

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MAHATMA GANDHI: AN ETERNAL TREATISE

Dr. Kiran Mani Tripathi

Asso. Prof. Department of Humanities, LNCT Bhopal (India)

ABSTRACT

Gandhiji's life is an open book. He lived a totally public life. His Autobiography_ 'The Story of my Experiments with Truth' presents values of simple and true life. The content of his autobiography is his experiments with truth. Truth is the founding principle of his life. His idea of self-introspection and reformation is to learn from mistakes is profound. Gandhiji's autobiography comes as a perfect example where he has not hidden his pettiness or his failure. Gandhiji directly imbibed many traits from his mother. He experimented with her ideas of non-injury to living beings, vegetarianism, fasting for self-purification as well as protest and tolerance towards our faiths. Gandhiji symbolizes the best of Indian culture and tradition.

Keywords: *Activist, Ahimsa, Experiments, personification, self-realization, vegetarianism.*

I. AUTOBIOGRAPHY- GENRE OF LITERATURE

Autobiography is a self – exposing form of literature. As the author writes biography about the life of some famous figure; autobiography is the self-expression of the author. Candidness is the basic trait required for writing a good autobiography. Only an honest person who is not afraid of accepting her or his own shortcomings and defeats can write a relevant autobiography. It is a genre of literature that reveals everything. Gandhiji's autobiography The Story of my Experiments with Truth comes as a perfect example where he has not hidden his pettiness or his failures. Gandhiji symbolizes the best of Indian culture and tradition.

II. FROM A COMMON MAN TO MAHATMA

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF M.K. GANDHI

It is very difficult to comment on the life of a person who pervades the whole Indian consciousness. We all live in an India that has been partially created by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, if not wholly. Gandhi's role in making the British quit India has been pivotal. He used the age-old weapons of truth and non-violence. He believed in harmony of life, vegetarianism and welfare of others. India has a very long and elaborate tradition of fast. Gandhiji absorbed the Indian spirit, accepted it, believed in it and experimented with it. He can be said to be the best personification of the Indian spirit.

The fact that Gandhiji's model was essentially Eastern cannot be denied. The great psychologist Erik H. Erikson writes, "My justification for approaching Gandhi is the conviction that psycho-analytical insights happen to compliment his kind of truth by a strange reversal of the traditional roles of East and West; for he is now a model of activism in Western culture"¹

Gandhiji saw himself in continuity of the flowing Indian ethos. He never denied the existence, role and importance of religions, gods and goddesses, rituals and festivals. He accepts India as she is. From the plus and

minus points of India he carves out his own tools of protest. Gandhiji said, "Hinduism as I know it entirely satisfies my soul, fills my whole being... when doubts haunts me, when disappointments stare me in the face and when I see not one ray of light on the horizon I turn to the Bhagvad Gita and I find the verse to comfort me; and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming sorrow. My life has been full of tragedies and if they have not left any visible and indelible effect on me, I owe it to the teachings of the Bhagvad Gita". Later in life when he was asked he was a Hindu, he replied, "Yes I am. I am also a Christian, a Muslim, a Budhist and a Jew." ²

Gandhiji took four to five years in writing the autobiography. Many parts of it were written when he was imprisoned in the Yervada Jail near Pune in Maharashtra. It was first published as a series in a Gujarati Weekly called Navjivan during 1925-28. Navjivan was published in Ahmadabad in Gujarat. It was first published as a compiled autobiography by Navjivan Trust in two volumes, first in 1927 and the second volume in 1929. The autobiography has been translated into English by Gandhiji's close associate Mahadev Desai. Mahadev Desai lived with Gandhiji throughout his life. The English version was published again by the Navjivan Trust in form of a series in its magazine Young India.

III. GANDHIJI'S LIFE

The details of Mahatma Gandhi's life are simple. He was born on 2nd October 1869 at Porbandar in Gujrat. He died on 30th January 1948 in Delhi. The name of his father was Karam Chand Gandhi and the name of his mother was Putlibai. The name of his wife was Kasturba. Gandhiji belonged to a well-to-do family. His mother was very religious. She fasted regularly. She even used peaceful protest through fasting when things did not go according to her in the family; Gandhiji directly imbibed many traits from his mother. He experimented with her ideas of non-injury to living beings, vegetarianism, fasting for self-purification as well as protest and tolerance towards our faiths. He was born in the Vaisya community, the business caste.

Before leaving for England for his further studies his mother made him vow not to take meat or alcohol in England. In London the intense conflict went on within him regarding values. His mind firmly rested on the values given by his mother but at the same time he was eagerly attracted by the lure and charm of instant enjoyment in England. Once he was on the verge of falling prey to pleasures of the flesh but as he says again and again he was redeemed and saved by God. He was firm in his vow of vegetarianism. For him a vow is a vow; a decision is a decision. His life is a life of making conscious choices. He always supported what he thought was right.

Gandhiji lived in South Africa from 1893 to 1914. His experiences there prepared Gandhiji for his struggle in India. In South Africa he realized that the whites treat blacks and Indians in a derogatory manner. He was not allowed to use his turban at the court. He protested. He was thrown off from a train at Pieter Muritz Burg when he refused to go to the third class while holding a valid first class ticket simply because he was an Indian. This first hand exposure to racism and sheer cruelty of colonism perturbed Gandhiji. However he always chose peaceful means of protest rather than violent ones. At the time, of his leaving from South Africa, a bill came that denied Indians franchise. At the request of other Indians Gandhiji stayed back in South Africa to protest against discrimination. He became an activist. He founded the Natal Indian Congress in 1894. His main work was to bring into light the plight and grievances of Indians living in South Africa.

In India his first successful Satyagraha (protest for a truthful cause) was in Kheda, Gujrat. The villagers of Kheda liberated themselves from the exploitation of the British officers under Gandhiji leadership. Gandhiji also tried to motivate the villagers to leave the social ills like untouchability, dowry and child marriage. Not being able to digest his popularity, the British arrested him and ordered him to leave the area. A mass movement arose for his immediate release. He was released from jail, but his protest did not stop. Sardar Patel represented the side of farmers while negotiating with the British, Gandhiji fought relentlessly for the villagers of Champaran and Kheda. The confidence of the Indian masses grew in him. People started calling him Bapu (father).

People accepted Gandhiji as their own leader. It was the magic of his sincerity that his voice controlled the whole nation. He and his followers completely boycotted foreign goods. He evolved a new tool for Satyagraha, i.e. non-cooperation. The British had been following the policy of 'Divide and Rule'. Gandhiji believed that India had to improve herself if she wanted to get freedom and maintain that freedom. In 1928 he finally gave the British rulers the ultimatum of granting India dominion status or face consequences. The British kept silent at the challenge. On 26 Jan. 1930 the Indian tricolour was flagged publically for the first time. In 1930 Gandhiji marched over 400 KMs. from Ahamdabad to Dandi to break the oppressive Salt Law. Over 60,000 people were jailed during this protest.

During the Second World War in 1939 Gandhiji did not co-operate the British and launched the final Quit India movement in 1942. By 1947 India was free but the British had done their trick. They succeed in dividing the nation on religious grounds. The body of Gandhi might have died, but his spirit will never die.

IV. GANDHIJI'S PRINCIPLES

The content of Gandhiji's autobiography is his experiments with truth. Truth is the founding principle of his lifelessly. Truth means to be true to oneself, not to hide anything at all and to speak and act fearlessly. He writes, "My uniform experience has convinced me that there is no God other truth"³. His idea of self-introspection and reformation is to learn from mistakes.

From truth follows the demand of truth, that is, Satyagraha. To protest for a truthful cause in a peaceful manner is Satyagraha. If something is correct, it has every right to assert itself. Truth does not need supporters. It will last forever. In Satyagraha what is demanded must be authentic, legitimate and correct.

Gandhiji's one idea is related to the other. His concept of non-violence is non-injury to living beings, to the flora and fauna. He was influenced by Jain and Buddhist philosophy.

Celibacy (Brahmacharya) is an important tenet of Gandhian philosophy. Gandhiji believed that excess of any instinct leads to destruction and negativity. Physical pleasures should be limited and strained to allow our energies to flow towards a creative and constructive direction.

Gandhiji believed in spiritual and practical purity. Celibacy and asceticism were his major tools. He wanted to wash the bodily vessel of all impurities and go near God. Brahmcharya for him was a means of self-realization.

Vegetarianism is a tool to achieve the ideal state of health – both physical and mental. It becomes clear by reading the autobiography that Gandhiji experimented with his food habits throughout his life. He experimented with meat eating as a child but as we can see in the autobiography, his mind never accepted meat. When he ate flesh, he dreamt all the night that goat and chicken were jumping in his stomach. Here again we may underline that the impact of Putlibai, his mother was very deep on him. He was an activist for vegetarianism. He lived among the Dalits and spoke for social equality and justice.

Gandhiji's ideas on Swadeshi, Khadi and small scale industries have been called antigrowth but these concepts are based on self-reliance and India's rural pattern living. He made full use of all resources available to him. He found a purpose in his life – the purpose of freeing India and improving India. He would have done the same today. If living today, he would have found a suitable purpose to his life without caring for the society, its norms or the authority. He would have lived in today's scenario at his own terms and conditions. All of us have a Gandhiji within us. Gandhi is the name of goodness within each one of us. This is the relevance of the Mahatma today.

V. STYLE OF WRITING – SIMPLE:

As far as the prose style of the autobiography is concerned, Gandhi's autobiography is much simple to understand as he has used very polite diction even on unpleasant situations. Like his personality, his prose style is also simple. It contains qualities of simplicity, plainness and directness. His style has no place for any embellishments, yet he did not hesitate in using examples and similes to explain the peculiarities of the contemporary personalities like Gokhale, Tilak and Pherozeshah Mehta. He writes "Sir Pherozeshah seemed to me like the Himalaya, the Lokmanya like the ocean but Gokhale was as the Ganga." He also has given other examples like "the Green pamphlet sold like hot cakes", and the advice was as better as poison to me." Gandhi has also used antithetical expressions in writing to give force to his statements as he has written, "Swaraj is for the awakened, not for the sleepy and the ignorant". In his autobiography there is no confusion or ambiguity in his style as he is very clear about his goal and the path he followed. As Gandhi was shy of speaking, he developed the habit of brevity. He used words very economically. As a lawyer using direct opinions he made his point and hit the target without being diverted by unnecessary, ornamental and flowery expressions.

Gandhi wrote in his autobiography on political and spiritual matters as well. He was a spiritual personality as he was influenced by the Gita, The Bible, and other literary works like Ruskin's Unto This Last, Carlyle's Heroes and Hero-worship, Tolstoy's The Kingdom of God is Within You and Thoreau's Civil Disobedience. So he developed a prophetic style, which is well-pronounced in his statements on Ahimsa, Truth, and Love etc. He insists on the necessity of the purification of self. It was the message of the Gita that made his thinking profound and deep.

VI. CONCLUSION

Gandhiji's autobiography also suggests ways to improve one's own life and personality. A vast volcano of positive forces is within all of us. Gandhiji's words have the power of unleashing that positive energy.

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