

# Truth : Gandhi's Concept of Justice



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## Abstract

Justice for Gandhi is deeply embedded in his concept of truth "Satya". Truth is the Sovereign principle, which includes other principles. The word Satya comes from "Sat" which means "to be", "to exist" Gandhi saw a natural unity and interconnectedness in spiritual, moral and political dimensions of his experiments with truth. If truth is the highest morality in itself then it is apparent that for Gandhi this was the essence of dharma. Truth was to him the goal of all human endeavor, be it political, social, economic or religious where he says, "To find truth completely is to realise one-self and one's destiny, in other words, to become perfect". The relationship between his concept of truth and justice is undeniably all-inclusive, where each one is included. He says, "I do not believe in the doctrine of the greatest good of the greatest number. The only real, dignified, human doctrine is the greatest good of all"<sup>1</sup>. Gandhi believed that the only way to attain justice is through 'satyagraha', in the insistence of truth or 'truth to power'. The essence of satyagraha lies in its emphasis on ahimsa which is often loosely and incompletely translated as 'non-violence'. Ahimsa is not only a moral method but is also a moral principle derived from truth. 'While truth is the bed-rock principle, non-violence follows as a corollary'<sup>2</sup>. Truth cannot be, never will be, reached except through non-violence"<sup>3</sup>. Falling back on stayagraha exhibits the conviction and dedication of one towards reason. Moreover, Gandhi felt that the act of satyagraha, which had the capacity of disposing of social evils, could create a profound power fit for changing the entire world and set up Justice.

**Keywords:** Truth, Satya, Justice, Gandhi, Satyagraha, Ahimsa, Moral and Political Philosophy, Non-Violence, Dharma.

## Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi is considered more of a avant-garde than a scholar due to the role he played in leading India to freedom with his non-violent yet steel-gritted methods. However, we must not fail to recognise him as a true champion of justice.

Justice is a natural concept rooted in human lives, yet it is complicated to understand and explain perfectly. Simplistically, we experience justice in two ways: First, as its fulfillment and realisation for human lives and societies; and second, in its violation and denial of rights and freedom. In general human experiences, justice is understood more widely in this second sense. It is especially true in contemporary societies now where it is often not less than a miracle to see justice being done.

Gandhi's idea of justice was drawn from his own battle for the rebuilding of justice and his own encounters and perceptions of bad form as a casualty of political persecution, bigotry, and politically-sanctioned racial segregation in South Africa and India. He utilised his aptitude of legal theories and groundings into real-life discourses pertinent to the problems of the age he lived in. Gandhi's views depended so much on events and experiences that they developed and changed over time. The central theme of Gandhi's life and works was 'quest for truth'. Naturally, his concept of Justice was a restoration of Truth in society. According to him, "Truth Never damages a cause that is just"<sup>4</sup>. A just society was one where truth prevailed. The concept of Truth or Satya was the ontological basis for all his moral, religious and philosophical positions.

## Truth

The word Satya comes from "Sat" which means "to be", "to exist". In "The Story of My Experiments with Truth" Gandhi writes "But for me, Truth is the Sovereign principle, which includes other principles... I worship God as Truth only. I have not yet found, him, but I am seeking after him." According to him, Truth leads us to an understanding of God. But, his concept of God is devoid of theological implications. Truth is not independent of our moral values nor is it a mere cognitive notion; it is much more than that. Gandhi initially stated that 'God is Truth' which he reversed

to 'Truth is God' sometime in 1929 as he evolves as a thinker. He explains it as a culmination of his relentless search for Truth. The "assertion 'Truth is God' was an attempt to express an insight which sought to state a substance-attribute relation". In God is Truth, Truth becomes an attribute of God, one of the many attributes that God may represent. In this proposition, God is the substance, the fundamental core, and Truth is the attribute, one of the ways in which that substance can be understood. To thus "relegate truth to just one of the attributes of God is to fail to understand the nature of reality in question". When the assertion is reformulated to Truth is God, Truth becomes the primary attribute, the fundamental core. In fact, Truth is the essence of God.<sup>5</sup>

Truth is to be attained and achieved in both the private and public realm, at the level of the individual and the collective. In fact, as a logical extension of this reading of Gandhi's notion of truth, it is held that politics was the most natural vocation chosen by Gandhi as it lent him space in public domain within which he could experiment with truth. He saw dharma (dharma here connotes both religion and one's sense of duty towards moral law) and politics as inseparable when he said, 'I do not believe that the spiritual law works in a field of its own. On the contrary, it expresses itself only through the ordinary activities of life. It thus affects the economic, the social and political fields'.<sup>6</sup> Gandhi saw a natural unity and interconnectedness in spiritual, moral and political dimensions of his experiments with truth. If truth is the highest morality in itself then it is apparent that for Gandhi this was the essence of dharma. Truth was to him the goal of all human endeavor, be it political, social, economic or religious where he says, "To find truth completely is to realise one-self and one's destiny, in other words, to become perfect".<sup>7</sup>

### Justice

Gandhi's understanding of justice is not merely an epistemology, it is, in a deeply philosophical sense, an understanding of being itself—an ontology. Justice for Gandhi is deeply embedded in truth "Satya". It is in the realm of social justice that he experiments with truth. Gandhi's notion of truth is not merely an epistemic issue or of theoretical concern alone. He transformed absolute truth of the philosophical sat to the relative truth of ethical principle capable of being tested and applied.<sup>8</sup> His idea of truth has moral and spiritual dimension of relevance to both individual and collective action. Following this Gandhi's understanding of justice is a result of his religious beliefs and ontological grounding. As a seeker of truth, Gandhi's concept of social justice is founded on the concept of Dharma. Dharma can be understood in many ways. Generally, it is defined as "that which supports or sustains" (Dharayetiiti dharma: that which supports or sustains is Dharma) the universe, the relationships, the moral law. In a derivative sense, it can also mean religion and duty. Gandhi's understanding of social justice has both these meanings as a foundation, and they are inextricably interlinked. But 'Satya' is the overarching moral law (dharma) that rules every other positive or man-made law enacted by the state.<sup>9</sup> If a man-made

law is seen as contradicting the moral law, disobedience to such state law would be perfectly legitimate.

While today's perception of social justice is often founded on a "rights-based approach," Gandhi's vision of a just world is one based on "duties." He always held the "notion of duty" as fundamental to a just society, as he writes in his radical attack on (modern) civilization: "Civilization is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty. Performance of duty and observance of morality are convertible terms. To observe morality is to attain mastery over our mind and our passions. So doing, we know ourselves. The Gujarati equivalent for civilization means "good conduct."<sup>10</sup> The logic of Gandhi's concept of justice is that if one performs one's duties, everyone else's rights are ensured. However, these days we are so engrossed in getting our "rights" and getting others to do their duties that we forget that each and every individual needs to fulfill their own duties in order to have a just society. The relationship between his concept of truth and justice is undeniably all-inclusive, where each one is included. He says, "I do not believe in the doctrine of the greatest good of the greatest number. The only real, dignified, human doctrine is the greatest good of all."<sup>11</sup>

### Means to Justice

Gandhi believed that the only way to attain justice is through 'satyagraha', in the insistence of truth or 'truth to power'. Satyagraha is a Sanskrit word made up of 'Satya' and 'agraha'. Satya means not just "true" as opposed to false, but also "real" as opposed to unreal, and "good" as opposed to harmful; and agraha means "insistence" or "holding firmly to."

*"Truth (satya) implies love, and firmness (agraha) engenders and therefore serves as a synonym for force. I thus began to call the Indian movement Satyagraha, that is to say, the Force which is born of Truth and Love or non-violence, and gave up the use of the phrase "passive resistance", in connection with it, so much so that even in English writing we often avoided it and used instead the word "satyagraha" itself or some other equivalent English phrase."<sup>12</sup>*

The essence of satyagraha lies in its emphasis on ahimsa which is often loosely and incompletely translated as 'non-violence'. Ahimsa stands as opposed to hinsa which means injury or harm. To understand its full meaning ahimsa must be translated not as mere absence of violence but something like 'the force unleashed when desire to harm is eradicated.' It really stands for 'love in action.' In the Manu Smriti, the great lawbook of Hinduism, it is written, "Ahimsa paramo dharma": ahimsa is the highest law. Gandhi emphasises this point when he says that ahimsa is the very essence of human nature. Ahimsa or non-violence, for Gandhi, is not merely a strategy to be employed to seek success in political action; it is rather the only moral method possible to attain relative truth. Ahimsa is not only a moral method but is also a moral principle derived from truth. If ahimsa is seen merely as a tactic, it would make us believe that violence is right but cannot be employed as a tactic. Gandhi believed

ahimsa as the law of the universe, of every species and therefore, it cannot go wrong or be unsuccessful. Gandhi's contention was that a means based on the natural law of the universe cannot run counter to our idea of truth. Truth is the end and ahimsa is the means. Ahimsa automatically flows from truth. 'While truth is the bed-rock principle, non-violence follows as a corollary'<sup>13</sup>. "Non-violence is the greatest force man has been endowed with. Truth is the only goal he has. For God is none other than truth. Truth cannot be, never will be, reached except through non-violence"<sup>14</sup>. Falling back on stayagraha exhibits the conviction and dedication of one towards reason. Moreover, Gandhi felt that the act of satyagraha, which had the capacity of disposing of social evils, could create a profound power fit for changing the entire world and set up Justice.

The addition of ahimsa in the path to obtaining justice adds a unique touch to Gandhi's concept of justice. A traditional and more popular form of delivering justice, whether the aim is retribution, prevention or even reformation, involves punishments wherein the wrongdoer is made to suffer. But in Gandhian framework, restoration of justice is aimed to be achieved through a compassionate approach. A satyagrahi (a person who seeks justice through satyagraha) is not merely required to practice restraint from violent means but is also required to have love for the wrongdoer. The aspect of servitude to mankind must take into consideration the positive meaning of ahimsa wherein it is one's dharma is to do good to all creatures of the world. When a person turns to violence to restore justice, it only sets into motion a chain of violent emotions that manifests into violent acts in the future.

In Gandhi's framework of justice, a wrongdoer is not the one made to suffer, it is the victim who suffers. This is an absurd idea in the science of jurisprudence, yet is not only advocated but practiced by Gandhi. The idea here is to bring the wrong-doer into self-realisation of his wrongdoings. If he does not realise the truth of his adharm (sin) and has a change of heart he may not truly be brought to justice by mere pronouncement of punishments upon him; it may not serve his well-being.

*"We punish thieves because we think they harass us. They may leave us alone, but they will only transfer their attentions to another victim. This other victim, however, is also a human being, ourselves in a different form, and so we are caught in a vicious circle. The trouble from thieves continues to increase, as they think it is their business to steal. In the end we see that it is better to endure the thieves than to punish them. The forbearance may even bring them to their senses. By enduring them we realize that thieves are not different from ourselves, they are our brethren, our friends, and may not be punished. But whilst we may bear with the thieves, we may not endure the affliction. That would only induce cowardice. So we realize a further duty. Since we regard the thieves as our kith and kin, they must be made to realize the kinship. And so we must take pains to devise ways and means of winning them over. This is the path of ahimsa."*<sup>15</sup>

Gandhi is one who firmly believes that the very essence of human nature and intuition of man would bring genuine social justice. Following the path of a satyagrahi, one has the capacity to reason correctly which strengthens the moral and spiritual forces in guiding the principles for establishing justice and equity in society.

#### **Aim of the paper**

To analyse Gandhi's concept of truth and justice, and show that his conception is truth is an essential element in meeting or achieving social justice. For Gandhi, it is the individual who is important in a society because he believes that the very essence of human nature and intuition of man would bring genuine social justice. If one follows a path of a satyagrahi, one develops the capacity to reason correctly which strengthens the moral and spiritual forces in guiding the principles for establishing justice and equity in society. A satyagrahi base their life on truth which implies love and firmness which enforces self-realisation and respect for others. It is through this that one can achieve justice through reason on the understanding for the need of relying on truth.

#### **Conclusion**

In Gandhi's vision of a just society, the well-being of each and everyone is essential. In contrast to western utilitarian's greatest well-being of the greatest number of people', Gandhi's notion of justice, if based on truth will automatically drive to the realization of the need for all-inclusive growth and development. Gandhi's satyagraha enlightens the minds but more importantly gives us the theory of moral action morally guided in his principle of truth (Satya) which is essential in guiding an individual towards the right path, towards right reason which helps in establishing a just society. Once everyone becomes a satyagrahi, everyone, inclusive of all, becomes an agent of truth and justice.

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12. (Narayan, 1968, pp. 109-10)
13. (Pradhan, 2006, p.38).
14. (Iyer , 1993, p.240)
15. (Suhrud. 2019, p.26)

**Endnotes**

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2. (Pradhan, 2006, p.38).
3. (Iyer , 1993, p.240)
4. (Merton , 2007, p.47).
5. (Sayeed, 2006, pp.84-103)
6. (Rothermund, 1994, pp. 97-99)
7. (Jain, 2005, p. 133)
8. (Ericsson, 1969, p.413)
9. (Alam, 2006, pp. 6-9).
10. (Gandhi, 1908, p.53)
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