

# Mahatma Gandhi's Interpretation of History

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Man's way of life in a given historical situation is an indication of his view of history; such is quite clear in the case of Gandhi. What follows are four basic and tentative aspects of his interpretation of history as I understand them:

- I. The meanings of life and of history being identical.
- II. The ultimate meaning of life: a-historical or trans-historical and, at the same time, paradoxically enough, conceived as intimately related to the normal order in society.
- III. The ultimate meaning of life transcending historical tradition and social structure, hope to be placed not in the future perfectibility of human society in history, but in God.
- IV. The ultimate meaning of life being a-historical, no view of history to be thought of as absolute.

I am extremely grateful for the enlightenment and criticism afforded me both by those who were personally associated with Gandhi during his lifetime and by those influenced by him more indirectly. Talks with them gave me not only intellectual clarification of certain issues but also moments or flashes of insight which are still with them and affect my whole approach to life.

## I. Meaning of Life.

It would be impossible to remain unaware of Gandhi's consistent and ceaseless search for the meaning of life as a fundamental continuity in change of his life attitude. Such is the life of openness

toward God as Satya, a fundamental symbol indicating a way of truly becoming human. This openness as a way of life expresses itself as an act in and led by Satya, which is no single constituent of human life, such as economical, political, poetic or philosophical, but the foundation by which all these are unified and directed. This Satya is eternally now, transcendent and immanent.

The more radical this openness, the more he found that God was all and related to all. Out of this experience, he interpreted the religious tradition symbolically and transcendently so that he found himself not only as a carrier of tradition, but also its reformer. Such a history of tradition as conceived by Gandhi is not closed, but open ended.

Phenomenologically, the seemingly 'doing nothing', such as prayers, worship and silence, was deeply related to his fearless and creative activity. It gradually became clear for Gandhi that the life of nothingness and nonattachment, arising from the God-centered life, was the life of freedom given by God's grace. It was not something to be proved, but to accept as God's gift. To receive God's grace was to live related to all: loving, enduring, hoping, forgiving and questioning. This was a way to know Satya through which all kinds of barrier were gradually being overcome. Gandhi's clear thinking, spontaneity and whole hearted relation to others were an expression of his rootedness in Satya.

His religious symbols due to his family background and the environment in which he was brought up were in Indian religious traditions. There is one thing, however, which is unmistakable: his existential awakening to reality, to the fact that, while, in youth studying in England, he could not become, however hard he

might try, an English gentleman. The deepening of this consciousness had a revolutionary effect on the Indian national movement.

Gandhi's search for the meaning of life, inseparably related to his positive and total involvement in the formation of social, political and economic order, shows two things: the rejection of 'historicism' and the identification of the meanings of life and of history. Without this identification, history is meaningless. Consequently, unless there had been such a consistent search for its meaning in Gandhi, history would not have become such a fundamental and crucial issue for him.

## II. Social Order

Historically speaking, Indian religious traditions have on the whole been under the heavy yoke of formalism, traditionalism and, recently, compartmentalization. This tends to hide the meaninglessness and rootlessness of life behind emotional revivalism, the politicization of religious feeling, fanaticism, and ritualism. This is the fallacy of 'anthropomorphism', 'ontomorphism' and 'personalism', and Gandhi was quite aware of it.

In his political involvement, the three most striking and universal factors are (1) its central concern with people; (2) a national movement for the establishment of a righteous and human order in the world context of class and power conflict; and (3) the spiritualization of power politics through Satya and Ahimsa as a political dynamic. The first refutes a politics dominated by and centered in the privileged, the second, that of fanatic and ego-centered nation-alism, and the third, that of sheer power politics.

Gandhi's political involvement demonstrates that a moral and spiritual order in society is necessary for human life, and though

this man can become more human. Without normal order in society, it is very difficult for man to become human, or to grow in humanity. His search for the meaning was a definite step and mark in the Indian people's search for identity and unity in religious, political and religious diversites.

Gandhi rejected antotelic industrialization, meaning that economic values should be subordinated to human values. Phenomenologically, Gandhi radically challenged the trend of modern industrialization and directed attention to specific problems of India's economic condition: poverty, an overpopulous peasantry and labour surplus. His aim in propagating 'a non-acquisitive society' and 'minimum industrialization' was the emancipation of Indian people from poverty. Such, according to Gandhi, were the ways out of a western industrialization which exploited India, destroying traditional manufactures and strengthening colonialism. There is no need to repeat his contention that solution of economic problems demands much more than political independence from Britain; 'Ram-raj', Gandhi's ideal social order, implies a total dimension of life. Gandhi's life was one of the most impressive and powerful examples of the paradoxical reality of a-historical or trans-historical meaning being immanent and conceived as intimately related to the normal order in society.

He dedicated himself to establishing a new form of social order led by God in the light of his own religious tradition. He was also quite aware of other religious traditions as his deep and personal fellowship with some Christians such as C. F. Andrews and his reading of religious scriptures indicated. His meeting with others who had been sustained by religious traditions other than his own

must have been religious experiences for him too. This partly explains his consciousness of the whole mankind as one community and his refusal to think of the Hindu religious tradition as an absolute. This new humanism cost him his life.

In principle, the Hindu religious tradition is inseparably related to a particular socio-economic structure though the ultimate meaning transcends such a historical structure. That is to say, traditional insight reveals a paradoxical reality of transcendence and immanence of the ultimate meaning. Considering his symbolic interpretation of Hindu religious history and tradition, it can be said that Gandhi's way of life was very traditional.

### III. Interpretation of History.

It is clear, without any doubt, that to Gandhi the ultimate meaning of and concern with history was 'Satya'. Transcendence, presence and immanence of Satya was Gandhi's meaning of history. The destiny of history is in God's hands; the focus of history is God. Such an understanding of history is for Gandhi not a theory, but a fact of life. It was the God-given life.

Gandhi had a historic-futuristic vision in which he saw evolutionary growth as the unfolding of spirituality and the social order. Such a vision actually dominates his sayings regarding history, but it does not mean that hope lay in the future perfectability of human society in history. I would rather say that Gandhi's historic-futuristic vision was a God-given insight of the normal order in society. God as the locus of hope in history implied a possible rupture of history, and there seems to be a serious tension between the historic-futuristic vision and a possible rupture of history. If however, the locus of hope in history is clear, this

tension will not exist. A possible rupture of history did not make Gandhi despair ; on the contrary, he acted spontaneously, courageously, joyfully and whole heartedly related to all in love, receiving life as God's gift.

God being the meaning of history will naturally and always question all views of history and reject the absolutization of any one view. His interpretation of history being symbolical and transcendental, it was obvious that he could not accept any kind of reductionism, historical, scientific or symbolical such as Marxism, liberalism or literalism. It must have been most painful for Gandhi to see an indifference to history because it manifests man's subordination to time and environment. It is a sad sign of loss of man's humanity and religious traditions.