as Professor and Chair for Hindu Studies in 1996. Was the first Chair for Hindu Studies and Indian Philosophy at University of Durban Westville, Durban, South Africa before taking over her post in Canada.

Since the establishment of Delhi University 80 years ago, she is the only academic in its Department of Sanskrit to have been honored with the highest degree of D.Litt. Rukmani also has the distinction of being the first woman, and the second person, to receive a Ph.D. in Sanskrit from the same University. In addition, she obtained the double distinction of gaining first position in the University, both in her MA and BA degree examinations and was awarded a gold medal for her MA achievement.

In 1972, she was awarded the Ida Smedley International Fellowship to work as a post-doctoral fellow on comparative philosophy, under the guidance of the world-renowned philosopher, the late Prof. BK Matilal, at Toronto University. .

Amongst the many awards that Rukmani has won are: Award by Mandakini, Sanskrit Research organization, for excellence in Sanskrit Research (Vidyavacaspati) at the Tenth World Sanskrit Conference, Bangalore, 1997; Fellowship at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study in Shimla, India in 1989 and 2003; and The Delhi Sanskrit Academy award for Sanskrit scholarship in 1993.

Her four volume work on Vijnanabhiksu's Yogavarttika and her two volume work on Sankara's Yogasutrabhasyavivarana have been widely acclaimed in scholarly circles as significant contributions to the furtherance of Yoga Philosophy. Both are published by the well known Indological publishers Munshiram Manoharlal in Delhi, India. She has also written and edited six other books dealing with different aspects of religion and philosophy and has published many research papers in academic journals, both in India and in other parts of the world.

After her tenure in the Indraprastha College at Delhi University, India from 1964 to 1981, she took over as Principal of Miranda House the only University college for Women of Delhi University. She held this post for over ten years before she went to South Africa to take up her assignment as the first Professor of Hindu Studies and Indian Philosophy in 1993.

Besides her deep commitment to academics, Rukmani has been active in "Women's Studies" and programs connected with women. She was President of the University Women's Association of Delhi for two years and was a member of the International Federation of University Women's Fellowship Committee in Geneva (Switzerland) for three years. She is at present on the Consultative Committee of the International Association for Sanskrit Studies.