LESSON - 1

GANDHIAN NATIONALISM

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Objectives

After reading this article you will be familiar with:

- Gandhi’s idea of the Indian National Identity
- The Gandhian imperatives for fostering a strong nationalist identity and spirit in the context of the freedom struggle against the British
- The main elements of his nationalist program

Introduction

We take for granted our nationalist identity as Indians. We know we have a government and a state and an army to protect us from external aggression. We cheer our cricket team and feel proud at the achievements of fellow Indians in various fields. Today the nationalist identity and feeling among the people is well established and has taken deep roots.

But this was not always so. Like other social phenomenon nationalism also evolved historically. Along with the emergence of social and historical conditions communities came up in various parts of the world. They often came up through tribal, slave and feudal phases of social existence. At a certain stage of social, economic and cultural development nations came into being. It was distinguished by certain specific characteristics such as

(a) an organic whole of the members of the nation living in a distinct territory
(b) a single economy
(c) a consciousness of a common economic existence
(d) a common language and
(e) naturally a common culture which evolved.

And this process developed from sixteenth century onwards as a part of the development of human history. Generally speaking development of nationalism in various counties was a prolonged historical process. It is in the development of historical conditions that nation states developed. And development of nationalism in different countries was determined by its social and cultural history - its political, economic and social structures. And the character of its various classes, which played the role of vanguard of struggle for a national social existence. Therefore every nation was born and forged in unique way. The history of seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth century India is primarily the history of formation of a nation and the struggle against internal and external obstacles in that process.

Indian nationalism is a modern phenomenon. It came into being during the British period as a result of various subjective and objective factors and forces, which developed within the Indian society under the conditions of British rule and the impact of world forces.

Pre-British India was unique. It sharply differed from the pre-capitalist medieval societies of Europe. It was a vast country inhabited by huge population speaking many languages with
different religions. Socially it was dominated by a population which was Hindu in character, but there was no homogeneity. This extreme social, religious division of the Hindus in particular and the Indian in general presents a peculiar background to the growth of Indian nationalism. It was under the conditions of political subjection that the British introduced for its own purposes certain changes which introduced new social forces which radically changed the economic structure of the Indian society. It established

(a) centralised state (modern civil service, centralised administration, judiciary, new land ownership laws, zamindari system etc)
(b) introduced modern education (establishment of universities and colleges)
(c) modern means of transport and communication (postal system, railways, roads etc)
(d) modern press
(e) slow development of industries (introduction of just, tea etc)

and it is the combination of these very social forces along with its character of exploitation which emerged under the part of the British rule and became the basis of the rise and development of Indian nationalism. It is the British colonial rule under East Indian Company and subsequently under the British government from 1858 that the Indian people entered into a period of severe repression and exploitation. It is in this background that we see a number of peasant rebellions, which was prominent in the history of eighteen-century India including a large number of famines for example.

Prof. Irfan Habib has succinctly commented:

‘The unification of the country on an economic plane by the construction of railways and the introduction of the telegraph in the latter half of the nineteenth century, undertaken for its own benefit by the colonial regime, and the centralisation of the administration which the new modes of communications and transport made possible, played their part in making Indians view India as a prospective single political entity. Modern education (undertaken in a large part by indigenous effort) and the rise of the press disseminated the ideas of India’s nationhood and the need for constitutional reform. A substantive basis for India’s nationhood was laid when nationalists like Dadabhoy Naoroji (Poverty and UnBritish Rule in India, 1901) and R.C. Dutt (Economic History of India, 2 vols., 1901 and 1903) raised the issues of poverty of the Indian people and the burden of colonial exploitation, which was felt in equal measure throughout India.

We see, then, that three complex processes enmeshed to bring about the emergence of India as a nation: the preceding notion of India as a country, the influx of modern political ideas, and the struggle against colonialism. The last was decisive: the creation of the Indian nation can well be said to be one major achievement of the national movement.’ (Source: Irfan Habib, ‘The nation that is India’, The Little Magazine, Vol III : issue 2)

When Gandhiji emerged in the national movement after his South African experience in the post first world period with the non-cooperation movement. India by this time had seen through the peasant struggles of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries including the revolt of 1857. The social reform movements - the Brahma Samaj, Dayanand Saraswati’s Arya Samaj Movements etc passed into liberal phases subsequently with the formation of the Indian National Congress in 1885 and leaders like Gokhale, Ranade, Dadabhai Naoroji, W.C. Banerjee etc. The whole movement was socially forward but politically backward. It was the militant nationalism of the famous Lal-Bal-Pal with their slogan of ‘Swaraj is my birth right’ to a revolutionary
terrorism with bombs, pistols, individual killings as a method with individual martyrs like Surya Sen and Bhagat Singh which formed the background to Gandhi’s emergence.

It was only after this that the age of Gandhi began and his continued dominance and leadership of the national movement as the pre-dominant leader of the Indian National Congress till the achievement of independence. Therefore it was a challenge for the Indian nationalist leadership to develop a national identity, a method of struggle and transform the movement into a mass movement of the Indian people.

Mohandas Karam Chand Gandhi is significant because he could understand and bring the Indian masses – men and women – urban and rural – into the national movement. It was a radical break from the earlier methods of struggle.

Discussion

Before we start discussing Gandhi’s views on nation, nationhood, or nationalism it is necessary to have a brief overview of the whole period of the freedom movement when Gandhi occupied the centre stage. It is true that Gandhi could evolve a program of struggle which could recognise the role of the masses and the mass actions which involved every section of the society and for the first time it was under his leadership that Indian national movement became a multi-class nationalist movement and it was under his leadership that masses came out to court arrest, jails and cold face police firing and created an undying hatred against the British rule and a thrust for swaraj or freedom. It should also be remembered that Gandhi provided a program of action for each sections of the society. For peasantry, non-payment of land tax, for students, boycott of educational institutions, for lawyers, desertion of the courts, for women – picketing the liquor shops, foreign cloth shops and he asked the people as a whole to violate ‘lawless laws’ and it is under his call that millions of Indians joined the demonstrations and marched into jails using methods of satyagraha, non-cooperation, and civil disobedience. His use of hunger strikes, mass demonstrations, deliberate courting of jails were the principal weapons which he added to the nationalist struggle. The period between 1919 to independence is marked by three important struggles - Non-cooperation movement of 1919, Civil Disobedience movement of 1930, with its call of complete independence and the famous Quit Indian Movement of 1942.

It is in this background we must try to understand Gandhi and his role in terms of Indian nationalism.

Therefore Gandhi, his technique of struggle, his concept of national identity was radically different as Professor Bhikhu Parekh has commented:

‘He more or less completely bypassed the dominant nationalist vocabulary and showed that it was possible to articulate and defend the case for independence in a very different language. He showed that not every movement for independence is national, not every nationalist movement is nationalist and that not every nationalist movement need articulate itself in the language of European rather than home-grown theories of nationalism’. (Source: Bhikhu Parekh, Gandhi’s Political Philosophy, p. 3)

Many of the other leaders who came before Gandhi were western trained lawyers or intellectuals and saw many positives to the Western British way of life and were demanding from the British the same liberal system and parliamentary democracy on the basis of self-
determination that the British had in their own homeland and also hoped to stop the economic exploitation of colonial rule. But Gandhi focussed on the way of life of the Indian village and its thousands of years old substantially self-contained and self-sufficient system to argue for a different kind of national life where that way of life would be valued and protected and it’s strengths fully taken advantage of in the interest of the nation. He also argued the basic purpose of life in the Indian national understanding was spiritual growth (or attaining moksha) and one of the best facilitators of this moral cultivation was the simple and sustainable way of life of the Indian village.

Prof. Bhikhu Parekh has commented:

‘For Gandhi British imperialism dominated India at three related but different levels. At the political level the arrogant colonial government oppressed the Indian people and denied their right to run their affairs themselves. At the economic level it exploited and impoverished them, destroyed their indigenous industries and subordinated their interests to those of the British economy. In Gandhi’s view this was far more disturbing than political oppression and could continue even if India became independent. At the most disturbing moral and cultural level, British imperialism destroyed the identity and integrity of Indian civilisation and turned the Indians into brown Englishmen. Gandhi was convinced that the rule of British civilisation could continue even if the British government were to stop ruling over India and British capital to cease exploiting it. British imperialism was unacceptable not only because of its political and even economic but moral and cultural consequences. The struggle against it had therefore to be mounted and independence obtained at all three levels, especially the last. At the cultural level the anti-imperialist struggle had to be fought on two fronts simultaneously. First, British civilisation, which so infantuated and blinded the Indians to the moral enormity of foreign rule and legitimised their economic and political domination must be subjected to a thorough-going critique. Second, the basic structure of Indian civilisation, which they largely saw through the biased British perspective, must be sensitively teased out and defended.

In interpreting British imperialism in this way, Gandhi integrated and went beyond the three different types of critique advanced by his predecessors. Broadly speaking Dadabhai Naoroji, Surendra Nath Banerjee, Gokhale and the so-called liberals had welcomed the political and cultural advantages of British rule but attacked it on the grounds that it had drained India’s wealth, ruined its industries, imposed unfair trading arrangements and subordinated its economic development to British colonial interests. Although mindful of its economic and cultural consequences, the leaders of the terrorist movements in Bengal and Maharashtra attacked it on political grounds and were the first to develop a distinctive theory of political as distinct from cultural nationalism. They argued that the Indians have as much right to run their affairs as the British had to run theirs, that colonialism was a form of slavery and outrage to Indian dignity and self-respect, and that the ‘honour’ of ‘mother India’ demanded that she should be freed of the ‘foreign yoke’. In a culture which conceptualises energy in feminine terms and associates activity and restlessness with woman and passivity and detachment with ma, it was not at all surprising that the votaries of violence should have idealised ‘mother’ India and drawn inspiration from the Goddess Kali. Finally Vivekananda, B.C. Pal, Tilak and the so-called conservative leaders concentrated on the need to preserve the integrity of traditional ways of life and thought. They introduced the concept of Indian civilisation to match the one championed by the British, sharply distinguished the two and attacked foreign rule not so much because it involved economic exploitation and violated Indian pride as because it imposed an alien materialist civilisation on India’s essentially spiritual one.
Gandhi’s critique of British rule encompassed all three.............He was even more sensitive to the integrity of Indian civilisation than were the conservative leaders. Indeed he argued that most of them were even more interested in the ‘synthesis’ of the two civilisations than in the integrity of their own, had unwittingly reinterpreted and anglicised it far more than they realised or cared to admit, and that their critique of British imperialism was half-hearted and lacked moral depth. Gandhi’s critique not only included but also related and integrated the three earlier critiques into a comprehensive theoretical framework. He argued that political independence was important not only as an expression of India’s pride and a necessary means to stop its economic exploitation but also to preserve its civilisation, without which political independence remained fragile. The economic exploitation had to be ended not only to sustain Indian independence and improve the living conditions of its people but also to preserve the social and economic basis of its civilisation.’  
(Source: Bhikhu Parekh, Gandhi’s Political Philosophy, pp. 19-20)

In fact Gandhi saw India as a battleground between the immoral western civilisation of which the British were an excellent example (and which he was convinced would ultimately not last because it was based on immoral values like greed which led to violence) and the sustainable moral civilisation of India where the focus was on helping each soul find his spiritual salvation or God. In fact even in his own life that was his priority.

He wrote once: ‘I count no sacrifice too great for the sake of seeing God face to face. The whole of my activity, whether it may be called social, political, humanitarian or ethical, is directed to that end. And as I know that God is found more often in the lowliest of His creatures than in the high and mighty, I am struggling to reach the status of these. I cannot do so without their service. Hence my passion for the service of the suppressed classes. And as I cannot render this service without entering politics, I find myself in them.’  
(Source: Young India, 1924)

His chosen way of reaching God was thus service of the poor and the oppressed but in a non-violent manner because violence would be sinful, non-spiritual, and non-religious. Thus he could not agree with Communists for instance who suggested that the rich and powerful will not give their relationship of dominance and exploitation of the poor and the weak without coercion or force because it was not to their advantage. But Gandhi’s approach was to strive for a change of heart and shun violence strictly and under all provocations and circumstances.

He once told the wife of his British surgeon in 1924: ‘My own motive is to put forth all my energy in an attempt to save Indian, that is, ancient culture, from impending destruction by modern, that is, Western culture being imposed upon India. The essence of ancient culture is based upon the practice of the utmost non-violence. Its motto is the good of all including every living thing, whereas Western culture is frankly based upon violence.’  
(Source: Gandhi to Mrs. Maddock, Collected Works of MK Gandhi, Vol. 23, p. 243)

While Gandhi was critical of the modern western civilisation and saw it as a danger he was not a nationalist in the narrow extreme sense, who hated other countries and wanted domination over them to spread his own version of what is superior civilisation. He was open to eventually spreading the message of his understanding of what should be a superior and sustainable civilisation to the whole world eventually but only after first establishing it well in
the country of it’s origin. In fact he was not averse to using the term Ram Raj even to refer to the India of his dreams even though the term is obviously open to communally sensitive interpretations.

But he had clarified that by ‘..Ramraj I do not mean Hindu Raj. I mean by Ramraj Divine Raj, The Kingdom of God’. (Source: Young India, Sept. 19, 1929) Further clarity on his conception of Ram Raj can be obtained from his other comments like:

‘The Ramraj of my dream ensures the rights alike of prince and pauper.’ (Source: Anand Bazar Patrika, Aug. 2, 1934)

‘There can be no Ramraj in the present state of iniquitous inequalities, in which a few roll in riches and the masses do not get even enough to eat.’ (Source: Harijan, June 1, 1947)

‘The ancient ideal of Ramraj is undoubtedly one of true democracy, in which the meanest citizen could be sure of swift justice without an elaborate and costly procedure.’ (Source: Young India, Sept. 19, 1929)

As is clear from the above, to understand Gandhian nationalism it is important to understand his critique of modern western civilisation. Gandhi wanted Indian nationalism to be about rejecting the British and western model of modern civilisation and a return to the basics of what he saw as India’s ancient genius. He was deeply aware that most people arguing for freedom were not appreciative quite so much of the glory of that civilisation and merely wanted a change of political rulers.

He once commented: ‘[You] want English rule without the Englishman. You want the tiger’s nature, not the tiger; that is to say, you would make India English. And when it becomes English, it will be called not Hindustan but Englistan. That is not the Swaraj I want.’ (Source: Hind Swaraj, p. 15)

Prof. Bhikhu Parekh has succinctly explained Gandhi’s understanding of modern civilisation as follows:

‘For Gandhi modern civilisation was propelled by the two inter-related principles of greed and want. It was controlled by ‘a few capitalist owners’ who had only one aim, to make profit, and only one means to do so, to produce goods that satisfied people’s wants. They had a vital vested interest in constantly whetting jaded appetites, planting new wants and creating a moral climate in which not to want the goods daily pumped into the market and to keep pace with the latest fashions was to be abnormal and archaic. Indeed, since self-discipline or restriction of desires, the very emblem of human dignity, threatened to cause mass unemployment, throw the economic system out of gear and cause human suffering, it was seen as anti-social and immoral. Not surprisingly men saw themselves not as self-determining moral subjects but as consumers or vehicles for the satisfaction of externally-induced wants.

The capitalist search for profits led to mechanisation and ‘industrialism’. For Gandhi machines relieved drudgery, created leisure, increased efficiency and were indispensable when there was a shortage of labour. Their use must therefore be guided by a well-considered moral theory indicating how men should live, spend their free time and relate to one another. Since the modern economy lacked such a theory and was only propelled by the search for profit, it mechanised production without any regard for its wider moral, cultural and other consequences. Machines were introduced even when there was no obvious need for them and were in fact likely to throw thousands out of work. This was justified either in the name of increased leisure without
anyone asking why it was important and what to do with it, or of cheaper goods, as if man was only a passive consumer and not an active moral being for whose sanity, self-respect and dignity the right to work was far more important than the febrile gratification of trivial wants. Treated with the veneration and awe accorded to Gods in primitive societies, machines had come to cast a magic spell on modern man and followed their own will. For Gandhi the mechanisation or fetishism of technology was closely tied up with the larger phenomenon of industrialism, another apparently self-propelling and endless process of creating larger and larger industries with no other purpose than to produce cheap consumer goods and maximise profit. He argued that since modern economic life followed an inexorable momentum of its own, it reduced men to its helpless and passive victims and represented a new form of slavery, more comfortable and invidious and hence more dangerous than the earlier ones.

Based on the belief that life was continuous motion and movement, that unless one was constantly on the move one was not alive and that the faster the tempo of life the more alive one was, modern civilisation was inherently restless and intolerant of stability. It aimed to conquer time and space and developed increasingly speedier modes of transport and communication. Cars were replaced by trains and the later by planes, but no one asked why one needed to travel so fast and what one intended to do with the time saved. Thanks to its restless and ‘mindless activism’ incorrectly equated with dynamism and energy, modern civilisation undermined man’s unity with his environment and fellow men and destroyed stable and long-established communities. In the absence of natural and social roots and stable and enduring landmarks which alone gave man a sense of identity and continuity, modern man had become abstract, indeterminate and empty. He was not internally or organically related to others and his relations with them were not grounded in the sentiments of fellow feeling and good will. Everyone was a stranger to everyone else and no one cared for or knew how to behave towards others…………

In Gandhi’s view the exploitation of one’s fellow men was built into the very structure of modern civilisation. Consumers were constantly manipulated into desiring things they did not need and which were not in their long-term interest. Workers were made to do boring jobs at subsistence wages under inhuman conditions and given little opportunity or encouragement to develop their intellectual and moral potential. The poor were treated with contempt and held responsible for their own misfortunes. The weaker races were treated as if they were animals and bought and sold and brutally exploited. The weaker nations were conquered, mercilessly oppressed and used as dumping grounds for surplus goods and as sources of cheap raw materials. For Gandhi imperialism was only an acute manifestation of the aggressive and exploiting impulse lying at the very heart of modern civilisation and at work in all areas of human relationships.’ (Source: Bhikhu Parekh, Gandhi’s Political Philosophy, pp. 22-23)

Gandhi was troubled by the fact that modern civilisation entailed a certain surrender of the individual to the institutionalised modern state which undermined the individual’s cultivation of his human powers of self-determination, autonomy, self-knowledge (in the spiritual sense), self-discipline and social cooperation. Gandhi was naturally therefore not very impressed by modern institutions and systems of education, law, medicine, media etc and even the system of a modern democratic state led by the functioning of a parliament at the top. Gandhi was deeply disturbed by the education system that the modern British western state had imposed on India as can be judged from his following comment in a letter to an associate: ‘the system of education at present in vogue is wholly unsuited to India’s needs, is a bad copy of the Western model and it has by reason of the medium of instruction being a foreign language
sapped the energy of youths who have passed through our schools and colleges and has produced an army of clerks and office-seekers. It has dried up all originality, impoverished the vernaculars and has deprived the masses of the benefit of higher knowledge which would otherwise have percolated to them through the intercourse of the educated classes with them. The system has resulted in creating a gulf between educated India and the masses. It has stimulated the brain but starved the spirit for want of a religious basis for education and emaciated the body for want of training in handicrafts. It has criminally neglected the greatest need of India in that there is no agricultural training worth the name......’ (Source: Collected Works of MK Gandhi, Vol. 14) Gandhi was deeply disturbed by the fact that modern western English education was creating a divide in Indian society between those who were English educated and those who were not. Professor Judith Brown in her biography of Gandhi has explained how this led to Gandhi’s search for a common national language – probably one of the first people to carry out this task. She has commented:

‘His increasing emphasis on the divisiveness of contemporary Indian education showed his growing identification with the poor in his homeland rather than with the educated with whom he would naturally have fitted by virtue of his own education and professional training. His concern for what education was doing to India and Indians also led him into deeper consideration of the problem of finding a genuinely national language rather than English, with all its drawbacks of social exclusiveness and association with the political and cultural rejection of the nation’s own rich heritage. As early as December 1916 he presided at a conference on this issue; in October 1917 he was president of a Gujarat educational conference at which he dealt with the question of a national language as well as wider educational issues. His preference was for Hindi as spoken by north Indians, Muslim and Hindu, which could be written in either Devanagri or Persian scripts. This was to be a significant aspect of his work for a new national identity and true swaraj until the end of his life’. (Source: Judith M. Brown, Gandhi – Prisoner of Hope, p. 107, Oxford University Press)

Gandhi was against the whole attitude and approach of modern western allopathic medical science. In fact in his own personal life he experimented with Indian healing methods whenever possible in his ashrams and elsewhere and would be much disturbed if he had to see a doctor either for himself or any of his family members.

Gandhi was also deeply distressed with the British system of law even though he was a London trained lawyer himself professionally. Bhikhu Parekh has brought out Gandhi’s objections to the British system of legal dispute resolution rather well: ‘Gandhi thought that ... dehumanising phenomenon ... was evident in the field of law. Men were intelligent and moral beings capable of resolving their differences by discussing them in the spirit of charity and good will or by seeking the arbitration of widely respected men and women in their community. Instead, every time he failed to get what he thought was his due, modern man rushed to the court of law where trained experts in the esoteric body of legal knowledge conducted expensive and incomprehensible debates about him without his participation. ...the legal establishment reduced him to a case to be discussed as if he were a child to be tutored into what to say about his own actions and incapable of participating in their evaluation. ... the legal system did little to develop and mobilise man’s moral impulses and capacities for reflection and introspection. Instead it required him to alienate them to a central agency telling him how to run his life and conduct his relations with others, including his own neighbours, wife, ex-wife and children. Gandhi found it
strange that modern man who talked so much about his self-respect and dignity, did not find all this deeply humiliating.’ (Source: Bhikhu Parekh, Gandhi’s Political Philosophy, p. 27)

In fact Gandhi was not convinced even by the western model of the state itself.

He once commented: ‘The state represents violence in a concentrated and organised form. The individual has a soul but the state is a soul-less machine, it can never be weaned from violence to which it owes its very existence.’ (Source: The Modern Review, Oct.1935)

Prof. Bhikhu Parekh has explained well the reason why Gandhi saw the modern state as violent: ‘Gandhi argued that the highly centralised and bureaucratic modern state enjoying and jealously guarding its monopoly of political power was a necessary product of modern civilisation. Competitive and aggressive men ruthlessly pursuing their own interests could only be held together by a well-armed state. Since they were all strangers to one another and lacked the bond of good will and mutual concern, their relations could only be regulated by impersonal rules imposed and enforced by such a powerful external agency as the state. The centralisation of production in the modern economy created social and economic problems of national and international magnitude, and again required a centralised political agency to deal with them. Unemployment, poverty and the social and economic inequalities created by the modern economy led to acute and legitimate discontent and required a well armed state to deter its desperate citizens from resorting to violence. ‘Shorn of all the camouflage the exploitation of the masses of Europe is sustained by violence’, Gandhi argued. The centralised modern state was also necessary to protect international markets ad overseas investments………………Even as the state monopolised all political power, it tended to monopolise all morality. Since its atomic and morally depleted citizens lacked organic bonds and the capacity to organise and run their social relations themselves, the state was the sole source of moral order. It alone guaranteed civilised existence and saved society from social disintegration. As such it came to be seen as the highest moral institution, whose preservation was a supreme moral value. ………

Gandhi argued that, although the state claimed to be a moral institution transcending narrow group interests and pursuing the well being of the whole community, it was in fact little more than an arena of conflict between organised interests manipulated and controlled by the more powerful among them. Since men of independent spirit and honour generally avoided it, it was largely in the care of men and women forging convenient alliances with powerful interest groups and using it to serve their interests. Gandhi thought that in these respects the democratic governments were no better than the undemocratic and belonged to the ‘same species’. They were just as vulnerable to the pressures of the dominant class and just as ‘ruthless’ and ready to use violence in the pursuit of its interests. In its actual practice a democracy was basically a form of government in which a ‘few men capture power in the name of the people and abuse it’, a ‘game of chess’ between rival parties with the people as ‘pawns’. Although the fact that democratic government was periodically elected by and accountable to ordinary people made a difference, it also served as a ‘camouflage’ hiding the basic fact that the masses were often ‘exploited by the ruling class….under the sacred name of democracy’. Democracy thus veiled and conferred moral legitimacy on the reality of exploitation, and had only a marginal moral edge over fascism.’ (Source: ibid., pp. 28-29)

Gandhi believed that parliament is basically a ‘talking shop’ where the political parties manipulate public opinion to maintain their positions of power and sub-serve the interests of
powerful people and who followed the party line without referring issues to the test of their consciences. Gandhi also felt in an electoral democracy the voters are susceptible to thinking along the lines of short term interests and were influenced by the media. He saw the media functioning of modern civilisation with deep suspicion. He once commented on the newspapers (there was no broadcast media or television at that time and newspapers were the main media outlets) in Britain:

‘To the English voters their newspapers is their Bible. They take their cue from their newspapers which are often dishonest. The same fact is differently interpreted by different newspapers, according to the party in whose interests they are edited.’ *(Hind Swaraj, p. 33)*

Gandhi believed in a modern capitalist system independence of the press is a mere slogan and media independence is impossible because the press was owned by the capitalist class for manufacturing public opinion. They were not concerned with truth but propaganda of what served the interests of the owners and their friends and did not serve the purpose of educating public opinion.

Therefore for Gandhi the task was to build a new nation which will preserve its own civilisation. This strength according to Gandhi was to be found mainly in the way of life and civilisation of India’s villages. Bikhu Parekh comments: ‘In Gandhi’s view every civilisation had its own distinctive natural and social basis. Modern civilisation was born and could only survive in the cities, and was naturally carried all over the world by the commercial classes. Indian civilisation had, by contrast, been cradled and nurtured in the villages, and only the rural masses were its natural custodians. So long as their way of life was intact, its integrity and survival was guaranteed. If the villages were to disappear and their traditional moral and social structure was to be shattered, it would lose its socio-economic basis and its fate would be sealed forever. Since the civilisations that had so far come to India were all rural and thus posed no threat to it, it was easily able to accommodate and enter into a dialogue with them. Modern urban civilisation presented a deadly and unprecedented challenge and required a most discriminating and cautious response.’ *(Source: Bhikhu Parekh, Gandhi’s Political Philosophy, p. 43)*

Gandhi was convinced the British could conquer India mainly due to the selfishness and lack of unity of Indians and a degeneration in the national character. He thus saw it as a priority to rebuild the national character. Here his views are almost identical to what Swami Vivekananda had preached decades before. Gandhi came on the scene but could never gather much of a national audience for it outside the educated classes. Gandhi like Swami Vivekananda was particularly exercised about the degeneration of the Hindu character. He believed Indians (and Hindus in particular) had lost courage, physical, intellectual and moral. They could not take the moral decisions to decide what is right and wrong and then whatever the consequences stand up for it. Thus Indians ended up compromising in all kinds of indignities and humiliations and violations of the self-respect and personal dignity.

Gandhi thought Indians had lost the national character and ‘would not fearlessly walk to the gallows or stand a shower of bullets and yet say “we will not work for you”’. *(Source: Collected Works, Vol 14, p. 510)* Gandhi further analysed it was the lack of courage in the national character that bred suspicion, distrust and jealousy and said ‘What I would rid ourselves of is distrust of one another and imputation of motives. Our sin is not our differences but our littleness.... It is not our differences that really matter. It is the meanness behind it that is undoubtedly ugly’. *(Source:
Again that it was because of the jealousy and mutual distrust that Indians were most ‘uncharitable to one another’ and blaming others rather than themselves for their mistakes had ‘become a second nature with them’. (Source: Raghavan Iyer, The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi, Oxford: Claredon Press, 1987, vol. II, p. 539) Gandhi was convinced the British East Indian Company could not have established their presence in India leading to the eventual enslavement of India if different groups of selfish Indians had not done private deals with them and instead stood up as one in refusing to cooperate with the British empire. Bhikhu Parekh comments on how Gandhi also saw this as an explanation for the steady erosion of the ranks of the Hindus also. He says Gandhi felt:

‘Thanks to their preoccupation with narrow personal interests and mutual distrust, the Indians lacked the capacity to pursue a common cause. Everyone went his own way and resisted the discipline of a common organisation. They were ‘like children in political matters…. [who] do not understand the principle that the public good is also one’s own good’. They did not take a long term view of their interests and appreciate that these were best secured within a larger organisational framework whose preservation benefited them all. In Gandhi’s view they only acted in a concerted manner when inspired and organised by great leaders and broke up into loose atoms once the later disappeared.

Gandhi also pointed to the absence of a social conscience among his countrymen. They were ‘callous’ about the conditions of the poor and underprivileged. Their doctrine of the unity of man had remained merely ‘philosophical’ and was rarely practiced, which is why a large number of lower caste Hindus had embraced such egalitarian religions as Islam and Christianity.’ (Source: Bhikhu Parekh, Gandhi’s Political Philosophy, pp. 47-48)

Gandhi’s strong feelings about the inadequacy of the national character can be gauged from the following words of his:

‘What are our failings, then, because of which we are helpless and cannot stop the profuse flow of wealth from our country, and in virtue of which our children get no milk, three crores of our people get only one meal a day, raids occur in broad daylight in Kheda district, and epidemics like plague and cholera cannot be eradicated in our country while they can in others? How is it that the haughty Sir Michael O’Dwyer and the insolent General Dyer can crush us like so many bugs and the priest in Shimla can write unworthy things about us; how is it that an intolerable injustice has been done to us in the Punjab?.

The reason is our inveterate selfishness, our inability to make sacrifices for our country, our dishonesty, our hypocrisy and our ignorance. Everybody is selfish, more or less, but we seem to be more selfish than others. We make some self-sacrifice in family matters, but very little of it for national work. Just look at our streets, our cities and our trains. In all these, we can see the condition of the country. How little attention is paid to the condition of others in streets, in the town as a whole and in trains?. We do not hesitate to throw refuse out of our courtyard on to the street; standing in the balcony, we throw out refuse or spit, without pausing to consider whether we are not inconveniencing the passers-by. When we are building a house, we take little thought of the inconvenience that may be caused to our neighbours. In cities, we keep the tap open, and thinking that it is not our water which flows away, we allow it to run waste. The same thing is seen in the trains. We secure a seat for ourselves by hook or crook and, if possible, prevent others from getting in. No matter if others are inconvenienced, we start smoking. We do not hesitate to throw banana skins and sugar-cane peelings right in front of our neighbours. When we go to draw from a tap, we take little thought for others. Many such instances of our selfishness can be listed.
Where so much selfishness exists, how can one expect self-sacrifice? Does the businessman cleanse his business of dishonesty for the sake of his country? Does he forgo his profit? Does he stop speculation in cotton for his country’s sake? Is any effort made to keep down milk prices by giving up the profit from its export? How many give up a job when necessary, for the sake of the country?

Where are the men who will reduce their luxuries and adopt simplicity and use the money so saved for the country? If it is necessary for the country’s sake to go to jail, how many will come forward?

Our dishonesty is there for all to see. We believe that business can never be carried on honestly. Those who have the chance never refuse a bribe… Our hypocrisy is only a little less than that of the British. We have experience of this every moment. In our meeting and in all other activities of our lives, we try to show ourselves other than what we are. We have made cowardice especially our own. Nobody wants bloodshed in connection with non-co-operation, and yet it is out of this fear of bloodshed that we do not want to do anything. We are possessed by the fear of the Government’s armed might that we dare not take any step. And so we submit to force in every matter and allow dacoits to plunder us in broad daylight.

What shall I say about our hypocrisy? It has increased in every field. Weakness is always accompanied by hypocrisy. Moreover, where the people want to be upright but can not be so, hypocrisy will naturally increase; for, if we are not upright, we are anxious to seem so and thus we add another moral weakness to the one which we already possess. Hypocrisy had entered our religion as well, and that so fully that the marks which we put on our forehead, the rosary and things of that kind have ceased to be tokens of piety and become signs of impiety.’ (Source: Raghavan Iyer, The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi, Oxford: Claredon Press, 1987, vol. I, pp.307f)

Gandhi was determined that the most important task in the task of building a strong national identity and a nationalist character – a process he referred to as national regeneration, was to reform the character of Indians. And in this he saw no use in a blind adoption of western modern civilisation. He was of the conviction that while western civilisation may not all be totally bad (even though he did think it was inferior to India’s naturally spiritual minded civilisation) Indians had to adopt what suited Indians and was good for India. He was of the view the Indian civilisation had been evolved by the Indian people and reflected their unique and historically emerged swabhava.

Interestingly Gandhi was also not exactly in favour of going back to the exact situation of ancient Vedic times as he believed every age had its own yug-dharma and the task of Indians was only to take inspiration and guidance from the past but device a new yug-dharma for the modern times.

He admitted that Indian civilisation had turned static, asleep and inert and the arrival of the west had awakened us and we got access to the western scientific spirit of inquiry but once that had happened he wanted Indians to then turn inwards and find out what the central principles of India’s ancient and powerful self-sustaining civilisation was and in the light of that looking at the circumstances and needs of modern times draw up a well thought out plan of national regeneration. Gandhi believed India’s self-regeneration was the most vital task because otherwise even if India gained political independence from the British, it would not last and
would be very fragile because we would be beset by internal unrest and dissensions and external manipulations and aggressions. In fact he believed Indians should not attain independence till the task of national regeneration was substantially completed.

The Gandhian programme for national regeneration according to Bhikhu Parekh was ‘highly complex and involved a cluster of inter-related strategies of which cultivating the *swadeshi* spirit, *satyagraha* and the Constructive Programme were the most important.’ Swadeshi was at the heart of Gandhian nationalism and it is important to understand his understanding of it because even though its origins predated Gandhi’s entry in the freedom struggle he had a greater impact in making it widely respected and followed and of course he also redefined it. Bikhu Parekh explains Gandhi’s wide meaning of *swadeshi* beautifully as follows and deserves to be quoted in full:

‘For Gandhi every man was born and grew up in a specific community with its own distinct ways of life and thought evolved over a long period of time. The community was not a mere collection of institutions and practices but an ordered and well knit whole informed by a specific spirit and ethos. It provided its members with an organised environment vital for their orderly growth, a ready network of supportive relationships, a body of institutions and practices essential for structuring their otherwise chaotic selves, a foci for sentiments and loyalties without which no moral life was possible and a rich culture. In these and other ways it profoundly shaped their personalities, modes of thought and feeling, deepest instincts and aspirations and their innermost being. Every community in turn was inextricably bound up with a specific natural environment within which it had grown up, which had cradled and nurtured it and in the course of interacting with which it had developed its distinctive customs, habits and ways of life and thought. The natural environment was not external to it but integrated into its history and culture and suffused with its collective memories, images, hopes and aspirations. As Gandhi put it, a community’s culture or way of life constituted its soul or spirit and its natural habitat its body. The two formed an indissoluble unity and inescapable basis of human existence.

…Gandhi used the term *Swadesh* to refer to this unity, *swa* meaning one’s own and *desh* the total cultural and natural environment of which one was an inseparable part. *Desh* was both a cultural and ecological unit and signified the traditional way of life obtaining within a specific territorial unit. The territorial reference was as important as the cultural. *Desh* did not mean a state or a polity for a way of life might not be organised in such a manner; nor a mere piece of territory unless it was inhabited and culturally appropriated by a community of men sharing a common way of life; nor a cultural group unless it occupied a specific territorial unit and its cultural boundaries coincided with the territorial. The castes, religious and cultures constituting the Indian mosaic were not *deshas*; India, a civilisational cum territorial unit, uniting them all in terms of a common way of life was. In classical Indian political thought every territorial unit distinguished by a distinct way of life was called a *desh* and India was a desh composed of smaller *deshas*, each a distinct cultural and ecological unit but united with the others by a shared civilisation. Gandhi agreed except that he thought of the constituent units as *pradeshas* or subordinate or quasi-*deshas*.

The *swadeshi* spirit which Gandhi variously translated as the community, national or patriotic spirit or the spirit of nationality and sharply distinguished from nationalism, basically referred to the way an individual related and responded to his *desh*. Since he was profoundly shaped by and unintelligible outside it, he should accept the inescapable fact that it was the necessary basis and context of his existence and that he owed his humanity to it. He should show
a basic existential loyalty and gratitude to it and accept his share of the responsibility to preserve its integrity. He should recognise himself as an heir to the countless generations of men and women whose efforts and sacrifices made it what it is and cherish his heritage.’ (Source: Bhikhu Parekh, Gandhi’s Political Philosophy, pp.56-57)

Prof. Judith Brown has commented that *swadeshi* was an essential part of Gandhi’s spiritual philosophy of simplicity in material living, which in turn would make it possible for Indians to rely on their essential strength. She comments: ‘An integral part of Gandhi’s thinking on simplicity of living was the idea of swadeshi, literally meaning ‘belonging to one’s own country’. It was a politico-economic strategy which had been employed against the British in India while Gandhi was in South Africa. But to him it had a far deeper meaning than the mere boycott of British goods in as attempt to erode the financial aspects of British interests in India. For Gandhi it was inextricably tied to the values of simplicity and self-reliance, of limiting one’s wants, and of the worth of manual labour.’ (Source: Judith M. Brown, Gandhi – Prisoner of Hope, pp.90-91, Oxford University Press)

Writing in 1909 Gandhi wrote: ‘Swadeshi carries a great and profound meaning. It does not mean merely the use of what is produced in one’s country….there is another meaning implicit in it which is far greater and much more important. *Swadeshi* means reliance on our own strength.’ (Source: Indian Opinion, 1909)

*Satyagraha* was an important part of Gandhi’s national regeneration campaign and his main tool for political struggle – a method that he devised because he found it most in tune with the Indian’s character but which has now indeed become internationally famous and even in this country has undergone a strange sort of distorted revival at least in popular art because of the popularising of what has come to be known as ‘Gandhigiri’ after the success of a Bollywood film where this term was first used. Gandhiji had decided that from the spiritual point of view non-violence is sin and unacceptable but one nevertheless had to find a way for standing up to the truth of exploitation whenever it happened and struggle to stop it. What was his answer – his answer was what he called satyagraha. He saw in the strategy of *satyagraha* many advantages but none of the disadvantages of military training. It was free from blame of violence but required courage all the same. It could be carried out at different levels (from simple protest meetings to even sacrifice of life) and by different sections of the population (from children to women even). Most importantly it relied for its success on the strength of numbers, which India could provide in plenty owing to its huge population. Also it could be withdrawn easily and rapidly once started and did not necessarily escalate into a anything bloody involving death. It required a strange kind of courage based on the quite obstinacy and tenacity of purpose, which Gandhi probably saw, as one of the main characteristics of Indians, specially the rural masses. The *satyagraha* strategy had the further advantage that it never need be declared to have failed once started. One could always withdraw claiming partial success. As it did not involve a direct forceful challenge to the government, it denied the latter the excuse to use indiscriminate and massive violence that could frighten and prematurely kill a movement. Also if the government did become violent, it lost good will and political mileage. On the other hand if it agreed to the demands it meant the agitating masses gained a sense of success and power. Gandhi called *satyagraha* the ‘trump-card’ and regarded it as particularly suited to India. Gandhi himself had said that he never told the people involved that they were about to stage a *satyagraha*, he simply led the protest and later told them later that they in fact had already launched a *satyagraha*. *Satyagraha* was a fascinating example of the *swadeshi* spirit because instead of condemning the
lack of courage and some abstractly desirable qualities of character in the Indian people, it accepted and built on those that they had in plenty.

Another important element in Gandhi’s national regeneration idea was to carry out what he called his Constructive Programme. He believed India needed to be built up from the very bottom and only that would create the social, economic and ultimately moral and spiritual revolution that in his idea of Indian nationhood has to be the priority in contrast with other nations. He believed other nations may focus on other things but in India the task was to preserve and manifest our spiritual genius. Gandhi identified eighteen essential areas: Hindu-Muslim unity, removal of untouchability, a ban on alcohol or prohibition, the promotion and use of khadi, development of village industries and craft based education, equality for women, health education for promoting Indian systems of medicine and the Indian way of healthy living, use of indigenous languages or vernaculars, the adoption of a common national language for which his preference was hindi, the promotion of what he called economic trusteeship, building up peasants and workers organisations, integration of the tribal people into mainstream political and economic life, a detailed code of conduct for students, helping lepers and beggars and promoting respect for animals. In this entire list and how Gandhi proposed to go about them the one major point to remember is that Gandhi would only accept and approve of non-violent methods even if they weren’t practical or productive of concrete results in the short term or a reasonable period of time. For instance, Gandhi was convinced untouchability could be abolished by personal example and active promotion of the cause. He was convinced a change of heart was all that was needed and a non-violent persuasion without the least coercion, legal or otherwise, was only morally acceptable and enough to get rid of even such horrible evils. Similarly with the problem of the rich-poor divide and poverty and the continued economic exploitation by the upper classes Gandhi was for promoting what he called ‘trusteeship’ or the notion among the rich that they hold the wealth on behalf of the entire people and it was their duty to personally use only the least bit of it and do the utmost for the poor. He was not convinced that they may not want to give up their position of enjoyment of wealth for the public good just by moral sermons and that there may be needed laws and a state directed, at least partial re-distribution of property to eradicate poverty and the class system that perpetuated the riches of some and the poverty of many. And the reason is all coercion, legal or otherwise, was violent to him and not in tune with his principle of ahimsa. In fact that was the stated reason of his for rejecting socialism and communism. He bluntly said: ‘What does communism mean in the last analysis? It means a classless society – an ideal that is worth striving for. Only I part company with it when force is called to aid for achieving it.’ (Source: Harijan, March 13, 1937) Again: ‘Our Socialism or Communism, should be based on non-violence and on harmonious co-operation of labour and capital, landlord and tenant.’ (Source: Amrita Bazar Patrika, August 3, 1934) Or: ‘Communism of the Russian type, that is communism which is imposed on a people, would be repugnant to India. If communism came without any violence, it would be welcome. For, then, no property would be held by anybody except on behalf the people and for the people. A millionaire may have his millions, but he will hold them for the people.’ (Source: Harijan, March 13, 1941) So Gandhi was ready to take the risk of having a millionaire class many of whose members were financiers of the Congress and Gandhi’s ashrams and hope that they will stop acting in their own self-interest and instead act in the interests of the poor. Some Marxist commentators have suggested that for Gandhi the priority was a controlled mass movement so that the ruling upper classes and their advantageous positions were not threatened and the fact that he never suggested anything very
radical was the secret of success of the Gandhian Congress. Historian Sumit Sarkar for instance has commented: ‘As a politician and not just a saint, Gandhi in practice sometimes settled for less than complete non-violence (as when he campaigned for military recruitment in 1918 in the hope of winning post-war political concessions), and his repeated insistence that even violence was preferable to cowardly surrender to injustice sometimes created delicate problems of interpretation. But historically much more significant than his personal philosophy (full accepted only by a relatively small group of disciples) was the way in which the resultant perspective of controlled mass participation objectively fitted in with the interests and sentiments of socially-decisive sections of the Indian people. Indian politicians before Gandhi, as we have seen, had tended to oscillate between Moderate ‘mendicancy’ and individual terrorism basically because of their social inhibitions about uncontrolled mass movements. The Gandhian model would prove acceptable also to business, as well as to relatively better off or locally dominant sections of the peasantry, all of whom stood to lose something if political struggle turned into uninhibited and violent social revolution. In more general terms, as we shall see, the doctrine of ahimsa lay at the heart of the essentially unifying, ‘umbrella-type’ role assumed by Gandhi and the Gandhian Congress, mediating internal social conflicts, contributing greatly to joint national struggle against foreign rule, but also leading to periodic retreats and some major reverses.’ (Source: Sumit Sarkar, Modern India 1885-1947, pp.179-80) Bhikhu Parekh has disagreed with Marxist commentators that Gandhi was a mascot or spokesman of the capitalist class and has commented that Gandhi did agree eventually to use state power, on a suggestion from a group of socialists led by Prof. Dantwala, in a manner that he would have generally regarded as immoral and violent in what must be seen as an evolution of his thoughts. He has pointed out how Gandhi eventually agreed to impose if necessary trusteeship by law, a very high level of taxation to what was prevailing in his time and even a nationalising of vital industries. (Source: Bhikhu Parekh, Gandhi’s Political Philosophy, p. 140) In general on the nationalist relevance of the Constructive Program he has rightly commented: ‘Although several items in the Constructive Program had only a limited practical impact, its symbolic and pedagogical value was considerable. First, for the first time during the struggle for independence, Indians were provided with a clear, albeit limited, statement of social and economic objectives. Second, they were specific and within the range of every one of them. In a country long accustomed to finding plausible alibis for inaction, Gandhi’s highly practical programme had the great merit of ruling out all excuses. Third, his constant emphasis on it reminded the country that political independence had no meaning without comprehensive national regeneration, and that all political power was ultimately derived from a united and disciplined people. Finally, the Constructive Programme enabled Gandhi to build up a dedicated group of grass roots workers capable of mobilising the masses…As Gandhi understood them satyagraha was primarily concerned with the moral and political, and the Constructive Programme with the social and economic regeneration of India, and the swadeshi spirit was the overarching principle inspiring and guiding them.’ (Source: Bhikhu Parekh, Gandhi’s Political Philosophy, p. 63)

Swami Vivekananda had coined a term Seva Yoga to suggest that for the times that they lived in a state of degeneration and imperialist enslavement, apart from the other four paths of spiritual practice for attaining enlightenment or moksha, that is the paths of Bhaki, Raja and Gyana Yoga, the most relevant path was national service of the people of India. Gandhi seems to have developed a similar mindset and philosophy. He observed for instance: ‘Yajna, dana, tapas are obligatory duties, but that does not mean that the manner of performing them in this age should be the same as in ancient times. Yajna, dana etc are permanent
principles. The social practices and the concrete forms through which they are put into practice may change from age to age and country to country. The right gift which a seeker of moksha in this country and this age may make is to dedicate his all, body, intellect and possessions, to the service of the country. And, likewise, the right tapas for this country and this age consists in burning with agony at the suffering of countless untouchables and others who are starving for want of food or because of famines. Anyone who performs these three important duties certainly becomes purified and he may even have a vision of God’s cosmic form which Arjun had.’

Further that:

‘Every age is known to have its predominant mode of spiritual effort best suited for the attainment of moksha. Whenever the religious spirit is on the decline, it is revived through such an effort in tune with the times. In this age our degradation reveals itself through our political condition….Gokhale not only perceived this right at the beginning of his public life but also followed the principle in action. Everyone had realised that popular awakening could be brought about only through political activity. If such activity was spiritualised, it could show the path of moksha.

In this age, only political sannyasis can fulfil and adorn the ideal of sannyasa; others will more likely than not disgrace the sanyasi’s saffron garb. No Indian who aspires to follow the way of true religion can afford to remain aloof from politics. In other words, one who aspires to a truly religious life cannot fail to undertake public service as his mission, and we are today so much caught up in the political machine that service of the people is impossible without taking part in politics. In olden days, our peasants, though ignorant of who ruled them, led their simple lives free from fear; they can no longer afford to be so unconcerned. In the circumstances that obtain today, in following the path of religion they must take into account the political conditions. If our sadhus, rishis, munis, maulvis and priests realised the truth of this, we would have a Servants of India Society in every village, the spirit of religion would come to prevail all over India, the political system which has become odious would reform itself.’ (Source: Ibid., vol.II, p.137f)

He had therefore remarked it seems: ‘That is why my devotion to truth has drawn me into the field of politics; and I can say without the slightest hesitation, and yet in all humility, that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means.’ (Gandhi, An Autobiography, p. 420)

Gandhi did more than anybody else to create and make popular the idea of an Indian nation. Unlike western notions of nation that is a homogenous and self-conscious ethnic and cultural or ethno-cultural unit, Gandhi fashioned an idea of a nation that was a synthesis of many cultures and religious faiths based on an appeal to the need for preserving the integrity of the way of life and culture of the Indian village. He argued the Indian village was very flexible in understanding and adopting influences from other cultures and had done so for thousands of years and had a traditional and sustainable way of life close to nature that they must hold on to at all cost. The genius of Gandhi was that he managed to convey in his own way this understanding of the Indian nation and his passionate nationalism to the poor and illiterate masses even. Prof. Judith Brown has concluded well when she writes:

‘Gandhi was an ingenious and sensitive artist in symbols. In his own person as a self-denying holy man, by his speeches full of pictorial images and references to the great Hindu myths, by his emphasis on the charkha and on the wearing of khadi as a uniform to obliterate distinctions of region and caste, he portrayed and publicized in a world with few mass
communications and low literacy, an ideal of an Indian nation which was accessible even to the poor and un-politicised. For many, at least for a time, the ideal of the nation and a sense of national identity were lifted out of the rough and often sordid world of politics, although the inevitable struggles and intrigues accompanying any shifts of power in a complex polity jostled uneasily with the vision of nationhood and often threatened to engulf it. A new nation had to be fashioned out of the numerous loyalties and contests for dominance, which were the stuff of Indian politics. Gandhi knew this full well as he agonized over political strategies, as he attempted to minimize conflict among Indians and generate a moral community which encompassed and purified old loyalties.’

(Source: Judith M. Brown, Gandhi – Prisoner of Hope, p. 386, Oxford University Press)

**Exercise:**

1. Explain the Gandhian idea of the Indian nation?
LESSON - 2

GANDHIAN THOUGHT AND COMMUNAL UNITY

— Amaresh Ganguli

Objectives

After reading this article you will be familiar with:

- Gandhi’s thoughts on communal unity and his specific thoughts/definition of communal unity
- Gandhi’s concept of the urgency and imperative for communal unity
- The Gandhian strategy for fostering unity

Introduction

Gandhi has been called the ‘father of the nation’ and one of the main areas of his concerns and contributions is the role he played in fostering communal unity. Gandhi had a definite and strategic political purpose in working for communal unity quite apart from any private spiritual motivations that he may have had. He knew and understood more urgently than any other leader of the national struggle that before independence can be gained from the British, Indians will have to have a certain basic minimum level of national unity. He identified many aspects of Indian society that prevented that. Just as he identified untouchability as a severe underlying blockage in the goal of a united national identity he also saw communal divisions in Indian society particularly between the different religious communities that exist in India as a source of crippling weakness and he genuinely felt independence would have no meaning unless Indians found at least a basic minimum level of harmony in their life as a nation to successfully demand, achieve and run an independent political union.

Discussion

In fact most nations of the world at that time had basic affinities among her peoples like a common language or faith etc but India was the total opposite and so in search of a new kind of nationalism also, from that available in Europe, Gandhi had to find a way of reconciling communal divisions and particularly the Hindu-Muslim divide. As Bhikhu Parekh has commented:

‘Like the other Indian leaders he knew that India was radically different from every European country. It was vast in size, highly uncentralised, deeply divided, had a long and chequered history and consisted of different and not fully integrated ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural groups. Since it was not united in terms of religion, language, race, ways of life, common historical memories of oppression and struggle or any of the several other factors..........Gandhi instinctively knew that the (that) language of nationalism not only did not make sense in India but was bound to have fatal consequences. He was acutely aware of the fact that when Hindus flirted with nationalism during the first two decades of the 20th century, they frightened away not only the Muslims and other minorities but also some of the lower castes. And he hardly needed to be reminded of the confusion and mischief caused by Jinnah’s
introduction of nationalist language into Indian politics. That Gandhi and most other Indian leaders preferred the relaxed, even chaotic, plurality of Indian life to the homogeneity of the modern European state was a further factor pulling them away from European nationalism.

Accordingly Gandhi turned to the vaguer but politically more relevant and, to him, morally more acceptable concept of civilisation. Not race, ethnicity, language, religion or customs but the plural, evolving, civilisation…united the Indians. …foreign rule was unacceptable because it choked and distorted India’s growth and imposed a way of life incompatible with its basic character. India needed independence in order to undertake the long and painful task of revitalising its civilisation and regenerating its people. Its independence was desirable only in so far as it created the conditions for its autonomous moral growth, and it signified not a millennium but an invitation to decades of hard work. Since the civilisation Gandhi wanted the Indian state to nurture was synthetic, tolerant, spiritual and open, his vision of India had little in common with the collectivist, monolithic, aggressive and xenophobic nationalism of some of the Western and central European countries. …he rarely used the term ‘nation’ except when forced to do so by such antagonists as Jinnah, and then largely to refer to the fact that India was not a motley collection of groups but consisted of people sharing common aspirations and interests and a vague but nonetheless real commitment to the kind of spiritual civilisation discussed earlier. When he occasionally used the term ‘nationalism’ he largely meant ‘love of one’s country’. For the most part he preferred to speak of swadeshi spirit which captured the interrelated ideas of collective pride, ancestral loyalty, mutual responsibility and intellectual and moral openness. It is true that this conception of Indian civilisation was narrow and limited and, although not anti-Muslim, it had a strong Hindu orientation. However, it had nothing in common with the ethnic or even cultural nationalism of Tilak and Aurobindo, let alone such Hindu fundamentalists as Savarkar. Thanks to the non-nationalist philosophical framework within which he conceptualised the independence movement, the latter did not throw up a Hindu nationalism to match that of the (Muslim) League, but guaranteed full protection to Muslims even under the greatest provocation, laid the foundations of a secular state.

(Source: Bhikhu Parekh, Gandhi’s Political Philosophy, p. 194)

Bhikhu Parekh also makes the point that because of his background and his experience in South Africa Gandhi was anyway someone who could not understand why Hindu’s and Muslims should fight and therefore could very easily think of building an alliance between the two communities when he came back to India to join the national struggle. He comments:
‘Another reason why Gandhi had difficulty appreciating the nature and basis of the Hindu Muslim conflict had to do with his South African experiences, which distorted his understanding of the Indian situation and whose irrelevance he took years to recognise. He had gone there as an employee of a Muslim firm and had led and established excellent relations with the Muslim migrants. Most of them came from Gujrat and spoke his language, shared his culture and followed a way of life very similar to his own. They all faced the common problems of a minority settled in a foreign country and were too deeply involved in making money and fighting racist laws to worry much about internal differences. As Gandhi wrote to Gokhale in 1907, the ‘struggle we are undergoing here has resulted in making us feel that we are Indians first and Hindus, Mohameddans, Tamils, Parsis etc afterwards. Three years later he wrote on the basis of his South African experience that to ‘create among the inhabitants of India the consciousness of their being one nation, no Herculean efforts are necessary. We are of course a single nation and brothers as among ourselves’. He argued that nationality had nothing to do with religion or
language and was entirely a matter of culture, which Muslims, being ‘simply converts from Hinduism’, shared in common with Hindus.

When Gandhi returned to India he made two assumptions, both based on illicit generalisations of his South African experience. First, Indian Muslims were all like Gujarati Muslims he had met in South Africa, and second, Muslims and Hindus primarily thought of themselves as Indians. It took him early ten years to realise that the assumptions on which he had hitherto based his action were profoundly mistaken. Muslims in north India were acutely conscious of their ethnic and cultural identity. It was true that the two communities had evolved a common culture as they had done in Gujarat. However, in Gujarat Muslims had largely fitted into the Hindu culture, whereas the opposite was generally the case in the north. Again the two communities, especially the Muslims, defined themselves in religious and not political terms, and unlike South Africa all the power of the colonial government in India was used to perpetuate this state of affairs.’ (Source: Bhikhu Parekh, Gandhi’s Political Philosophy, p. 186-87) In fact Bhikhu Parekh beautifully notes the great irony of Gandhi’s life: ‘…his close boyhood friend and hero was a Muslim, his mother belonged to the Pranami sect which was influenced by Islam, he owed his first worthwhile job to a Muslim firm, was deeply indebted to Muslims for fighting in his satyagraha in South Africa and for helping him acquire a national and international reputation that stood him in good stead on his return to India, and he was eventually killed by a Hindu for being pro-Muslim’. (Source: Bhikhu Parekh, Gandhi’s Political Philosophy, p. 183) The irony being that Muslims on the other hand asked for a separate homeland for Pakistan because they felt he and the Congress under his leadership were out to Hinduise India and had betrayed them and they thus could not be part of the substantially Hindu nation that Gandhi conceived.

Gandhi adopted many methods to create a reconciliation between Hindus and Muslims. On a day to day level he was always asking and cajoling Hindus, in his public speeches and utterances, to be friendly and decent with Muslims by avoiding playing music outside mosques or taking out processions and he would in turn ask Muslims to avoid cow slaughter. At a personal level he had close relationships with many Muslims and of course people from other faiths who usually maintained their lifelong friendships and loyalties to him which shows his feelings towards them were most likely entirely genuine and not part of any symbolism or political agenda necessarily. At the level of Congress politics his great move was seeking and making an alliance with Muslim groups for the Khilafat cause which he hoped would unite the two communities into one fighting political force. Later for various reasons his attempts failed.

Bhikhu Parekh is of the opinion that for Gandhi, Hindu-Muslim divisions were unacceptable because his idea of Indian fundamentally had as one of its elements the harmonious co-existence and co-operation of different communities which functioned and lived together while at the same time maintained their distinct ideas and roles. He comments:

‘……..Indian civilisation was for him plural and synthetic and not only tolerated and respected but positively cherished diversity and differences. It had provided a hospitable framework within which different communities, cultures and religions had lived side by side and made their distinct contributions. With all its limitations and occasional quarrels, India had been a ‘happy’ family to which all its children were privileged to belong.’ (Source: Bhikhu Parekh, Gandhi’s Political Philosophy, p. 184) Gandhi was passionate to uphold this view of what constituted
Indian civilisation. His depth of feeling on the matter can be gauged from some of the following definitions of swaraj that he gave in 1921 in the Gujarati publication Navajivan: (It may be noted Gandhi used to advance various definitions of swaraj to make his ideas clearer.) ‘Swaraj means that Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Parsis, Christians, and Jews should all be able to follow their own faith and should respect those of others.’

‘Complete disappearance of the evil passions in the hearts of Hindus and Muslims. This means that a Hindu should respect Muslim’s feelings and should be ready to lay down his life for him, and vice versa. Muslims should not slaughter cows for the purpose of hurting Hindus; on the contrary, they should on their own refrain from cow-slaughter so as to spare the latter’s feelings. Likewise, without asking for anything in return, Hindus should stop playing music before mosques with the purpose of hurting Muslims, should actually feel proud in not playing music while passing by a mosque.’

(Source: Navajivan, 14-08-1921, Collected Works of MK Gandhi, Vol. 20, p. 506)

A major part of his strategy was to work on removing the daily irritants in the relationship between Hindus and Muslims. He genuinely believed if Hindus and Muslims start behaving well with each other in a spirit of genuine friendship and decency and mutual tolerance for some time, then nothing would come in the way – not the British policy of ‘divide and rule’ nor the deep distrust between the two communities with its roots in history. His main appeal and attempt can be understood for instance from the following writing of his that was published in his journal Young India in 1921:

‘That unity in strength is not merely a copybook maxim but a rule of life is in no case so clearly illustrated as in the problem of Hindu–Muslim unity. Divided we must fall. Any third power may easily enslave India so long as we Hindus and Mussulmans are ready to cut each other’s throats. Hindu-Muslim unity means not unity only between Hindus and Mussulmans but between all those who believe India to be their home, no matter to what faith they belong. I am fully aware that we have not yet attained that unity to such an extent as to bear any strain. It is a daily growing plant, as yet in delicate infancy, requiring special care and attention. The thing became clear in Nellore when the problem confronted me in a concrete shape. The relations between the two were none too happy. They fought only about two years ago over what appeared to me to be a small matter. It was the eternal question of playing music whilst passing mosques. I hold that we may not dignify every trifle into a matter of deep religious importance. Therefore a Hindu may not insist on playing music whilst passing a mosque. He may not even quote precedents in his own or any other place for the sake of playing music. It is not a matter of vital importance for him to play music whilst passing a mosque. One can easily appreciate the Mussulman sentiment of having solemn silence near a mosque the whole of the twenty-four hours. What is a non-essential to a Hindu may be an essential to a Mussulman. And in all non-essential matters a Hindu must yield for the asking. It is criminal folly to quarrel over trivialities. The unity we desire will last only if we cultivate a yielding and a charitable disposition towards one another. The cow is as dear as life to a Hindu; the Mussulman should therefore voluntarily accommodate his Hindu bother. Silence at his prayer is a precious thing for a Mussulman. Every Hindu should voluntarily respect his Mussulman brother’s sentiment. This however is a counsel of perfection. There are nasty Hindus as there are nasty Mussulmans who would pick a quarrel for nothing. For these we must provide panchayats of unimpeachable probity and
imperturbability whose decisions must be binding on both parties. Public opinion should be
cultivated in favour of the decisions of such panchayats so that no one would question them.

I know that there is much, too much distrust of one another as yet. Many Hindus distrust
Mussulman honesty. They believe that swaraj means Mussulman raj, for they argue that without
the British, Mussulmans of India will aid Mussulman powers to build a Mussulman empire in
India. Mussulmans on the other hand fear that the Hindus, being in an overwhelming majority,
will smother them. Such an attitude of mind betokens impotence on either’s part. If not their
nobility, their desire to live in peace would dictate a policy of mutual trust and mutual
forbearance. There is nothing in either religion to keep the two apart. The days of forcible
conversion are gone. Save for the cow, Hindus can have no ground for quarrel with Mussulmans.
The latter are under no religious obligation to slaughter a cow. The fact is we have never before
now endeavoured to come together to adjust our differences and to live as friends bound to one
another as children of the same sacred soil.’
(Source: Young India, May 11, 1921)

It was one of Gandhi’s main strategic moves to take up the issue of Khilafat which
excepting a very small rather fundamentalist fringe, the vast majority of Muslims were not really
very enthusiastic about as it involved the questions of far away Turkey and did not really touch
the lives of the average Indian Muslim. Gandhi hoped that Khilafat will endear Hindus to
Muslims and remove the deep distrust and chasm in terms of identity. The move to adopt the
Khilafat cause surprised Hindus and even many in the Congress but Gandhi was adamant that it
should be taken up with full energy. He even linked it to the Hindu’s desire to see cow-slaughter
end and told them the way forward was through Khilafat. For instance in a speech in Kanpur in
1921 he said: ‘…Cow protection also depends on Khilafat. Hindus must be prepared to make
sacrifices for Khilafat without desiring anything in return. Every morning I pray for the cows.
Cow slaughter is the result of the sins committed by Hindus; it is owing to these sins that we are
derived of the sympathy of our brethren. We must repent for those sins. For a satisfactory
solution of the Khilafat question it is of utmost importance that there should be Hindu-Muslim
unity. Khilafat alone will unite the two communities’. (Source: Collected Works of MK Gandhi, Vol. 20,
p. 482)

Interestingly Gandhi was not shy to state his political aims and intensions openly. He
wrote in 1920: ‘I hope my alliance with the Mahomedans to achieve a threefold end – to obtain
justice in the face of odds with the method of Satyagraha and to show its efficacy over all other
methods, to secure Mahomedan friendship for the Hindus and thereby internal peace also, and
last but not least to transform ill-will into affection for the British and their constitution which in
spite of its imperfections has weathered many a storm.’ (Source: Judith M. Brown, Gandhi, p. 141ff)
But throughout he was careful to ensure that it wasn’t interpreted by Muslims as a temporary
political move as can be gauged from the following:
‘This unity cannot be a mere policy to be discarded when it does not suit us. We can
discard it only when we are tired of swaraj. Hindu-Muslim unity must be a creed to last for all
time and under all circumstances.’ (Source: Young India, Dec 2, 1920)

‘Hindu-Muslim unity consists in our having a common purpose, a common goal and
common sorrows. It is best promoted by cooperating to reach the common goal, by sharing one
another’s sorrows and by mutual toleration.’ (Source: Young India, Feb 25, 1920)
‘What can be more natural than that Hindus and Mussalmans, born and bred in India, having the same adversities, the same hopes, should be permanent friends, brothers born of the same Mother India? The surprise is that we should fight, not that we should unite.’
(Source: Young India, Aug 21, 1924)

‘For good or ill, the two communities are wedded to India, they are neighbours, sons of the soil. They are destined to die here, as they are born here. Nature will force them to come together voluntarily.’ (Source: Harijan, October 29, 1938)

He was clear in his message to Hindus that they had to be the first to attempt to win the love and trust of Muslims and that he was attempting to lead them into so doing by example, even though for this move of his he began attracting the hostility of Hindu nationalists and was ultimately killed:

‘I am striving to become the best cement between the two communities. My longing is to be able to cement the two with my blood, if necessary. But before I can do so, I must prove to the Mussulmans that I love them as well as I love the Hindus. My religion teaches me to love all equally’.
(Source: Young India, Sept 25, 1924)

It was Gandhi’s claim that Hinduism fundamentally was open and tolerant and absorbent of all faiths and indeed allowed itself to be influenced by what is good in other faiths and that was the secret of the strength of openness of Indian civilisation and culture. He argued the Indian culture was deep down a believer in truth and non-violence and thus could absorb other faiths and not seek to suppress them. Indeed he argued that was the reason Hinduism is not a ‘missionary faith’. He wrote: ‘Hinduism is not an exclusive religion. In it, there is room for the worship of all the prophets of the world. It is not a missionary religion in the ordinary sense of the term…..Hinduism tells everyone to worship God according to his own faith or Dharma, and so it lives at peace with all the religions.’ (Source: Young India, Oct 6, 1921). Or that: ‘…the Hindusim of my conception is no narrow creed. It is a grand evolutionary process as ancient as time, and embraces the teaches of Zoraster, Moses, Christ, Mohammed, Nanak and other prophets.’ (Source: Young India, March 8, 1942)

Bhikhu Parekh has argued that Gandhi’s viewpoint of Hinduism and its basics and the influence of Islam and its absorption may have been innocent, deeply felt and even basically right, but it did not necessarily play out politically in the way Gandhi would have wanted it to, as Muslim sensitivities were not always accepting Gandhi’s views as such. He comments:

‘……India was not (Gandhi argued) a nation but a civilisation which had over the centuries benefited from the contributions of different races and religions and was distinguished by its plurality, diversity and tolerance. It was a community of communities, each enjoying considerable autonomy within a larger and shared framework. As for Hindus and Muslims, they had lived side by side in the villages and cities for centuries without ever feeling that they were enemies or oppressed one by the other. India was a united country long before the Muslims came, and it was absurd to argue it had ceased to be so afterwards. What was more, most Muslims were converted Hindus and their claim to nationhood was no more valid than would be that of a section of English citizens converted to Islam to a separate state in England. As Gandhi wrote to Jinnah, ‘I find no parallel in history for a body of converts and their descendants claiming to be a nation apart from the parent stock. If India was one nation before the advent of Islam, it must remain one in spite of a change of the faith of a very large body of her children’.
Gandhi’s and other Congress leaders’ description of Muslims as ‘ex-Hindus’, ‘converts’ and ‘basically Hindus’ caused much misunderstanding and resentment. The Muslims construed it as an implicit denial of their separate cultural identity and a sign of Hindu imperialism. They were both right and wrong, for Gandhi and the Congress used this term in two very different senses which they did not clearly distinguish. First, they used it in a religious sense implying that Muslims had once been Hindus who had later converted to Islam out of fear or hope of reward. In this sense the terms implied that they had betrayed their ancestral religion and were inauthentic Muslims, and carried derogatory overtones. The second sense of the term was cultural or civilisation-al and had quite different associations. It grew out of a search for the deeper bonds binding the two communities. Since the vast majority of Muslims had once been Hindus, they shared in common with them their beliefs, customs, social practices, values, and ways of life, and thought, in a word a civilisation. Their conversion to Islam changed their religious identity but could not and did not affect the deeper cultural continuity between the two communities. Indeed, they carried their old culture with them to their new religion and profoundly Indiansied it. They were therefore not just Muslims but Indian Muslims, Indians not merely in a territorial but cultural sense, and co-heirs with the Hindus to Indian civilisation. It is this that Gandhi intended to emphasise in describing them rather clumsily as ‘ex-Hindus’ or ‘basically Hindus’. Since he did not clearly distinguish the two senses, and since many of his followers generally used the terms in their accusatory sense, their use was a source of irritation to Muslims.’ (Source: Bhikhu Parekh, Gandhi’s Political Philosophy, p. 177ff) Bhikhu Parekh has made the point that Gandhi may have attempted to unite the two communities to remove one of the fundamental blockages in a national political identity but in his approach there was a fundamental problem – he relied on the what he thought is the basic Hindu character and did not really try to or was in a position to reconcile the deep historical divide. He comments:

‘Although Gandhi himself did not put it this way, Indian history for him began with the arrival of the Aryans and continued for several thousand years during which it developed a rich Hindu culture. The Muslim and British periods were largely aberrations made possible by Hindu decadence, and significant because of their revitalising influence on Hinduism. The Muslims were basically converted Hindus whose religion was but an icing on their essentially Hindu cake. And as for British rule, it imported an alien civilisation unsuited to the Indian genius of which the culturally revitalised India was only to assimilate a few elements. The Muslim perception of Indian history and identity was diametrically opposite to Gandhi’s. In their view they were outsiders in both their historical origins and cultural sympathies and of a different stock from the Hindus. While some had inter-married with Hindus, many had for centuries retained their ethnic ‘purity’. It was true that a significant number of them were Hindu converts. However, the conversion was not a mere credal change but a process of profound transformation that de-Hinduised them, gave them a wholly new identity and marked a drastic rupture with their past. For the Muslims their history had begun outside India and was continued and flourished in it for several centuries before it was interrupted by British rule. Deeply divided about their past, their present became a shaggy terrain on which they jostled for their divided future. They needed a balanced view of Indian history capable of recognising the rich contributions each had made to the development of Indian civilisation. Gandhi was obviously not in a position to provide it. …..It is true that unlike Tilak, Aurobindo, Savarkar, and others for whom Hinduism was to be the basis of Indian unity, Gandhi took a genuinely plural view of India. His India was a creative synthesis of many civilisations and a happy home of different religious, linguistic, and ethnic groups. However, when it came to articulating the nature of the synthesis and the manner of their
co-existence, he unwittingly fell back on Hinduism. The cultural synthesis was for him a uniquely Hindu achievement and a tribute to the Hindu way of tolerance. Furthermore, since Gandhi’s approach to life was essentially moral and spiritual, the differences in culture, customs, habits of thought, literature and forms of art between the two communities disappeared at that highly abstract level and never really entered his perceptual universe. Rather than recognise and reconcile the historically generated differences, he took his stand on a trans-historical plane and simply ignored them. A view of history that left out history itself could hardly be expected to unite those haunted by it. To be sure unlike Tilak and Aurobindo Gandhi left a large and autonomous cultural space for Muslims. However, it was a space within a basically Hindu framework. They were given the fullest freedom to preserve their identity and grow, but not integrated into and seen as a vital and indispensable component of the larger Indian identity. Unlike the Hindu fundamentalists who Hinduised India, Gandhi genuinely tried to Indianise Hinduism and opened it up to Muslim and other influences. While this was a momentous step in the right direction, his India continued to rest on a Hindu foundation.

Thus in the opinion of Bhikhu Parekh who is regarded as one of the most authoritative scholars on Gandhi, this was a great lacunae in the Gandhian approach to dealing with the problem of communal unity. He comments: ‘Gandhi could have avoided this if he had done two things. First, rather than equate pre-Muslim India with Hinduism he should have seen it as a home of many cultures, of which the dominant Hindu culture was but one. While recognising the great Hindu contribution to the development of India, this would have allowed him to separate the two, challenge Hindu possessiveness about India and to provide a broad framework within which the non-Hindus could claim to be just as authentically Indian as the Hindus. Secondly, he should have appreciated more fully than he did that ‘Hinduism’ was not an undifferentiated whole but a loose and complex structure of beliefs, values, rituals, and practices evolved out of the sediments left behind by many an indigenous and foreign civilisation. It was a continually evolving and an incredibly diverse and open tradition so that one could be a Hindu in several different and sometimes incompatible ways. The Vaishnavites, the Saivites, the Tantric schools of the ‘left’ and the ‘right’ and the others, who shared little in common, not even belief in the Vedas, rebirth, and the varnashramadharma, were all Hindus. The orthodox, or sanatani, Hindu is therefore a contradiction in terms. Indeed, insofar as it imposes an unwarranted credal unity, the term Hinduism itself is inaccurate and does injustice to Hindus. ….Of the two essential steps Gandhi needed to take in order to arrive at a historically accurate view of India, he did not take the first and took the second only to a limited degree. This was not at all because he shared the Hindus’ possessiveness about India or took a parochial view of Hinduism. On the contrary, his views of both India and Hinduism were remarkably… open. What got in the way were his limited knowledge of Indian history, inadequate historical imagination and the failure of the earlier generations of leaders to do the necessary spadework. Gandhi could hardly be blamed for not doing what none before had done and none since either.’ (Source: Ibid, p. 189ff)

Politically even when gradually the Congress under Gandhi’s leadership was losing its authority to speak for India’s muslims, Gandhi was fairly uncompromising for a very long time in his basic stance that the Congress and he had the right to represent India’s Muslims as much as the Muslim League or other Muslim parties and political outfits. As late as 1946 when as per the negotiations of the Cabinet Mission Plan, an Executive Council was to be formed, the Congress nominated a Muslim to represent the Congress to which Jinnah objected and refused to go along with it, his argument being only the Muslim League had a right to represent Muslim and
nominate a Muslim. When the Viceroy Wavell requested Gandhi to ask the Congress to waive the right to nominate a Muslim as Jinnah was obstinately objecting (and it may lead to violence) even though he himself had no problems with the basic position of the Congress, Gandhi refused and wrote to Wavell:

‘You recognised fully the reasonableness of the Congress position, but you held that it would be an act of high statesmanship if the Congress waive the right for the sake of peace. I urge that if it was a question of waiving a right it would be a simple thing. It was a question of non-performance of a duty which the Congress owed to non-League Muslims.’ (Source: Wavell’s Journal, Oxford University Press)

Even though Gandhi was firm in his publicly argued principled positions he had begun to sense that the communal problem was going out of the hands of the national leaders and the Congress even in the 1920s. Bhikhu Parekh has researched this well and explains:

‘Around 1926, Gandhi’s views began to undergo a decisive change. In that year he wrote to Nehru that the two communities were going ‘more and more away from each other’. He told a meeting in Bengal a year later that the ‘Hindu-Muslim problem had passed out of human hands into God’s hands’. He told Jinnah a few months later that he wished he could do something, but was ‘utterly hopeless’. He kept striving for unity, but increasingly felt that the British policy of ‘divide and rule’ stood in the way and that nothing could be done until after independence. He told Ansari in 1930 that ‘the third party, the evil British power’ was creating the difficulties. Over a year later he wrote that ‘the moment the alien wedge is removed, the divided communities are bound to unite’. He repeated the view as late as 1942 and thought that ‘unity will not precede but succeed freedom’. This was why he kept urging Jinnah to delay partition until after independence and assured him that if things did not work out, he would have his Pakistan. Gandhi remained convinced until the end of his life that since the two communities shared common civilisational, ethnic and other bonds, nothing substantial divided them save the British policy of ‘divide and rule’ and ‘small’ misunderstandings.’ (Source: Bhikhu Parekh, Gandhi’s Political Philosophy, p. 187)

Gandhi’s answer throughout to the problem was to change behaviours and hearts. He fell back on his old techniques, which clearly were proving ineffective. As Judith Brown has commented: ‘As communal tension heightened and politics became polarised on communal lines, Gandhi was painfully aware of his own powerlessness, however profoundly he still hoped for communal unity: all he felt he could do was pray. His personal non-violence seemed incapable of altering the situation; nor did his colleagues in the Congress seem to take seriously his suggestion that the only way to win Muslim hearts was by serving Muslims, particularly in the villages, as opposed to the superficial ways of making mass political contacts or contriving high level political compromises’. (Source: Judith M. Brown, Gandhi, p. 296) In fact Bhikhu Parekh feels it was this basic approach which explains why Gandhi was not very successful in dealing with the communal problem: “Thanks to the basic limitation of his approach, Gandhi was unable adequately to conceptualise, let alone resolve, the Hindu-Muslim conflict. He could not see why men should quarrel at all, especially members of the same national family. He could not appreciate the deeper economic and historical roots of the conflict either, and attributed it to narrow hearts and emotional insensitivity. He thought that if Muslims stopped killing cows and Hindus ceased playing music outside mosques, most of their quarrels would disappear. He could not see that his sincere attempts to establish cordial and even friendly relations with individual Muslims made no impact on the relations between the two groups. Nor did he have much insight
either into the deepest fears and suspicions Muslims had entertained about Hindus since 1857, or the painful historical memories of Muslim persecution nursed by the latter. Every time a conflict occurred he turned to the Hindus and asked for heroic sacrifices. Since they were in a majority, better educated and more advantaged, he asked them to ‘yield up to the Mohammedans and what the later desire and ….rejoice in so doing’. Their sacrifices, he insisted, must not be ‘cheap and tawdry’ and based on ‘mere reciprocation’, but should spring from ‘love’ and ‘generosity’. When they resisted, he felt hurt and sought to ‘purify’ their consciences by means of fasts and plaintive appeals. This inherently precarious method worked for a while, but soon began to provoke strong feelings of resentment and bitterness among them.’. (Source: Bhikhu Parekh, Gandhi’s Political Philosophy, p. 186ff)

For all the scholarly analyses of the limitations of Gandhi’s approach Gandhi’s actions against communal tensions were often extremely heroic and moving and also very effective. His great fast at Calcutta to stop the communal killings when partition riots had started had been very effective in controlling it and in fact he had managed to send a powerful message throughout the Indian sub-continent when he could end his fast after the warring sides agreed to stop killing each other and peace was achieved. Historian Sumit Sarkar has described this period of Gandhi’s life for his attempts at dowsing the flames of communal hatred in the midst of partition as ‘The Mahatma’s finest hour’. (Source: Sumit Sarkar, Modern India, p. 437) Gandhi was deeply stirred by the communal divide and to what extent he remained ever ready to go to achieve communal unity. Ultimately it can be said in conclusion he laid down his life for the cause.

**Exercise:**
1. Explain Gandhi’s views on the problem of communal unity and the approach he adopted to deal with it.
OBJECTIVES

After reading this article you will be familiar with:

- Gandhiji’s thoughts on the evil of untouchability
- The urgency for elimination of this social evil in the Gandhian plan for national reconstruction and forging national unity
- The Gandhian strategy for dealing with the problem

INTRODUCTION

Of all the social evils that beset India of his times perhaps none moved Gandhi quite as much as untouchability. He saw it as one of the principal obstructions in reforming and uniting Hindus and by extension the whole of the Indian nation. He realised the whole moral basis for asking for freedom from the colonial masters would be rendered void and hollow if Indians continued to condone and acquiesce in the practice of untouchability. Hence Gandhi focussed on removal of untouchability with an energy and zeal that was unprecedented in the history of Indian social and political movements.

DISCUSSION

Before understanding the Gandhian approach to untouchability and how he proposed to deal with it is necessary to understand Gandhi’s understanding and estimation of the Hindu caste system or varnashram. It is instructive perhaps to begin by studying some of his utterances on the issue remembering the fact of course that he was a declared follower of the Hindu Sanatan Dharma. As such he would have perhaps approached the caste division idea with a positive frame of mind at least at the beginning to try and understand its benefits. It is also of course true that like all human beings Gandhi evolved in his thoughts over the period of his life.

Writing in 1920 he somewhat defensively wrote:

‘Man, being a social being, has to devise some method of social organisation. We in India have evolved caste; they in Europe have organised class. Neither has the solidarity and naturalness of a family, which, perhaps, is a God-ordained institution. If caste has produced certain evils, class has not been productive of anything less.’ (Source: Young India, December 29, 1920)

But then he was also quick to argue: ‘The beauty of the caste system is that it does not base itself upon distinctions of wealth possessions…….Caste is but an extension of the principle of the family. Both are governed by blood and heredity’. (Source: Young India, December 29, 1920) Also:

‘The spirit behind caste is not one of arrogant superiority; it is the classification of different systems of self-culture. It is the best possible adjustment of social stability and progress.’

‘Caste does not connote superiority or inferiority. It simply recognises different outlooks and corresponding modes of life. But it is no use denying the fact that a sort of hierarchy has been evolved in the caste system.’ (Source: Young India, December 29, 1920)
Gandhi was indeed quite open in seeing positive aspects in the caste system. For instance he regarded it as scientifically organised. He commented: ‘Caste system has, in my opinion, a scientific basis. Reason does not revolt against it. If it has disadvantages, it also has its advantages. It does not prevent a Brahmin from serving his Shudra brother. Caste creates a social and moral restraint. The doctrine of caste cannot be extended. I would restrict it to four divisions. Any multiplication would be an evil.’ (Source: Young India, march 12, 1925)

Or that: ‘From the economic point of view, its value was once very great. It ensured hereditary skill; it limited competition. It was the best remedy against pauperism. And it had all the advantages of trade guilds. Although it did not foster adventure or invention there, it is not known to have come in the way either.’ (Source: Young India, January 5, 1921)

Indeed Gandhi looked forward to offer the caste system for emulation by the rest of the world as he said: ‘Historically speaking, caste may be regarded as man’s experiment or social adjustment in the laboratory of Indian society. If we can prove it to be a success, it can be offered to the world as a heaven and as the best remedy against heartless competition and social disintegration born of avarice and greed’. (Source: Young India, January 5, 1921)

The reader of the above utterances sitting in this day and age may be surprised and even shocked but let us remember at the time Gandhi expressed the above views, caste system was the reality of the Indian social order. Indeed unlike now when it may be totally politically incorrect and a taboo even among educated circles to refer to caste in positive terms, it was the opposite then and anybody suggesting anything critical of the caste system was seen as breaking the well established social conventions and uttering very threatening anti-social and possibly anti-religious statements. Indeed Gandhi was attacked when he later got somewhat fed up with the rigidities of the caste system and its fall out of the evil of untouchability and if today we live in a society that is relatively free from these evils we have only Gandhi and the leadership and the social reformers of that era to thank. Gandhi in contrast to what one might conclude from the views given above attempted later to redefine in a social, political and spiritual sense the Indian Hindu caste system and eventually did more than any other leader in Indian history perhaps to publicly attack and fight the evil of untouchability at the level of social reforms without the aid of legal fiat.

Gandhi clearly as will be clear from the following quotes never accepted as a valid Hindu practice in a religious and spiritual sense the caste system as practiced in his time (and indeed to a large extent as it continues to be practiced to this day) and thus even his positive views on aspects of the caste system are open to interpretations that may not be obvious on the face of it, for most of the above quotations, from the early 1920s. He commented for instance in 1931: ‘I do not believe in caste in the modern sense. It is an excrescence and a handicap on progress.’ (Source: Young India, June 4, 1931)

Then again: ‘Caste in so far at it connotes distinctions in status, is an evil.’ (Source: Young India, June 4, 1931)

He denied caste system had a religious basis: ‘Caste has nothing to do with religion. It is a custom whose origin I do not know, and do not need to know. But I do know that it is harmful, both to spiritual and national growth.’ (Source: Harijan, July 18, 1936)

With time he turned more and more scathing (and presumably could take the risk of taking positions that would have been risky given the conservative society before). He
commented in 1946 ‘Soil erosion eats up good soil. It is bad enough. Caste erosion is worse; it eats up men and divides men from men.’ (Source: Harijan, May 5, 1946)

Gandhi realised that for the cause of forging a national identity and a national spirit the leadership will have to eliminate or dilute social divisions. And one of the worst divisions unique to India was the caste divide with untouchability as its ugliest manifestation. Thus as a matter of political strategy for the cause of the freedom struggle it was an urgency to fight the caste divide and eliminate untouchability. Also as a social reformer who believed the key to national regeneration was a rebuilding of the national character, particularly the Hindu character, he saw it as a vital imperative to eliminate the evils of caste and untouchability. Also as somebody who had it as one of his goals the spiritual revival of the Hindu religion, he came to see it vital and most urgent that untouchability be eliminated and the caste rigidities diluted. But as has been explained above, as a follower of the Hindu sanatan dharma he never for one moment would have thought that some kind of caste system or varnashram can not exist or that can not be devised that would be good and for the benefit of society. He also probably in all likelihood thought it’s true meaning may have been lost by Hindus over thousands of years of abuse and social degradation. He attempted to draw the contours of what would be an acceptable system to him. He commented in 1926 for instance: ‘I do not believe in caste as it is at present constituted, but I do believe in the four fundamental divisions regulated according to the four principal occupations. The existing innumerable divisions, with the attendant artificial restrictions and elaborate ceremonial, are harmful to the growth of a religious spirit, as also to the social well-being of the Hindus and, therefore, also their neighbours.’ (Source: Young India, Feb 25, 1926)

It was Gandhi’s case that the caste system had to be purified and corrected from the abusive and distorted form it had taken. This was his position both because he wished to reform and save Hinduism from its degraded state and raise the character of the Hindu for the sake of both Hindus and the Indian national cause but also because he realised the first step in fighting the British must be removing the blockages in the unity of the nation and one of the major divisions was caste. Of course he was not suggesting abolishing of the caste system and was only pleading for a mitigation of its worst aspects. One of the aspects that disturbed him most was the tendency of Indians to keep increasing the number of caste divisions. He made his impatience clear with the practice of sub-dividing the four castes again and again. His attempt at giving a new meaning to caste or varnaashrama can be judged from the following comments of his as illustration:

‘The divisions or classes are four and no more, and these classes are known all the world over. One is the repository of knowledge, the other is that of power, the third is that of wealth and the fourth is that of service. All these four labours are regarded as duties to be discharged by everyone of them for the protection and advancement of Dharma; and everyone who performs his duty to the best of his knowledge and ability, gains equal merit with the rest, if the latter, too, do likewise. The merit, therefore, consists, not in being one or the other, but in the performance of the duty assigned to it. Here, there is no untouchability. There is no superiority. And this is the essence of Varna Dharma.’ (Source: Harijan, March 4, 1933)

‘According to my conception of Varna, all inequality is ruled out of life. Inequality of intellect or in material possessions ought not to mean inequality of social status. I do most emphatically maintain that man is not made to choose his occupation for rising in the social scale’. He is made to serve his fellow-man and earn his daily bread by the sweat of his brow.
And since the primary wants of all are the same, all labour should carry the same value.’
(Source: Harijan, March 11, 1933)

‘Life is a duty, not a bundle of rights and privileges. That religion is doomed to destruction which bases itself upon a system of gradations, high and low. Such is not the meaning for me of Varnashrama.’ (Source: Young India, November 5, 1925)

‘The divisions define duties, they confer no privileges. It is, I hold, against the genius of Hinduism to arrogate to oneself a higher status or assign to another a lower. All are born to serve God’s creation. – a Brahmin with his knowledge, a Kshatriya with his power of protection, a Vaishya with his commercial ability and a Shudra with bodily labour.’ (Source: Young India, October 6, 1921)

‘Varnashrama is not a vertical line, but that it is a horizontal plane on which all the children of God occupy absolutely the same status, though they may be engaged in different pursuits of life and though they may have different qualities and different tastes.’ (Source: Harijan, Feb 18, 1933)

But Gandhi was very vehement in opposing the practice of varnashrama as it then was in his time:

‘Varnashrama seems to me to be an ideal system conceived for the highest good of society. What we see to day is a travesty and a mockery of the original. And if Varnashrama is to abide, Hindus must sweep away the mockery and restore Varnashrama to its pristine dignity.’ (Source: Young India, November 5, 1925)

Or that: ‘Varna has nothing to do with caste. Caste is an excrescence, just like untouchability, upon Hinduism.’ (Source: Wit and Wisdom of Mahatma Gandhi, p. 142)

While arguing for a reform of the caste system Gandhi was careful to explain he was not asking that they start eating together and inter-marrying. Perhaps he knew it would be realistically in a social and political sense too much to expect or perhaps he only wished to remove the really ugly edges of the system and had no real repulsion for a substantial portion of it, if it was suitably reformed. The answers to these question will remain open to interpretation and research but what is certain he had absolutely not the slightest hesitation and doubt in calling for the total abolition of untouchability which he saw as completely immoral, inhuman, repugnant to Hindu basics, a great barrier in national unity, a sin and without reason. He also believed we as a people could not ask for freedom from the British on the basis of equality of all men when we ourselves were ready to treat a substantial part of our own people as unequal.

Gandhi’s attack on the worst aspects of the caste system and untouchability had mainly two sides to it. He argued on the one hand that it was not in conformity with the basics of Hindu advaita principles and on the other that socially and politically it would be indefensible if we are to ask for freedom from the British when almost one fifth of our own people we were not ready to see as free people.

To argue the case from the point of Hinduism’s basics he relied on Advaita Vedantic principles exactly as Swami Vivekananda had done before him. He pointed out that as per advaita all men were equal and the same because they were part of the same cosmic unity or divine:

‘I believe in advaita, I believe in the essential unity of man and for that matter of all that lives. Therefore, I believe that if one man gains spiritually, the whole world gains with him and, if one man falls, the whole world falls to that extent.’ (Source: Young India, December 4, 1924)
Bhikhu Parekh has commented on how Gandhi’s attempt to reorient the practice of Hinduism as follows:

‘In these and other ways Gandhi profoundly redefined Hinduism and gave it a radically novel orientation. Not God, not Man, but men were made its centre, and self-purification and their active service in the spirit of love constituted its content. Gandhi thus rationalised Hinduism and reduced it to a set of such basic moral principles as love, truth, ahimsa, and social service. He marginalised the sastras and deprived them of their religious and moral authority. He rarely referred to them to support his views, poured contempt on the endless debates about the meanings of their isolated passages and interpreted them as he thought proper. He thereby undermined the traditional religious basis of Brahmanic authority and liberated Hinduism from their stranglehold. The Brahmans had stressed the authority of the sastras; Gandhi argued that they, including even the Vedas, were subject to the test of reason and conscience. They had insisted on the eternal validity of the revealed knowledge; Gandhi contended that every yuga had its own unique dharma and periodically needed to reinterpret the eternal moral principles. They had concentrated on the ritual and ceremonial aspect of religion; Gandhi made social service its basis. The Brahmans glorified the intellectual and spiritual and condemned manual activities; Gandhi insisted that the latter were an integral part of the cosmic yajna and that whoever avoided them was a ‘thief’ and a ‘parasite’. They regarded certain activities and the people engaged in them as polluted; Gandhi rejoined that only those engaged in the ‘lowly’ activities truly served their fellow men and made the untouchables, not the Brahmans, the privileged ‘children of God’. Gandhi turned Hinduism upside down in a way no-one had done before, and did it with such consummate skill and authority that the Brahmans were thoroughly outsmarted.’ (Source: Bhikhu Parekh, Gandhi’s Political Philosophy)

But it is interesting to note he was always careful to not suggest anything that would be too much disruptive of the social reality. For instance once addressing his own Vaishnav community in Gujrat in 1921 he said:

‘Some Vaishnavs believe that I am destroying varnashram. On the contrary, I believe that I am trying to cleanse of impurities and so reveal its true form. I am certainly not advocating abolition of restrictions on eating and drinking in company with anyone and everyone or on inter-marrying among communities. I merely say that the idea that physical contact with some person is a sin is itself sinful.’

So he was quite blunt however when it came to condemning untouchability. He went on:

‘... If anyone avoided contact with an Antyaj who had been engaged in sanitary work and had not bathed or otherwise cleansed himself after the work, or, in case he had contact with such an Antyaj, went and had a bath, I can understand the idea. But my conscience can never accept the idea that dharma requires us to keep away scrupulously from everyone born an Antyaj.

The inspiration of the Vaishnav way is compassion. I do not see a trace of this in our treatment of the Antyaj. Many among us never address an Antyaj except with a word of contempt. If an Antyaj is ever found sitting in the same compartment with other Hindus, there will be a rain of abuse on him. We offer hem food left over on our plates, as we do to cattle. If an Antyaj has fever or is bitten by a serpent, our vaids and doctors will refuse to go to his place and treat him. If anyone should get ready to go, we would do everything in our power to stop him. For their residence, the Antyajas get the worst localities, with no amenities like light and public streets. They are provided with no wells for their use. They cannot use public wells and dharamshalas and cannot attend schools. We expect from them the most difficult of services and pay them the least. The sky above and the earth below is all that they have by way of cruelty ?.
The British Government, against which you have launched non-cooperation, does not treat us with such contempt. We actually cherish our Dyerism towards Antyajas as dharma.

Speaking for myself, I believe we are reaping as we sowed. Treating the Antyajas with contempt, we have become objects of the entire world’s contempt.

The idea of untouchability is unacceptable to reason. It is contrary to truth and non-violence and, therefore, is certainly not dharma. The very idea of our being high and others low is base. He is no true Brahmin who lacks the quality of the Sudra; readiness for service. He alone is a Brahmin who possesses the quality of all others, the Kshatriya, the Vaishya and the Sudra and, in addition, has knowledge. A Sudra is not altogether devoid of knowledge. Readiness for service is predominant in him over his other qualities. The varnashrama-dharma has no room for distinctions of high and low. The Vaishnava tradition knows of Bhangis and Chandals who attained deliverance. How can a dharma which holds that the entire universe is permeated by Vishnu believe that He is not present in the Antyaj?

I have no desire, however, to interpret the sastras to you. I do not claim to be a man of learning. Every shastri is welcome to have the better of me in interpreting the Shastras. I know with confidence that I have had some experience of what the way of compassion means. This way can have simply no room in it for an attitude of contempt for Antyajas.’ (Source: A report in Gujarati newspaper Navajivan dt. 03-07-1921 from the Collected Works of MK Gandhi, Vol. 20, p. 319-20)

In fact Gandhi believed if untouchability was not dealt with it could lead to the destruction of Hinduism itself and when Rajagopalachariar, a close associate advised him to slow down his work for harijans and against untouchability he replied: ‘but how can I rest? How can one have rest with a raging fire within? How can any Hindu, knowing that Hinduism is on the brink of an active volcano, afford to have a moment’s rest?’ (Source: Speech, 2 January 1935, Collected Works of MK Gandhi, Vol. 60, pp. 46-7) He wrote in 1936: ‘Untouchability is a blot upon Hinduism and must be removed at any cost. Untouchability is a poison which, if we do not get rid of it in time, will destroy Hinduism.’ (Source: Harijan, June 20, 1936)

Gandhi turned himself into a full-fledged program for the uplift of Harijans. He not only led by personal example embracing the people from the lower untouchable castes in his ashrams but he also invariably set up the ashrams in harijan dominated villages where it was his endeavour to improve the quality of village life. It was his firm belief that the key to his goal was to alleviate the poverty and degradation of harijan villages for them to come up. He also started opening temples for harijans but believed it would be even better if upper caste hindus could permit harijans to visit their own temples. In fact he was desperate to reform Hindu society and was sure harijans would leave the fold of Hinduism if they were not embraced back. When Ambedkar, the great leader of the dalits and untouchables who publicly disagreed with Gandhi, and called his efforts cosmetic charity rather then real radical reform, advised his fellow harijans to move to other faiths like Buddhism he opposed and argued against conversion warning it could not be genuine. He said for instance:

‘But religion is not like a house or a cloak which can be changed at will. It is more an integral part of one’s self than of one’s body. Religion is the tie that binds one to one’s Creator and whilst the body perishes……religion persists even after death.’ (Source: Gandhi to E. Menon, 5 January 1935, Collected Works of MK Gandhi, Vol. 60, p.57)

In fact he felt it was untouchability in particular that put Hinduism at a huge disadvantage vis-à-vis other faiths that were on an evangelical preaching mission. He had written:
‘And why do I say that untouchability is a curse, a blot and a powerful poison that will destroy Hinduism? It is repugnant to our sense of humanity to consider a single human being as untouchable by birth. If you were to examine the scriptures of the world and the conduct of people other than Hindu, you do not find any parallel to untouchability.’
(Source: Harijan, June 20, 1936)

Even though Gandhi in public as has been mentioned above never promoted too radical measures like marriage between castes etc, later in his life to his most close associates he had even moved beyond that and suggested the possibility of considering arranged inter-marriages. For instance he once said regarding the arranging of marriages for young people by his close associates: ‘The barriers ought to be broken. When the whole country is ours, why should we keep ourselves confined to one community or region.’ (Source: Gandhi to Gangabehn Vaidya, 3 August 1937, Collected Works of MK Gandhi, Vol. 66, p. 9)

Gandhi was convinced untouchability was an aberration that had happened much later and was not a part of the original practice of sanatan dharma. He had strongly opined: ‘There is an ineffaceable blot that Hinduism today carries with it. I have declined to believe that it has been handed down to us from immemorial times. I think that this miserable, wretched, enslaving spirit of untouchability must have come to us when we were in the cycle of our lives at our lowest ebb…. That any person should be considered untouchable in this sacred land, passes one’s comprehension.’ (Source: Speeches and Writings of Mahatma Gandhi, p. 387)

Gandhi was clear that he wanted Hindus to see untouchability as a sin in the religious Hindu sense and his powerful spiritual appeal on the issue can be gauged from the following:
‘They are not untouchables, we are untouchables. They eat and drink and think and feel even as we do. If a sum total of their virtues and vices and the privileges they are denied were to be made and compared with our virtues and vices and the privileges we enjoy and deny to them, I am sure in God’s books we should find our debit side far heavier than theirs.’ (Source: Young India, May 13, 1926)

‘It is a sin to believe that anyone else is inferior or superior to ourselves. We are all equal. It is the touch of sin that pollutes us, and never that of a human being. None are high and none are low for one who would devote his life to service. The distinction between High and low is a blot on Hinduism, which we must obliterate.’ (Source: The Diary of Mahadev Desai, p. 286)

‘I do want moksha. I do not want to be reborn. But if I have to be reborn, I should be born as an untouchable, so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings, and the affronts levelled at them, in order that I may endeavour to free myself and them from that miserable condition….If I should die with any of my desires unfulfilled, with my service of the untouchables unfinished, with my Hinduism unfulfilled, I may be born again amongst the untouchables to bring my Hinduism to fulfilment.’ (Source: Harijan, Sept 12, 1936)

Gandhi in his national propaganda against untouchability had carried out three fasts or hunger strikes to highlight the issue out of his total seventeen fasts for various causes. Sometimes he had to deal with the most interesting questions and objections. For instance he would be asked if untouchables are treated differently who will do the sanitary work. He had replied once to such a question: ‘When untouchability has disappeared altogether, it is not feared that Bhangis will refuse to do sanitary work, if they are properly paid and well treated. Sanitary work is done well enough, if not better, in other parts of the world. But assuming that the Bhangis, on the bar
sinister being removed, refuse to do or scavenging, we must be prepared to do it ourselves. The removal of untouchability implies that there is no sin or shame in cleaning for other people, even as it is no sin for a mother to clean her baby or for a paid nurse to clean her or his patient.’

(Source: Collected Works of MK Gandhi, Vol. 20, pp.261-62) Similarly he was asked in response to his suggestion of education for untouchables, ‘who will then do their work?’ His angry but patient and careful response was: ‘This question itself shows the frightfulness of untouchability as we understand it today. There is nothing but scorn of untouchables in our everyday behaviour towards them. I think the very notion that education would make them give up being sweepers is wrong. The reason for it, however, lies in ourselves. We look down on the profession of a Bhangi, but, in fact, it is sacred work as it is concerned with cleanliness. A mother is regarded with all the greater feeling of sanctity because she removes the faeces of the child. We respect a woman who nurses the sick and is engaged in removing things which smell most offensively. Should we not worship the person who always cleans our lavatories and thereby helps us to remain free from disease? By treating such persons as low, we have sunk low ourselves. Anyone pushing another into a well himself falls into it along with others We have no right, thus, to look down on the Bhangis and others like them as belonging to low castes.

Even though Bhoja Bhagat was a was Mochi, we sing his devotional songs with love and revere him. Which reader of the Ramayana does not worship the hunter for his devotion to Rama?. Moreover, if Bhangis and others give up their profession, we need not oppose them or get alarmed. We shall not be fit for swaraj so long as we seek to force any work on people. We should learn to keep our lavatories clean. They will be as clean as our reading room when we feel ashamed of keeping them dirty. The filth in our lavatories, the foul odour and the gases which are generated in consequence works as a blot on our culture and bespeak our ignorance of the laws of hygiene. The condition of our lavatories is a proof of our unworthy attitude to the Antyajas and the cause of many of the diseases from which we suffer. The idea that contact with members of other communities will make us lose our caste or defile us betrays our weakness. Contact is unavoidable so long as we are in the world, and the test of the reality of dharma for us lies in our remaining pure in spite of it. The way of compassion requires that we educate the Bhangis and other communities like them to be clean, that we work for their advancement and treat them with respect. To do this, it is not necessary to sit down to meals with any member of such communities; what is required is a change of heart.’

(Source: Collected Works of MK Gandhi, Vol. 20, pp.391-92)

Gandhi was eventually convinced removal of untouchability was one of the three most important goals that had to be pursued to create a strong national character and pursue swaraj. After a period in Yeravada Jail when he is thought to have pondered and reflected deeply on the priorities of the national struggle he said in 1925 in a speech: ‘the purpose is that I should…..put before you the fruit of profound meditation in prison, namely, the key to swaraj lies in fulfilling three conditions alone – in the spinning wheel, Hindu-Muslim unity, and in the removal of untouchability.’

(Source: Collected Works of MK Gandhi, Vol. 25, p. 536)

It is interesting that while Gandhi was strenuously attempting a change of heart to deal with untouchability he was not at first for legal force by way of reservations etc or a role for the state but later he agreed probably realising the enormity of the problem. For instance he had once said: ‘I am not prepared for any concessions like reservations etc, to the untouchables because I believe that it would be perpetuating untouchability. Let the future legislatures of Free India be filled with untouchables alone, but let them come in as equals. Unless we raise them to our level,
our freedom will be futile.’  
(Source: Speeches and Writings of Mahatma Gandhi, p.905) But later he accepted that there may be a role of the state and the law. He went on a fast at his ashram in the early 30s to protest separate electorates for harijans and their own representatives or candidates, a plan of the British. His fast was called a political stunt by Ambedkar. But later Gandhi agreed to a proposal which formed the basis for what is known as the ‘Poona Pact’ between the Congress and Ambedkar. He accepted a system where there would be reserved seats for Harijans but not separate electorates. In fact even though Ambedkar drove a hard bargain and managed to extract for the dalits double the number of reserved seats than had been originally planned, it was Gandhi’s persuasion of the Congress that clichéd the deal. In fact under his advise and guidance the Congress ratified the pact and passed a resolution drafted by Gandhi himself that said, no Hindu should be regarded as untouchable because of his birth, and that all those who had once been untouchables would now have equal access with other Hindus to all public institutions, including wells, roads and schools. This was clearly a major revolutionary step. Later at the Round Table Conference in 1931 Gandhi clearly was asking and anticipating state and legal provisions for untouchables when he said:

‘I am afraid that for years to come India would be engaged in passing legislation in order to raise the downtrodden, and the fallen, from the mire into which they have been sunk……..Look at the condition, if you will, of the untouchables, if the law comes to their assistance and sets apart miles of territory. At the present moment they hold no land; they are absolutely living at the mercy of the so called higher castes, and also, let me say, at the mercy of the state. They can be removed from one quarter to another without complaint and without being able to seek the assistance of law. Well, the first act of the Legislature will then be to see that in order somewhat to equalise conditions, these people are given grants freely.’  (Source: Collected Works of MK Gandhi, Vol. 32, p. 150)

From the political point of view Gandhi’s most powerful argument that he rightly argued with the people of the nation was that we were asking for freedom from the British on the basis of the doctrine of equality but we were not ready to apply it ourselves to a large portion of our population. He argued just as the British assume they were born to rule because Indians were less civilised don’t we have that same attitude towards the harijans. Then how can we without being guilty of hypocrisy lecture the British when we ourselves are doing exactly the same. He also argued we had no right to ask the aid of God when we ourselves were denying the existence of a large number of her children. He had said for instance:

‘Swaraj is a meaningless term if we desire to keep a fifth of India under perpetual subjugation, and deliberately deny to the most deserving among His creatures the rights of humanity. Inhuman ourselves, we may not plead before the (British) Throne for deliverance from the inhumanity of others.’  (Source: Young India, May 25, 1921, Collected Works of MK Gandhi, Vol. 20, p. 136) He also genuinely believed something would definitely go wrong in the nationalist build up if our national unity had terrible fault lines and fissures in it like untouchability. He had commented: ‘It is easy to decide whether or not a particular issue should be taken up in the national struggle. There is no choice but to solve a problem which, if left unsolved, would block our progress. I am positively of the view that, had I not taken up the problem of untouchability, our struggle would have made no headway. We simply could not mount the heaven-bound plane, leaving behind those six crores of people whom, in our profound ignorance, we regard as untouchables and exploit to the utmost. They would cling to the plane and, as they are buried in the ground, it could not take off at all. I would not have taken up this question (of untouchability)
had I felt that they could have been carried along somehow, hanging on to the plane.”  
(Source:  
Collected Works of MK Gandhi, Vol. 20, p. 507-8

Professor Judith Brown has summed up well the Gandhian involvement with the problem of untouchability:

‘His primary social concern…was the problem of untouchability, the rejection of a whole group of the poorest and the most menial in society as a result of Hindu ideas of hierarchy, and purity and pollution. Now, as he travelled widely, he saw in harsh practice the power of this social division, and the poverty and degradation it caused, though he had rejected the whole idea far earlier and inveighed and worked against it even in South Africa. Once home in India, having tested the temper of public opinion, he was aware of the strength of Hindu orthodoxy and he took care not to equate his campaign against untouchability with the question of caste as a whole for fear of holding back the work on what he saw as the most vital and urgent reform. Rather, he argued, his was a campaign to purify and strengthen caste by abolishing this pernicious custom. For Gandhi untouchability was primarily a religious problem. He believed that there was no warrant for it in the scriptures: it was a late and evil accretion which actually harmed and threatened the Hindu tradition he so treasured, and its observance was positively sinful. If it continued he feared that Hinduism would not survive. However, he was also clear that its observance impeded India’s journey to swaraj at an obvious level, for such a profound fissure in Hindu society might well generate violent rebellion among untouchables against the higher castes, and would give leverage to any imperial authority wishing to maintain Indian divisions in order to rule’.

Bhikhu Parekh has critically commented on the Gandhian program on untouchability and has pointed out one basic and very surprising aspect to it – that the movement wasn’t really organised along the lines of non-violent protest or satyagraha that Gandhi taught India and the world. Why? . Was he concerned about maintaining national unity and what he stressed on again and again – ‘harmony’ ?.

Bhikhu Parekh has commented:

‘Gandhi’s reform of untouchability suffered from a similar limitation. He did more than any other Indian to undermine it, yet his attack had a profound weakness. He saw it as a blot on the Hindu religion and made it the sole responsibility of the high caste Hindus to fight against it. The untouchables themselves, reduced to passive and pathetic symbols of high caste Hindu tyranny, were not involved in the struggle for their emancipation, a strange attitude in a man who everywhere else wanted the victims to fight for themselves. As a result they had no opportunity to work and fight alongside the Hindus, and they neither occupied important positions in the Harijan Sevak Sangh and the Congress nor set up an independent and effective organisation of their own. Not surprisingly they hardly grew under Gandhi’s shadow, and a man who created so many great leaders was unable to create a single Harijan leader of equal stature. Ambedkar, one of the few exceptions, was not his favourite Harijan and grew in opposition to him.’  
(Source:  
Bhikhu Parekh, Gandhi’s Political Philosophy  p. 210-11

**Exercises:**

1. What were the main arguments against untouchability that Gandhi placed before the nation and what were the main methods that he used to eradicate it.
Objectives

After reading this article you will be familiar with:

- Gandhi’s thoughts on the role of women and women’s emancipation
- His strategy and efforts for raising the status of women in Indian society

Introduction

Gandhi had identified eighteen essential areas where he thought there needed to be special efforts by the people of India for what he called national regeneration and for reforming and making strong the character of Indians. One of the three areas along with untouchability eradication for instance or promotion of hand spinning or khadi was ‘equality for women’. Gandhi brought women into the national movement as a political stratagem but also thereby hoped to emancipate women. He had strong views on many social evils that women were victims of like dowry etc and he made energetic efforts to change the societal attitudes.

Discussion

It is important to understand that Gandhi’s himself evolved as a man during his lifetime and his own ideas and attitudes evolved and changed. To begin with he was quite as much a man of his time as one might expect – paternalistic, feudal and traditional in the basic attitude towards women seeing women’s role as one of lifetime obedient service to man. In fact he himself admitted this once in a letter to Rajkumari Amrit Kaur while referring to his wife Kasturba (or Ba as he called her). He had written to her:

‘If you women would only realise your dignity and privilege, and make full use of it for mankind, you will make it much better than it is. But man has delighted in enslaving you and you have proved willing slaves till the slaves and the slave-holders have become one in the crime of degrading humanity. My special function from childhood has been to make women realize her dignity. I was once slave-holder myself, but Ba proved an unwilling slave and thus opened my eyes to my mission.’ (Source: Letters to Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur, p. 100)

Before we proceed further let us examine what sort of a conservative mindset he may have had to begin with. Gandhi has himself admitted in his autobiography for instance, that in South Africa early in his life as a young man when he once had a fierce argument with his wife Kasturba when she refused to do some cleaning job that he had assigned her he threatened to push her out of his house. This is exactly the traditional unequal relationship that women in this country have been suffering and possibly still do when they are threatened with being sent back to their maiden homes or kicked out of in-law’s houses by husbands and which is a cause of women’s lack of sufficient empowerment. (Source: See Gandhi, An Autobiography, p. 232)
While one may be disappointed reading the above, scholars have pointed out we have to remember Gandhi was at least to begin with a man of his times. Prof. Judith Brown for instance has commented:

‘Indeed, modern feminists accuse Gandhi of confirming women’s dependent position by his use of traditional Hindu models of feminity, by his appeals to women to play a public and private role distinct from men and not in competition with them, and by his rejection of modern forms of birth control. Further, his reliance on women devotees also confirmed the subservience of women in the context of nationalist politics. Such criticism from the perspective of the late twentieth century is misplaced. Gandhi was a man of his own time, indeed a Victorian by birth, and many of his ideas about women were genuinely reformist if not radical in that context.’
(Source: Judith M. Brown, Gandhi, 391)

By far the most ‘radical’ of the ideas he had it has to be argued was asking women to come out of their homes and out of purdahs to participate in the satyagraha agitations against the British which could entail women being jailed and thus staying away from their families. For those times, this was clearly a major step as there were deep seated traditional notions of women’s purity and its link to family honour and how that might be endangered if a woman stayed a night away from home on her own or in the custody of men (even the authorities), other than of those from her own family.

Gandhi also had a political calculation behind the idea of getting women involved which he first developed in South Africa in 1913 when he realised women participating would arouse the moral sense of Indians and even those who were otherwise indifferent. The very sight of even women taking part in a struggle would inspire many people to join who otherwise may have remained indifferent. Also Gandhi had found out women made very good loyal, committed and unquestioning political workers and so would be great as volunteers and participants in the satyagraha agitations etc. Particularly during the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930, Gandhi’s call to women worked and women’s participation reached never before levels. Prof. Mridula Mukherjee has commented: ‘Before his arrest, Gandhiji had already called for a vigorous boycott of foreign cloth and liquor shops, and had especially asked the women to play a leading role in this movement. ‘To call women the weaker sex is a libel: it is man’s injustice to women’, he had said; and the women of India certainly demonstrated in 1930 that they were second to none in strength and tenacity of purpose. Women who had never stepped unescorted out of their homes, women who had stayed in purdah, young mothers and widows and unmarried girls, became a familiar sight as they stood from morning to night outside liquor shops and opium dens and stores selling foreign cloth, quietly but firmly persuading the customers and shopkeepers to change their ways.’ (Source: Mridula Mukherjee, in India’s Struggle for Independence by Bipan Chandra and others, p. 276)

Also Gandhi had led the program of promoting khadi, which was most dear to him, and rejection of foreign cloth. He would have realised such a program could only be made successful by women not just because women wear saris which consumes the maximum amount of cloth but also because women would be ideal for starting the sort of home spinning movement that Gandhi was promoting. So even from the point of view of shrewd political calculations Gandhi saw the use of changing women’s role, which, obviously in the context of the times would have meant de facto emancipation, however little, especially judging from our own vantage point in this day and age.
Apart from the reasons of national political mobilisation Gandhi also did his bit for the social causes relating to women’s emancipation that many other social reformers had also worked on even before him - chiefly of eradicating female infanticide and the dowry system which he understood were linked as was the desire for male children.

It is important not to underestimate the depth of difficult conditions for women prevailing then. Prof Judith Brown has summed up the environment well:

‘The other great social issue with which Gandhi felt bound to grapple in his grass-roots work for swaraj was the place and treatment of women in Indian society. Here he faced a complex problem, where tradition was reinforced by economic constraints on women. Whatever the high value placed on womanhood in Hindu scripture, and the possible equality of women and men at the earliest stages of Hindu civilisation, in practice by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Hindu women were treated as adjuncts of the males in a family, and primarily as bearers and rearers of children. A woman’s spiritual identity was achieved through marriage and motherhood, and widows were not permitted to remarry. Further, the control of women through arranged marriages was a powerful buttress of the caste system. Women were so poorly educated that they had little chance of individual development or achievement and were often seen as economic burden on their families, except in their capacity for domestic and agricultural labour. In poor rural households they were often staggeringly overworked in the house and the fields, over and above their frequent pregnancies; while in rich households they all too easily became ideal gossip and display stands for lavish jewellery, which reflected the family’s status. A host of inter-related social problems therefore faced the would be reformer: most families’ initial preference for baby boys rather than girls, knowing the eventual financial burden of a marriage and a dowry; arranged marriages between child brides and much older men to conform to caste restrictions on choice; the plight of child widows unable to remarry; the harsh conditions often suffered by older widows; and women’s general seclusion and lack of participation in public life, to name only the most pressing.’ (Source: Judith M. Brown, Gandhi, 208)

What was Gandhi’s response to these problems: he did not ask women to walk out of their homes and launch agitations, personal or public, against their plight or a satyagraha within their exploitative domestic environments or outside nor to seek the help of the British legal system or anything remotely very radical. As with most problems his approach was to work with the status quo in Indian society slowly, avoiding directly threatening any class of the Indian people, even those who may be committing evil and injustice. Whether this was with a concern for maintaining national unity or because of a commitment to non-violence (or non-coercion) of even the most remote kind or a certain traditional mindset that he may himself have had at least at the beginning of his life or anything else or a combination of reasons is hard to say with certainty. What is certain is that whatever the reasons for his approach, his approach was, like with many other issues, to work using Indian Hindu value systems or their purified reformed versions (often crafted by he himself) which were also often the lines of least resistance. To get an idea of his approach this is what he said in a speech to women in 1921:

‘It is not in the hands of the Brahmins, or of men, to preserve dharma. It is entirely in the hands of women to do so. The foundation on which society rests is the home and dharma is to be cultivated in the home. The fragrance in the home will spread all over society. A city may have flourishing trade and a big population but, if the homes there were not well-kept, I would
unhesitatingly say that that city was not good. Women are the presiding deities of the home. If they do not follow dharma, the people would be totally destroyed.’ *(Source: Collected Works of M.K. Gandhi, p. 63)*

But Gandhi was also clear that dharma does not mean a brutish behaviour from men treating women as chattel which he saw as a cause of the weakness of character of Indian society:

‘Man has converted woman into a domestic drudge and an instrument of his pleasure, instead of regarding her as his helpmate and better half. The result is semi-paralysis of our society.’ *(Source: Harijan, 12 Feb, 1939)*

‘To me, this domestic slavery of woman is a symbol of our barbarism. In my opinion the slavery of the kitchen is a remnant of barbarism mainly. It is high time that our womankind was freed from this incubus. Domestic work ought not to take the whole of a woman’s time.’ *(Source: Harijan, 08 June, 1940)*

Generally he never lost an opportunity to use his position to change the basic respect that society had for women and to raise the estimation of her capabilities and potentials:

‘To call women the weaker sex is a libel; it is a man’s injustice to women. If by strength is meant brute strength, then indeed woman is less brute than man. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man’s superior. Has she not greater intuition, is she not more self-sacrificing, has she not greater powers of endurance, has she not greater courage? . Without her, man could not be. If non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with women. *(Source: Young India, Apr 10, 1930)*

‘Women is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in very minutest detail in the activities of man, and she has an equal right of freedom and liberty with him.’ *(Source: Speeches and Writings of Mahatma Gandhi, p. 423)*

‘Woman in our country is brought up to think that she is well only with her husband or on the funeral pyre. I would far rather see India’s women trained to wield arms than that they should feel helpless’. *(Source: Harijan, 27 Oct, 1946)*

To women themselves his advice was suffused with a call to them to act from the spiritual and religious depths of purity etc of Hindu ideals as can be confirmed from the following:

‘Women may not look for protection to men. They must rely on their own strength and purity of character and on God, as did Draupadi of old.’ *(Source: Gandhi, The Role of Women, p. 111)*

‘Why should Indian women feel so helpless? Is bravery the monopoly of men only? Women, of course, do not generally carry swords, though the Rani of Jhansi did and outdid all her contemporaries in the valour of the sword. Still, all cannot become Ranis of Jhanis. But all women can emulate the example of Sita, who even the mighty Ravana dared not touch. Rani of Jhansi could be subdued.’ *(Source: Harijan, 27 June, 1946)*

‘Women is the incarnation of Ahimsa. Ahimsa means infinite love, which again means infinite capacity for suffering. Who but women, the mother of man, shows this capacity in the largest measure? Let her forget that she ever was or can be the object of man’s lust. And she will occupy her proud position by the side of man as his mother, maker and silent leader.’ *(Source: Young India, Oct 17, 1929)*
‘Women is nothing if she is not self-sacrifice and purity personified’. (Source: Young India, Nov 19, 1925)

‘Women must cease to consider herself the object of man’s lust. The remedy is more in her hands than man’s. She must refuse to adorn herself for men, including her husband, if she will be an equal partner with man. I cannot imagine Sita ever wasting a single moment on pleasing Rama by physical charms’. (Source: Young India, July 21, 1921)

Gandhi was particularly concerned that Indian women should maintain their attitude of maintaining purity:

‘If you (women) want to play your part in the world’s affairs, you must refuse to deck yourselves for pleasing man. If I was born a woman, I would rise in rebellion against any pretension on the part of man that woman is born to be his plaything’. (Source: Young India, Feb 20, 1920)

‘Refuse to decorate yourselves, don’t go in for scents and lavender waters; if you want to give out the proper scent, it must come out of your heart, and then you will captivate not man, but humanity. It is your birthright. Man is born of woman, he is flesh and bone of her bone. Come to your own and deliver your message again.’ (Source: ibid.)

‘It is my firm conviction that a fearless woman, who knows that her purity is her best shield, can never be dishonoured. However, beastly the man, he will bow in shame before the flame of her dazzling purity.’ (Source: Harijan, March 1, 1942)

‘When a pure woman adds bravery and motherliness to her purity, she becomes at once a magnet in a way no man can…For woman is sacrifice personified. When she does a thing in the right spirit, she moves mountains.’ (Source: Young India, Dec 22, 1921)

Also as far as roles of men and women were considered Gandhi’s views were what would be regarded as very traditional and patriarchal by the standards of modern feminists:

‘I do believe that women will not make her contribution to the world by mimicking or running a race with man. She can run the race, but she will not rise to the great heights she is capable of by mimicking man. She has to be the complement of man.’ (Source: Harijan, Feb, 1937)

‘Whilst both are fundamentally one, it is also equally true that in the form there is a vital difference between the two. Hence, the vocations of the two must also be different. Her duty of motherhood…requires qualities which man need not possess. She is passive, he is active. She is essentially mistress of the house. He is the bread winner, she is the keeper and the distributor of the bread. She is the caretaker in every sense of the term. The art of bringing up the infants of the race is her special and sole prerogative. Without her care, the race must become extinct.’ (Source: Harijan, Feb 24, 1940)

‘In my opinion it is degrading both for man and woman, that woman should be called upon or induced to forsake the hearth and shoulder the rifle for the protection of that hearth…There is as much bravery in keeping one’s home in good order and condition, as there is in defending it against attack from without.’ (Source: ibid.)

Or that:

‘The husband’s earnings are the joint property of husband and wife, as he makes money by her assistance if only as a cook.’ (Source: The Diary of Mahadev Desai, p. 189)

‘I admit no distinction between man and woman except as has been made by Nature and can be seen with human eyes.’ (Source: ibid.)

‘My ideal of a wife is Sita and of a husband Rama. But Sita was no slave of Rama. Or, each was slave of the other.’ (Source: Young India, Oct 21, 1926)
From the above it should be very obvious why Judith Brown has commented as follows to sum up Gandhi’s views on women:

‘However, his female ideal was not the ‘modern woman’, liberated from traditional social, economic and physical restraints by birth control, the right to divorce and a new economic independence. He would have seen no moral good in claims by later twentieth century feminists for ‘freedom’ to rule their own lives and to compete with men. Indeed he stated specifically that there was much in tradition which should be retained and cherished: ‘we should not give up the ideal of woman’s duty while espousing the cause of her rights’. The symbol of his ideal woman was drawn from Hindu epic tradition – Sita, the wife of King Rama, who was cruelly rejected by him, nonetheless maintained a brave constancy and purity, courageously bearing her ordeal until they were reunited. So within the symbolism of tradition Gandhi preached female virtues of bravery and independence, and a capacity to bear suffering; the model he offered to Indian women was the virtuous and faithful wife.’ (Source: Judith M. Brown, Gandhi, 209-10)

Gandhi, apart from bringing women into the struggle for swaraj, which he must have realised would also mean that children, the future of the country, would get trained in that idea as well, was very vehement and fairly relentless in coming down on various social ills effecting women like child marriage, the dowry system and female infanticide or the treatment of widows. While commenting on child marriage for instance he had once said: ‘The custom of child marriage is both a moral as well as a physical evil. For it undermines our morals and induces physical degeneration. By countenancing such customs, we recede from God as well as Swaraj.’ (Source: Young India, August 26, 1926)

On the evil of the dowry system he was very severe on men who would agree to the custom:

‘Any young man who makes dowry a condition for marriage, discredits his education and his country and dishonours womanhood.’ (Source: Young India, August 26, 1926)

‘A strong public opinion should be created in condemnation of the degrading practice of dowry, and young men, who soil their fingers with such ill-gotten gold, should be excommunicated from society’. (Source: Young India, June 21, 1928)

His advice to parents was to educate girls against the evil:

‘The parents should so educate their daughters that they would refuse to marry a young man who wanted a price for marrying, and would rather remain spinsters than be party to the degrading terms. The only honourable terms in marriage are mutual love and mutual consent.’ (Source: Young India, January 15, 1927)

As might be expected he saw the preference for a male child reprehensible and evil:

‘Women is described as man’s better half. As long as she not has the same rights in law as man, as long as the birth of a girl does not receive the same welcome as that of a boy, so long we should know that India is suffering from partial paralysis. Suppression of women is a denial of Ahimsa.’ (Source: Harijan, August 18, 1940)

‘Hankering for male offspring is almost universally present in Hindu society. In this present age of sex-equality, this sort of invidious discrimination against the female sex is an anachronism. I fail to see any reason for jubilation over the birth of a son and for mourning over that of a daughter. Both are God’s gifts. They have an equal right to live, and are equally necessary to keep the world going.’ (Source: Harijan, May 28, 1938)
The main contribution of Gandhi as far as women are concerned was firstly that he saw the lack of a public presence of women as a real problem and told the nation as such encouraging the participation of women in the national struggle and secondly that he devised and advocated ways that took into account the social realities and on the face of it his proposals and exhortations did not upset the social structure too much as to be totally unacceptable. Thus to a large extent he was effective and successful in his reforms.

Judith Brown has summarised well the Gandhian approach as follows:

‘As in the matter of caste, he consciously and selectively used elements of tradition to enable a new response to a changing situation. He was convinced that Indian women must draw on the deep resources available within themselves as women and within their religious inheritance to participate in public life, and in particular to play the vital role he saw for them in the struggle for swaraj. Unless they did so and unless society tackled the evils in contemporary treatment of women, he argued that there could be no real swaraj When the question of the priority of political or social reform was raised he refused to distinguish between them or place one before the other: social, economic, and political reform must proceed simultaneously. ‘The sooner it is recognised that many of our social evils impede our march towards swaraj, the greater will be our progress towards our cherished goal. To postpone social reform till after the attainment of swaraj is not to know the meaning of swaraj.’ All through the 1920s he hammered home that purdah, enforced seclusion of women, practised among some Hindu castes as well as Muslims, was inhumane, immoral, and deprived the emerging nation of the work for swaraj which its women could perform. Indian women must become conscious of their potential, must exercise their right and duty to serve outside as well as inside the home, and must participate on equal terms with men in the work for swaraj. He realised that this changing role would need readjustments by men unused to working with women, and by women who would have to learn how to work in formal organisations and not bring to that work bitchiness, suspicion and intrigues; indeed he noted wryly that even Indian men found selfless and open-handed organisation of public work difficult.

It was not just that the seclusion of women in private domain prevented half of India from working for swaraj. Gandhi believed profoundly that there were certain particularly female qualities and capacities which were much needed in the radical labour for a new society and polity. He often spoke of women having a special capacity for self-sacrifice, learned early in the cause of the family, which must now be put to use of the emerging nation. It was little wonder that the apostle of satyagraha, of self-imposed suffering in the cause of truth, should see women as his natural allies. Moreover he felt women so socially situated that they were particularly fitted to work at the three central elements of his national programme: reviving the art of spinning and making honourable the weaving of khadi, treating untouchables as fellow humans, and extending hands of simple friendship across communal boundaries, where men’s work in public meetings and speeches had failed. Increasingly in the 1920s Gandhi became aware of his need for more women workers, and it was partly because of this that he cared so deeply about the attitudes of women in the ashram, and exposed them to the new experiences of equality with men, communal living and fraternity across traditional social boundaries.

As Gandhi toured India, often speaking at women’s meetings and encouraging women to break out of some traditional social moulds and follow him into public work, he became more deeply aware of the attitudes and suffocating practices which restricted women and reduced their
self-esteem in their own eyes as well as those of men. Inevitably too his public position meant that he was asked very specific questions about the treatment of women. He was not slow in response, and as on the question of untouchability he argued that there was no religious warrant for many of the practices he condemned, and that their abolition would purify and strengthen Hindu society. Of course he was not alone in arguing for change: there was a tradition of social reformers and their organisations stretching well back into the nineteenth century. But Gandhi argued so strongly in the context of Indian and Hindu values that he could never be accused of ‘Westernising’ or undermining traditional values with foreign influences; and he placed social reform squarely in the centre of the work to achieve swaraj, whereas earlier social reform movements had been kept apart from the political work for fear of alienating the orthodox.’ (Source: Judith M. Brown, Gandhi, pp. 210-11)

Some scholars like Bhikhu Parekh has critically commented on the Gandhian approach as one that reinforced stereotypes (while largely agreeing that his efforts for Indian women and his public positions contributed a lot without doubt in the journey of Indian women towards emancipation):

‘…………he saw and honoured women largely as mothers, never as wives or lovers. When he said that he wanted to become a woman, he had in mind nothing more than nursing the sick and raising children. He did bring women into public life in a way no one had before, but largely to play motherly roles; even in satyagrahas they fought and suffered as mothers and sisters fiercely defending their children and brothers, but not as wives and sweethearts defending their husbands and lovers. While improving the condition of women, Gandhi also reinforced the traditional sexual stereotypes and roles.’ (Source: Bhikhu Parekh, Gandhi’s Political Philosophy, p. 210)

**Exercise:**
1. Discuss Gandhi’s view on the role of women and the ways and means he thought of including women in the freedom struggle? .