

Gandhi's *My Experiments with Truth*: Cultural and Social Expression of an Indian

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Abstract

Gandhi a social reformer, philosopher, thinker, educationist and above all a seeker after truth also developed the new dimensions of expression through his writings. His writings reflect the contemporary society and its vast panorama in which his global vision is absorbed deliberately with an acute analysis made by him through his incessant experiments towards life and society. With the help his spiritual memoir *My Experiments with Truth* Gandhi poured his philosophical views analyzing the social and cultural facets searching for Truth and inculcating the Self. Influenced greatly by the typical Indian tradition Gandhi assimilated himself with society and paved the path of morality including truth, non-violence, perseverance, positivity, love, respect and human values. To him culture is inseparable; it is an integral part of individual. Culture is the sole factor on which the foundation of individual character lies. His ardency for culture is quite evident in his practice of self-introspection. He considered the social and cultural codes as instruments by means which self can be attained and this self is manifestation of Truth and Ahimsa.

Keywords: Culture, Society, Search for Truth, Ahimsa, Simplicity.

Culture plays a vital role in literature. It possesses the capacity to influence the thoughts of writer. The writer shapes the view molding him with the existing cultural elements. Being brought up and educated in typical Kathiawari culture Gandhi never showed

any traits of isolation from his cultural ethics and codes. The influence of his religious mother, her practice of observing fast, regular prayers and many other activities enlightened him and he transformed his attitude into spirituality. Even in his childhood, the play of Shraavan Kumar, straightforwardness and honesty of Harishchandra also taught him about the moral duties and responsibilities towards family and society. Gandhi's association with different social activities was an outcome of his inclination towards his cultural. In fact, his writings act as the voice of his society and culture. *My Experiments with Truth* written as a memoir of his life events represents the Indian society and its people. In his autobiography we find the different segments in which Indian culture exuberates with excellence. Indian culture is grand and unique and it is tree in which other cultures bloom like leaves. The culture of any nation provides sustainability to its subjects to adapt them according to the needs. A culture is not a collection of doctrines or few chosen principles it is a broad concept transferred from generation to generations that assimilates the different ideologies propounded by the preceding people being experienced and experimented.

Even his thoughts on character, life style, diets, sacramental issues, reconciliation of problems and solutions are also colored with his own culture. In other words, he saw the spirit of his nation in culture. During movements for the freedom of Indian nation, he never gave the principles which he inherited from his culture and society. The amalgams of thoughts and practices with purposeful nature are flourished by his culture. Our culture has always taught us to lead a peaceful life with feelings of mutual co-operation, fraternity, solidarity, and respect to others. Indian culture consists of its constituent elements in which ethics, ahimsa, truth, unity dominantly prevail. Gandhi's personality is also an outcome of his culture that enables him to represent on the varieties of platform and different faculties of human stage treading on righteous paths and performing virtuous deeds. But he has always put the concept of multi-culturalism in high esteem and his global vision of unity is quite

emitted from his reverence for other cultures. Once he expressed his views on culture in a conference organized in Allahabad on April 5, 1936:

Many of us are striving to produce a blend of all cultures which seems today to be clash with one another. No culture can live if attempts to be exclusive there is no such things as pure Aryan culture in existence in India today. Whether the Aryans were indigenous to India or were unwelcome intruders, doesn't interest me much. What does interest me is the fact that my remote ancestors blended with one another with the utmost freedom and we of the present generation are result of that blend. (Kumar, 2017)

The above quoted expression by Gandhi clearly justifies that our Indian culture has characteristics of magnanimity, flexibility and above all synthesis. *My Experiment with Truth* is totally based on his actual experiments which he made during span of his life and it also elaborates Indian cultural element like religion, ethics, values, ahimsa, truth and unity. The style in which he delivers his precious thoughts has also touch of Indianness and Indian culture. Being brought up in a Vaishnav family, he never gave up the moral values and ethics. Gandhi in his autobiography presents the mirror to reflect the simple livings of contemporary people with their struggles, their indomitable spirit to get Swaraj. It explains the complicated issues of Indian society and arranges them in phenomenal sequence. Religion is the core entity of our culture upon which the empire of ethics and values lies. Gandhi's idea about religion has also touch of his culture. A close perusal of his autobiography sheds a light on the fact that the concept of religiosity bloomed in his heart due to virtuous deeds and religious practices of his mother. He would often observe the routine of his mother getting involved in daily prayers, observing fast and worshipping in the temple. At one place in the autobiography he portrays his mother as 'She was deeply religious. She would not think of taking her meals without her daily prayers. Going to Haveli – the Vaishnav temple – was one

of her daily duties. As far as my memory can go back, I don't remember her having ever missed the Chaturmas.' (14) Gandhi's advocacy for virtuosity to shape character of individual adequately finds the proper place in his autobiography. According to him the inculcation of moral values and ethics can build the character. He was strongly opinion that the attainment of Self can only be possible through virtuosity.

Another important aspect that arises from *My Experiments with Truth* is Gandhi's strong belief in simplicity of life. Being Indian, simplicity flows from our style, manner and mode of expression. Our culture has always taught us to be simple but bearing higher degree of thinking, the thinking that helps us to cast our dreams into realities of development and growth. The supremacy of individual exists in simplicity of life with good and productive thinking. After reaching England Gandhi decided to change himself as per English way of life and engaged a teacher of French and Latin for proper speaking, bought expensive dresses and started violin lesson tried to learn Foxtrot. But his role of becoming gentleman could not meet his needs. Because the gap between his inner and outward self was widening into chasm and he left the thought of adopting grandeur look colored with unknown culture. He felt himself helpless to face the reality being delved into the thought that English outfit on indigenous person could not make any remarkable changes in thoughts. To change his life he had to change his attitude, way of thinking and that was something that went deeper than any differences in customs. It is correct that better to be true to oneself than to try and act like someone else. So he writes in his autobiography that 'If my character made a gentleman of me, so much the better. Otherwise I should forgo the ambition'(51) He started to experiment with simple way of life. His impoverished state could have been a limitation; he turned it instead into an opportunity. He used to walk everywhere and his practice of long walks kept him strong and healthy even in the harsh winter of London.

One of the most important traits is his ardency for Truth. Truth plays a pivot role in every sphere of our life and culture. Our society also relies on the well built foundation of truth. Truthfulness leads the person to the eternity of thought and also paves the path for divinity which is beyond all imaginary entities of temporal world. Culturally in India truth has its own importance and dignity. Truth is not mere a word but it is a broad concept that shapes our ideas. Indian scriptures have also elaborated the dignity of truthfulness in deeds and every dealing of human beings. Gandhi in his whole life referred to 'God' as Truth and according to him Truth has much wider connotation than the term God. In the world there may be some people who are atheists or non-believer in the existence of God but nobody can deny to accept the supremacy of truth for even an atheist person also unhesitatingly accept the power of truth. He entitled his autobiography *My Experiments with Truth* because his main objective was to seek for Truth. Being seeker after truth Gandhi admits that 'for me, truth is the sovereign principle which includes numerous other principles. This truth is not only truthfulness in words but truthfulness in thoughts also, and not only the relative truth of our conception, but the Absolute Truth, the Eternal principle that is God.(Gandhi, 11)

Similarly ahimsa, the non-violence is characterized by Gandhi as a weapon. The Bhagwad Geeta also pleads for ahimsa quoting the most influential line 'Ahimsa Parmo Dharmah'. For Gandhiji ahimsa was the noblest expression of Truth or the ways to truth. Gandhi always regarded ahimsa as dharma and recognized as the central law of our beings. He strongly believed in the fact that without existence of ahimsa peace cannot be established in society. Where there is violence there is existence of jungle raj. Ahimsa and truth are intertwined to each other in such a way that it is impossible to disentangle and separate them. Nevertheless, non-violence is the means and truth is the end.

Gandhi always led a simple and totally public life and his autobiography *My Experiments with Truth* gives the vivid description of contemporary society and societal

facets. He was longing for an ideal society that would neither be jungle nor a straight jacket, but a home where one exercises one's right to freedom not affecting the freedom of other people in peaceful environment making one's progress as well the progress of society. He dreamt of establishing Ramraj where happiness and plenty might dwell. He was the keen observer of his surroundings who deliberately observed people of society. His autobiography fulfills the condition that 'Literature is the mirror of Society'. Gandhi acutely analyzed events and put them all in sequence as to produce this great volume which not only gives the living description the Indian society but also preaches the ethical codes essential for the human beings. His autobiography also makes his idea clear about the unity of heart delivering the message that we are externally diverse in terms of religion, ethnicity and culture or otherwise yet we are all united beneath the surface. M.K. Gandhi's opinion as Indian cultural representative is based on his personal experiences he gained during his life time. These experiences embodied his ideas and turned his attitude towards the consciousness and reformation of society.

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