

Human Values in Vivekananda and Gandhi: Relevance in Contemporary India

Dr. Hemant Kumar Mishra

Assistant Professor (History)

Swami Devanand P. G. College Math Lar Deoria U.P.

Abstract

This research paper identifies the similarities and between Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi. It explains how the two men vastly differed in their family background and the educational and social milieu in which they grew up. Vivekananda was a religious leader and the proclaimed heir of the great saint of Bengal, Sri Ramakrishna, while Gandhi plunged into the political arena at the age of twenty-four, and for the next fifty years, led struggles against racialism and imperialism. Vivekananda rejected politics, while Gandhi believed that religion could not be separated from politics. Despite these differences, they both responded to Western influences with judicious discrimination, accepting what was life-giving and rejecting what was deleterious.

India, with its rapid economic modernization and urbanization, has rejected Gandhi's economics but accepted much of his politics and continues to revere his memory. We noted that, "modern India is hardly a Gandhian nation, if it ever was one. His vision of a village-dominated economy was shunted aside during his lifetime as rural romanticism, and his call for a national ethos of personal austerity and nonviolence has proved antithetical to the goals of an aspiring economic and military power." By contrast Gandhi is "given full credit for India's political identity as a tolerant, secular democracy."

Vivekananda revitalized Hinduism within and outside India, and was the principal reason for the enthusiastic reception of yoga, transcendental meditation and other forms of Indian spiritual self-improvement in the West. Aghananda Bharati explained, "...modern Hindus derive their knowledge of Hinduism from Vivekananda, directly or indirectly". Vivekananda espoused the idea that all sects within Hinduism (and all religions) are different paths to the same goal. However, this view has been criticised as an oversimplification of Hinduism.

Nature Or Man According To Swamiji : It is a matter of fact that no system of thought either social or religious or political is complete as far as a study of human nature is concerned. It is the understanding of human nature that brings perfection to the social system and thought. So man is to be studied from all aspects of life. Swamiji avoided any sectarian outlook on man. According to him, the individual must enjoy his earthly life and then renounce it for a higher ideal. Man should, therefore, be viewed integrally with a view to ensuring his total fulfillment. Swamiji expands a philosophy of man, whether eastern or western, can feel at home and find the inspiration to achieve total life-fulfillment. Thus, the thought, teaching and messages of Swamiji is nothing but Vedanta or Neo- Vedanta. "Man, according to Vedanta Philosophy is the greatest being that is in the universe Angles or Gods, whatever you may call them, have all to become man if they want to become perfect."4 This conception of man cannot be comprehended unless man has to struggle to remove his ignorance to become Divine, to reach God and see God, because Swamiji believed nothing but realisation of goodness, of perfection, of Divinity of man. "Divinity of man" is the core of his philosophy. Swamiji wanted that man being the highest being in creation and divine, the power, energy and strength in every man has to be manifested. He says, "Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this divinity within, by controlling nature, external and internal. Do this either by work or worship or psychic control or philosophy. By one or more, or all of these and be free. This is whole of religion. Doctrines or dogmas or rituals or books or temples or forms are but secondary details"5 What does Swamiji mean by Divinity? His concept of man is inseparable from his concept of Divinity or God. His idea interlinked with man-god relationship. If the divinity is the utmost core of man, the man has to achieve this through the withdrawal of senses and the mind from the world of sensate experience and turning energies inward in a supreme effort of concentration. By such inward penetration of concentrations through self-effort, self-reliance and self mastery, man achieves realization of his true nature. But man failed to realize his true nature due to the body mind dichotomy. Man is essentially a soul and soul's identification with this dichotomy causes alienation. Apart from this, ignorance of his original divinity makes him feel miserable, weak and helpless. Swamiji used to quote the parable of the fall of Adam from paradise to show that originally man was pure and free and, on account of ignorance and falsehood, there was a fall and he came to be alienated from his real nature. So Swamiji goes on, "Teach everyone his real nature, call upon the sleeping soul and see how it awakes. Power will come, goodness will come, and purity will come when the sleeping soul is roused to self-

conscious activity.”⁶ To overcome the religious, social and material aspect of alienation and ignorance, Swamiji emphasized the need to teach everyone his real nature. The sleeping soul, could be aroused through religion, nay, the Vedanta, is scientific and practical. Religion for him is not blind faith or empty formulae or lifeless rituals, it is being and becoming. Religion is Spiritual realization, the fullest manifestation of the Divine, within in life and conduct. Food, clothing, shelter and security, power and knowledge are not ends in themselves. They are but means while the end is the fullest development of man, the complete manifestation of the perfection already in him. The Vedanta views life in its wholeness. Its theme is man. Man is in search of fullness of truth, beauty and goodness. Part of this search is carried out in the external world, but the most significant part of this search is conducted in the inner world. The first brings about social welfare through the application of the physical and social sciences; the second generates spiritual freedom through the discipline of morality and religion. There can be no conflict between the two-the secular as against the sacred-as they both refer only to different stages in the growth of the same individual. So, the real alienation of man, according to Swamiji is alienation from his Divine nature. This has to be overcome if man is ever to find self-fulfillment. Self-fulfillment, better still, self realization is attainable, either through work or worship or psychic control or philosophy by one more or all these. Swamiji laid stress on work as a means for self realization, but also prescribes other methods like worship, psychic control or philosophy. In fact, all these have to be harmoniously combined, if man is to attain full realisation of his Divine nature. Swamiji invokes the past only to illumine the present; he holds up the spiritual goals of Vedas and Upanishads but does not decry the material benefits of modern technology. He advocated the synthesis of spirituality and science. As Dr. Albert Einstein said, “Science without religion is blind and religion without Science is lame” This Vedantic view expounded by Swamiji as the synthesis of science and religion and is also the synthesis of head and heart. The vision of this synthesis is the outstanding contribution of Swamiji to human thought. Sister Nivedita says, ‘it is this which adds its crowning significance in our master’s life, for here he becomes the meeting point, not only of east and west, but also of past and future. If the many and one be indeed the same Reality, then it is not all modes of creation which are paths of realization. No distinction, henceforth, between sacred and secular. To labor is to pray. To conquer is to renounce. Life is itself religion. To have and to hold is as stern a trust as to quit and to avoid.’ This is the realization which makes Vivekananda the greatest preacher of karma [action] not as divorced from, but as expressing jnana and bhakti. To him, the worship, the study, the farmyard and the field are as true and fit scenes for the meeting of God with man as the cell of the monk or the door of the temple. To him, there is no distinction between service of man and worship of God, between manliness and faith, between true righteousness and spirituality. All his words, from one point of view, read as a commentary upon this central conviction.’ “Art, science and religion”, he said once, ‘are but three different ways of expressing a single truth. But in order to understand this, we must have the theory of Advaita.”⁷ The man has to manifest his Divinity through work. Here Swamiji’s approach to work is that of “Work is Worship”, “serve Jiva as Shiva”, Work done on the spirit of worship serving the Jiva {man} as Shiva {Lord} helps man to sublimate to a higher level where its other side effects are overcome. Work done in any other spirit is bound to lead to attachment, dependence, suffering and bondage. ‘Work is Worship’ is a philosophy which combines external action aimed at the enrichment of society with internal action aimed at the spiritual enrichment of the individual. Services rendered in spiritual attitude uplift both the giver and the receiver. The Vedanta always emphasizes that man must grow morally and spiritually. When man thus takes into account his own spiritual development through his work with humility and reverence in society, all his work turns into not only service, but veritable worship. By his work, he not only ensures the welfare and happiness of his fellow human beings to whom he gives his service in a spirit of reverence but also gains in spiritual status himself. Introducing the phrase “Daridradevobhava,” he wanted us to look upon the poor and serve him. Swamiji says, “Learn that the whole of life is giving, that nature will force you to give. So give willingly, sooner or later you will have to give up. Be, therefore, not a beggar, be unattached. This is the most terrible task of life.”⁸

So, man has to perform most terrible tasks of life through constantly non- attached work; for the poor, downtrodden people “daridranarayana” as Swamiji calls them. His Upanishadic call, “Arise ! Awake ! and stop not till the goal is reached,,” is the awakening call to the man to awaken to achievements of science and civilization, morality and social justice. The same awakening process carried still deeper brings man to the feet of God and recognise himself through the realization that man is God himself. Gandhiji while paying tribute to Swamiji said, “I have gone through his works very thoroughly and after having gone through them, the love that I had for my country became a thousand fold”⁹ Thus Swamiji’s concept of man and his action is the new hope for rejuvenated humanity. Let us take look at Gandhiji’s concept of man. Gandhiji was not born great. He was an ordinary man. He molded himself with all the intense passion and the superb patience of an artist working with his chisel on rough stone. And nothing could be more creative than the piece of sculpture he carved-himself. He was himself well aware of that he wrote “I must admit my many inconsistencies, (But) there is a consistency running through my seeming inconsistencies as in nature there is unity running through my seeming diversity.”¹⁰ Gandhiji’s life was not suddenly transformed unlike that of Swamiji. His religious quest started in

South Africa and from an upper middle class barrister he became a naked Fakir, a Sanyasi. Gandhiji's political mission and religious quest began simultaneously when he was in his twenties; his religious convictions gave him the strength and the stamina for a half-century of a crowned political career. He asserted that religion could not be separated from politics, but he also made it clear that he was not referring to dogmas and rituals but to the essential ethical content in all major religions. He had endeavored to enforce the teachings of the Gita in his own life, and come to the conclusion that perfect renunciation was impossible without observance of Ahimsa in every shape and form. He was a believer in Advaita. Then, how, does one define Gandhiji's concept of man? "Man is neither mere intellect, nor the gross animal body nor the heart or soul alone. A proper and harmonious combination of all three is required for the making of the whole man and constitutes the economics of education."¹¹ So, Gandhiji at the outset believed in the basic unity of human nature though men differ in the context of their culture and tradition. What is thus true regarding human being is taken as true also regarding the unity of man and nature. He told N.K. Bose, the anthropologist, a man was best represented not by highest flights of thought which he reached at rare moments but by the actual measure of the ideal of his daily life.¹² By saying this Gandhiji came to the conclusion that man has to be judged from his day to day action. Gandhiji believed that the spirit of man is imperishable and every human being, however wicked he may appear to be, has a hidden nobility, a Divine spark, which can be ignited. Gandhiji's religious quest helped to mould not only his personality but the political technique with which he confronted racism in South Africa and colonialism in India. In him evolution of Satyagraha technique, and implementing it, he could understand the intrinsic nature of vast mass of human beings and came to the conclusion that it is easier for men of religion than other to accept the basic assumption of Satyagraha that it is worth while fighting, and even dying but the soul lives on and that no oppressor can crush the imperishable spirit of man. Gandhiji had impregnable faith in God. To Gandhiji, God was truth, love and justice. He believed that God and man have to co-exist; otherwise, God would disappear and man would be left lonely in the jungle of life. But this is impossible. He believed that there is a soul in each human being. Whatever might be the differences between human beings due to geographical and historical circumstances and conditions during a few thousand years, each one had a soul equal to any other soul. God created man in his own image, said Bible, God resided in each human being said the Gita, The Buddha and Mohammed affirmed the same truth. So Gandhiji believed in the equality of human souls. From Gandhiji's faith in this equality sprang his conviction that there was no man or woman so small, weak or helpless, that he or she could not discover the strength of the soul inside and make use of it when life itself is in peril. Gandhiji thus put his faith not only in a transcendent God but equally in the God immanent in every man and woman. Gandhiji says, "I do not believe that an individual may gain spiritually and those that surround him suffer. I believe always in the essential unity of man for that matter of all that lives."¹³ As he believed in the essential unity of man, he was infinitely humble and sympathetic, ready to consider each and every claim to truth. But he was also a resolute and discriminating person rejecting everything that is short of Truth. Gandhiji emphasized that in Indian tradition man is not understood as a rational animal; an animal with the power of more ratiocination; rather he is taken as a 'spiritual being', a being who is capable of self-existence or self-awareness. It is because of this understanding of man that here in India morality and religion are taken to be the most fundamental aspects of human existence and action. Once human existence is understood in its transcendental ideal character, the importance of human Endeavour to apprehend its significance becomes clear. Gandhiji believes that this transcendental ideal ever points beyond itself to the absolute or pure ideal-Truth or God which we never can apprehend because of our limitations. But being chained to mortal frames that we are it is not possible for us, according to Gandhiji, to transcend our mortal frames and achieve the Divine in its fullness. Hence, we suffer and act in submissiveness to the ideal which requires absolute faith in us and humility towards others. The combination of these two qualities in man drives out from him hypocrisy, cowardice and violence which are the greatest hindrances to the attainment of the truth. Such living faith in ourselves is essential, for it alone gives us that determination of will which we require in our search for truth. Humility as well as compassion towards others is essential, because, "Truth is not to be found by anybody who has not got an abundant sense of humility. If you would swim on the bosom of the ocean of truth, you must reduce yourselves to zero."¹⁴ Gandhiji has maintained that one can come close to the Infinite or God 'through love'. Thus for Gandhiji 'Divine love' manifests itself not in our enjoyment of it but in our suffering for it. "Suffering is the law of human being ... it opens up the inner understanding of man." Hence his emphasis is on faith and humility. Gandhiji reveals man's essential limitations. They spur him to vigorous efforts to overcome these limitations and to have a clear vision of the ideal. To Gandhiji morality is a problem of individual behavior in a social context; the individual guided by discipline and example, would so control himself that the arm of law would not have to keep him on the strait path, while it is a call for human perfection, it is also a plea for an order of society which is humanist and humane. While this view is identical with Swamiji's it is interesting that a radical Marxist thinker like M.N. Roy echoed the same expectation of man when he says, "A good society can only be created by good men; and a man is part of nature and rises out of the background of nature, living nature having risen out of the background of inanimate evolution. This humanism is not something ad hoc constructed... As

part of law- governed harmonious physical universe, human nature is also harmonious; human nature is also logical and rational, which are expressions of law-governance and consequently it is inherent in human nature to be capable of moral judgment.”¹⁶ Gandhiji believed in the power of soul in human beings and gave the call to his people to Awake, Arise and act non-violently in South Africa as well as in India. The response was astonishing and justified Gandhiji’s faith in God and man. Gandhiji’s instrument for action was Satyagraha and Ahimsa. Satyagraha literary means ‘Insistence on Truth’. Ahimsa and Satyagraha are ways of conducting war against social injustice. (Satyagraha and Ahimsa mode of struggle) Gandhiji had evolved for fighting against social and political oppression. They are rooted in morality. Gandhiji has asserted that truth and non-violence (Ahimsa) are to me faces of the same coin. “My mission”, Gandhiji, (like Swamiji) wrote in 1929, not merely brotherhood of Indian humanity, my mission is not merely freedom of India, though to-day it undoubtedly engrosses the whole of my life and the whole of my time. But through the realization of freedom of India, I hope to realise and carry on the mission of the brotherhood of man.”¹⁷ Addressing a public meeting held at the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, Karachi, Pakistan, on 15th February, 1948 in memory of Mahatma Gandhi who was assassinated in New Delhi on 30th January 1948, Swami Ranganathanandaji said, “Among contemporary leaders of people, Gandhiji stands alone in his eminence and uniqueness. His is the amazing example of a leader who practiced what he professed and gave out to the people only what he had tested in his own life; whether it be in the fields of politics or economics, religion or personal morality”¹⁸ The statements cited above reveal Gandhiji’s firm faith in man, in his dignity and destiny and man’s capability to realize his own intrinsic nature. It is obvious that self-realization results from the realization of one’s potential. Another significant point to be noted in this connection is that Gandhiji’s humanism, like Swamiji’s, is an emanation from his faith in man’s potentialities and the belief that man has to strive forward to realize his potential. Conclusion: Swamiji was the most charismatic Indian spiritual leader of the nineteenth century as Gandhiji was of the twentieth. They were contemporaries but they never met or interacted. The fact that their public life began at the same time has often been overlooked. Swamiji’s triumphant speech at Chicago Parliament of Religion was delivered in 1893 and Gandhiji launched his struggle against discrimination in South Africa in the same year. Both of them came from vastly different backgrounds. Swamiji died in 1902 at age of 39 while Gandhiji plunged into the political arena at the age of 24 and led the struggle against racism and imperialism until his death in 1948. Despite these differences, the thought patterns and teachings of both Swamiji and Gandhiji share a lot in similarities and, if we look the matter in the right perspective, Gandhiji carried forward the work for reform and revitalization of India which Swamiji left unfinished. Now the humanity finds itself at crossroads once more. There is rampant violence, taking the form of terrorism endangering the existence of man compounding food, water and environmental crisis. The greatest challenge India is facing today, is the crisis of confidence and character, mental and moral decay and break down of traditional ethos. The inspiring call to the nation given by both of them falls on deaf ears of our policy makers leading India into deeper existential crisis. The relevance of Swamiji and Gandhiji is more keenly felt today. Swamiji’s and Gandhiji’s concept of man as a divine and spiritual being has to be disseminated widely among the masses once again if India and the world are to be saved.

References:

- [1]. Collected works of Swami Vivekananda.
- [2]. Ibid.
- [3]. The meeting of East & West in Swami Vivekananda, - Swami Ranganathananda. Calcutta 968 P.-200.
- [4]. Collected works of Swami Vivekananda.
- [5]. CW Vol-I P.-257, 11th edition.
- [6]. CW Vol-III P.-193, 4th edition.
- [7]. Introduction to the CW of Vivekananda, Vol-I, PP. xv-xvi.
- [8]. CW Vol- II, P.5-6.
- [9]. Young India, February 13, 1930 P.-52.
- [10]. Sadhana: Individual and universal.
- [11]. N.K. Bose: My day with Gandhi (Calcutta-1974), P.-22.
- [12]. Sadhana: Individual and universal, P.-15.
- [13]. Sadhana: Individual and universal, P.-26.
- [14]. Sadhana: Individual and universal, P.27.
- [15]. Politics, Power and Parties: M.N. Roy, P.-23.
- [16]. In search of Gandhi : B.R. Nanda (Oxford 2002), P.-62.
- [17]. Eternal values for a changing society Vol-iv, P.-280.