

MAHATMA GANDHI AND AUTHORITY

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1. Introduction

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) was more a man of action than a thinker, so much so that he once said, "My life is my message."¹ Because of his holy and saintly life which spoke louder than words, Tagore described Gandhi as "Mahatma (the Great Soul) in a beggar's garb."² Gandhi was primarily a man of social and political action, inspired by a religious interpretation of human existence.³ His life was one of selfless action in the service of his fellow human beings, and his method was nonviolence and voluntary suffering.⁴ While many people had professed nonviolence before Gandhi, hardly anyone had tried to apply it on as vast a scale as Gandhi.⁵

Thanks to his involvement in the social and political nonviolent action in South Africa, Gandhi was later able to emerge as a charismatic leader in India.⁶ His ideas and his whole life was influenced by the *Bhagavad Gita*, Madame Blavatsky's *Key to Theosophy*, Sir Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia*, the Sermon on the Mount, Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, and Ruskin's *Unto This Last*.⁷ His leadership raises the question of authority, because without authority there cannot be leadership.

The present article deals with authority as manifested in the leadership of Gandhi. Since Gandhi's life itself is a

message, the relationship between Gandhi and authority can be seen from two angles: (1) authority according to Gandhi; (2) authority in Gandhi. The present work attempts to bring out both the aspects. The first aspect becomes clear only in the light of the second.

The first part of the present article outlines my motive for choosing to study authority in the life and teachings of Gandhi. The second part studies the divine foundation of authority as seen by Gandhi, and the third part attempts to spell out the human formation of authority as exemplified by him.

2. The Authority of Gandhi

2.1 The concept of authority

The concept of authority entails two other concepts: (1) the position of the one who has authority; (2) obedience or respect on the part of the subjects to the one who has authority. The implications are: (1) Authority is attached to the position. Any one who occupies the position acquires authority over others. There is a distinction between the person and position. Thus position is not intrinsic to the person. It can be acquired by or snatched away from the person. There could be a moment when the position is vacant without a person occupying it. The position and so the authority attached to it are not personal. (2) Authority demands obedience and respect from the inferiors. The latter are constrained to obey the authority. Hence there could be a possibility of obeying the authority without willingness.

There could be another understanding of authority, which is not attached to the position of a person, but to the

very life of a person. The person lives such a holy life that the others are drawn to extend respect and obedience to him or her. Two implications can be noted: (1) Sanctity gives the person authority. This sanctity is not something external to the person but intrinsic, and part and parcel of the person. It is characteristic of his or her life. (2) The authority of such a person does not demand obedience and respect. On the contrary others make themselves subjects to the authority of the person voluntarily and with much willingness.

2.2 Gandhi's exercise of authority

Unlike other political leaders Gandhi exercised the second type of authority. In today's context this is something extraordinary and exceptional. In India there were and still are many Hindu religious leaders who attract millions of people. They receive enormous respect and obedience from the people. Even the richest people and the political leaders prostrate before them. This is because of the sanctity that shines in them.

Gandhi exercised authority not because of his position but because of his sanctity. But his actions were in the political field. This is how he introduced religion into politics. He gave a new meaning to the authority that is exercised in the socio-political field, and at the same time he gave a new interpretation to the life of religion. Even in the political field he adopted the method of converting his opponents with love.⁸ The idea of 'spiritualizing politics', of using abnegation and self-denial for secular causes, was applied by Gandhi in the political field. The nonviolent method can be practiced by an atheist too, but it is easier for religious people to accept the assumptions on which it rests.⁹

For Gandhi, there is an underlying unity among all the religions, namely love as a means of reaching God.¹⁰ For him, religion does not remain apart from the ordinary activities of life.¹¹ Especially in South Africa, the idea of non-possession led him to live a simple life and do selfless action. Thus his religion is intimately connected with his public life.¹² His voluntary continence or self-denial was born out of his great desire for service.¹³ He did not divorce the sacred and the secular.¹⁴

Gandhi's leadership was not a search for the insignia of power. It stemmed from an ability to combine love with rationally effective political behavior.¹⁵ "And since the only authority he could command was moral, and the only means he had was an appeal to the head and the heart, he had to be patient and accept compromises on details in order to achieve his ultimate political and social objectives."¹⁶ Such a rare combination of religion and politics raises a question as to what is the real meaning of authority and what is its foundation. With much admiration for Gandhi's bold attempt at this combination I wish to answer the above mentioned questions.

The authority arising from sanctity of life will not be easily accepted in the non-religious field. It encounters plenty of obstacles and opposition. But Gandhi was an optimist and a man of hope. He would say that a single perfect human being can change the world.¹⁷ For him, satisfaction lies in the effort, not in the attainment. Full effort is full victory.¹⁸ The life of Gandhi shows that Jesus' words and life were not an utopia.¹⁹ Gandhi's imitation of Christ gives us a strong assurance that we can live like Christ. Gandhi is a man of hope for all humanity.

3. Divine Foundation of Authority

3.1 Truth and nonviolence

For Gandhi, God is the foundation of everything. For him God is Truth. Truth does not mean logical truth, nor moral truth, but ontological truth. Anything that is, is true. So truth here means existence. While the existence of a non-divine thing is relative truth, God is the absolute Truth.²⁰ He is PURE EXISTENCE without any mixture of materiality. Gandhi went one step further and made a simple conversion: Truth is God.²¹ Thus God in Himself, in the ontological order, in the order of being, is TRUTH.

God is not merely the absolute Truth, He is not closed on to Himself. On the contrary He is open towards creatures. He is active²² in the sense that He is very loving towards them. Gandhi holds in fact that God is not merely loving, but LOVE itself.²³ But for Gandhi, love is nonviolence which renders love very active.²⁴ This is not mere passive love, nor simply a feeling of compassion, but a love which is in the order of action. Violence is a negative action, and its opposite too is action, but an action that is positive.

Speaking about the relative truth and nonviolence of human beings, Gandhi contends that nonviolence is the means towards truth or authenticity²⁵ which is the end.²⁶ In order to realize one's truth, one has to adopt a just method or means, and that is nonviolence.²⁷ The end does not justify the means. Truthful action, for Gandhi, was governed by the readiness to get hurt and yet not to hurt - an action governed by the

principles of nonviolence.²⁸

Nonviolence is ‘the law of life,’ and ‘the progressive recognition of the law and its application in practice’ is what fundamentally distinguishes human beings from beasts. Nonviolence is the essence of being human.²⁹ It is the greatest force because it is the highest expression of the soul.³⁰ Where there is nonviolence there is Truth and Truth is God.³¹ This is an expression of the positive spirit of seeking God through the service of human beings, the realization of truth through action.³²

3.2 Freedom and authority

God’s freedom, for Gandhi, corresponds to the Truth. If Truth is pure existence devoid of any mixture of materiality, then freedom is the freedom from any attachment to earthly things. Once again we note that freedom, for Gandhi, is not in the order of morality, but of being. God is totally free from attachments. The human being’s ultimate freedom or liberation or heaven is actually freedom from all attachments to matter. But freedom from all matter is God Himself.³³

In Gandhi’s thinking, authority is intimately connected with nonviolence. Authority or power consists in being nonviolent towards others. Being nonviolent is not the characteristic of the weak but of the strong,³⁴ because it is easy to hurt another, but it is very difficult to be patient. Hence one’s strength or fortitude consists in avoiding violence. Authority on the other hand is related to one’s ontological freedom. The strength or power to be nonviolent comes only through detachment from worldly things.

4. Human Formation of Authority

4.1 Sanctity and simplicity

In every created thing there is some spark of divinity. In a very special way the human being has a divine element within himself or herself. This justifies the contention of Gandhi about the inner goodness of the human being.³⁵ No person is evil in himself or herself. One's action may be good or bad, but as a person he or she is always good because he or she has within himself or herself the spark of divinity.³⁶ Because of this original goodness, Gandhi contends that the human being can be taught, educated and converted in a nonviolent way.³⁷

The sanctity of the human being has a double direction. In the ontological direction, human sanctity is manifested in his or her way of life, that is, in the life-style. This life-style is simplicity, which derives from one's internal real freedom, namely freedom from attachment to the worldly things.³⁸ This is the virtue of non-possession. That is why Gandhi changed his mode of life in South Africa.³⁹ Simplicity can be said to be one's authenticity or one's truth.

Authority over others must be preceded by authority (control) over oneself: self-control, reining in of one's natural desires, control of one's thoughts, renunciation of all attachment.⁴⁰ *Swaraj* (self-rule) is primarily individual, and only then it is national.⁴¹ The simplicity which is derived from one's freedom brings forth peace in oneself, which is the peace of God Himself.⁴²

4.2 Sanctity and sharing

The sanctity of the human being, in the ethical direction, is manifested in one's capacity and willingness to share one's possessions and share all that one has. The actual sharing is characterized by service.⁴³ It is for the sake of service that one shares.⁴⁴ It is the basis of the Trusteeship principle (the rich hold their surplus as trustees of the poor and share with the poor in need) advocated by Gandhi.⁴⁵

Sharing must be maximum.⁴⁶ This maximum is verified by one's simplicity. If one shares with others what one has, but does not live a life of simplicity or of renunciation,⁴⁷ one's sharing is not maximum and so not meritorious. Gandhi lived so simple a life that Churchill described him a 'half naked fakir'.

The need to share and serve arises from the idea that all human beings are equal and are sons and daughters of God, because in all of them there is the spark of divinity.⁴⁸ It follows that there should not be any discrimination among the children of God in society.⁴⁹ According to Gandhi, the *varna* system (division of the society on the basis of the division of labor) is good, but caste system on the basis of birth should be shunned.⁵⁰ Since all human beings are children of God, when one is affected by evil, all are affected. So each one should be willing to suffer for the good of others.⁵¹ Service inevitably involves suffering for others.

Authority, therefore is that capacity, power, willingness and strength to share, to serve others and suffer for them. This sharing distinguished by simplicity leads to the formation of authority, whereas nonviolence constitutes the foundation

of authority. Authority, in the sense of sharing, serving and suffering, brings forth peace and joy among one's fellow human beings. This is the meaning of the concept of *Sarvodaya*, the principle of which is 'welfare of all human beings'.⁵²

5. Conclusion

5.1 Sanctity as the criterion of authority

From the foregoing exposition of authority in and according to Gandhi one can derive the conclusion that God is the criterion of authority in the foundational order, and sanctity is the criterion of authority in the formative order. In fine, one's authority is recognized and accepted on the condition of one's sanctity. "Gandhi's great strength as a political leader, however, and the key to his compelling personality, lay precisely in his saintliness, his transparent honesty, and his constant willingness to see new points of view, to admit mistakes, but above all to be faithful to the truth as he saw it at the moment."⁵³

5.2 Interiority as the characteristic of authority

The sanctity of the human being consists of voluntary conversion of heart and acting upon the dictates of conscience. Gandhi's insistence on interiority (conversion, conscience) clarifies the concept of authority, namely reformation of heart.⁵⁴ Acting upon the inner voice is the secret of all charismatic leadership, but how could he know it was the truth? Gandhi's answer would be: only the readiness to suffer would tell.⁵⁵

The secret of Gandhi's immense power lay in the fact

that Gandhi worked in tune with the sentiments and temperament of the people and did not base his politics on intellect and theory.⁵⁶

5.3 Self-imposition as the means of authority

The human being can survive only if he/she has faith in himself/herself. It is by this faith and determination that Gandhi, born an ordinary man, made himself so great and became the moral leader of millions. This moral leadership is not the imposition of one's will on others, but the imposition of the reign of reason and love on one's blind and selfish passions. It is a process of reforming and guiding others unconsciously while one is consciously trying to reform oneself.⁵⁷

5.4 Self-realization as the goal of authority

In Hinduism God-realization is held to be the goal of life. But this is possible only in and through self-realization, because one has to realize the divinity that is in oneself. In the foregoing presentation of authority in Gandhi, one may note that the human formation of authority can be considered as self-realization and the divine foundation of authority as God-realization. It is through the simple life of renunciation and service and sharing that one reaches God who is the Truth and Love.⁵⁸

Syed Hossain once gave a lecture in the USA. After the lecture someone said, "Ladies and Gentlemen, we of the western world cannot follow the leadership of a man who goes about half-naked." Syed Hossain replied, "The most important thing about Mahatma Gandhi is not what he wears; the most important thing about Mahatma Gandhi is not even

his body; the most important thing about Mahatma Gandhi is his soul. As for the alleged inability of the western peoples to accept the leadership of someone not conventionally clad, I am reminded that the one whom they call their Master was also clad in nothing more than a loin-cloth at a crucial moment in the history of humanity.”⁶⁰

Notes

¹ Cf. W. T. De Bary, *Sources of Indian Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966) 799.

² Cf. D. M. Datta, *The Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1961) 19.

³ Cf. M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* (London: SCM Press, 1969) 193.

⁴ Cf. B. R. Nanda, *Mahatma Gandhi: A Biography* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989) 800-801.

⁵ Cf. J. O. Odey, *Active Nonviolence as a Theology of Liberation: A Moral Evaluation of the Nonviolent Techniques of Martin Luther King, Junior* (Rome: Leberit Press, 1994) 82.

⁶ Cf. T. M. P. Mahadevan and G. V. Saroja, *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, 3rd. ed. (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1985) 128-130.

⁷ Cf. J. O. Odey, *Mahatma Gandhi: His Life and Message: A Profile in Love, Peace and Nonviolence* (Rome: Leberit Press, 1993) 191-196.

⁸ Cf. B. R. Nanda, *Gandhi and His Critics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) 74.

⁹ Nanda, *Gandhi and His Critics* 73.

¹⁰ Nanda, *Gandhi and His Critics* 5-6.

¹¹ Nanda, *Gandhi and His Critics* 7.

¹² Cf. K. S. Bharati, *Foundations of Ambedkar Thought* (Nagpur: Dattsons Publishers, 1990) 56. Cf. Also Nanda, *Mahatma Gandhi: A Biography* 265.

¹³ Cf. Nanda, *Gandhi and His Critics* 12.

¹⁴ Cf. Nanda, *Mahatma Gandhi: A Biography* 265.

¹⁵ Cf. E. H. Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969) 392.

¹⁶ Nanda, *Gandhi and His Critics* 146. Gandhi had been severely criticized by many for his principles, policies and practices. Dr. Ambedkar was the most important of his critics. Cf. V. T. Rajshekar, *Mahatma Gandhi and*

Babasaheb Ambedkar (Bangalore: Dalit Sahitya Akademy, 1989) 5-64. See the whole book, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, ed. V. Moon (Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, Education Department, 1991).

¹⁷ Cf. Mahadevan and Saroja, *Contemporary Indian Philosophy* 138. Cf. Also Odey, *Mahatma Gandhi: Life and Message: A Profile in Love, Peace and Nonviolence* 231.

¹⁸ Nanda, *Gandhi and His Critics* 146.

¹⁹ Cf. Odey, *Mahatma Gandhi: Life and Message: A Profile in Love, Peace and Nonviolence* 242.

²⁰ Erikson *Gandhi's Truth* 411. Cf. also Mahadevan and Saroja *Contemporary Indian Philosophy* 131.

²¹ Cf. M. K. Gandhi, *My Experiments with Truth* (London, 1945) 411. Cf. also Thomas *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* 193.

²² Erikson *Gandhi's Truth* 93.

²³ Mahadevan and Saroja *Contemporary Indian Philosophy* 131.

²⁴ Mahadevan and Saroja *Contemporary Indian Philosophy* 137.

²⁵ Erikson *Gandhi's Truth* 411.

²⁶ Cf. Thomas *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* 195. Cf. also G. Richards, *The Philosophy of Gandhi: A Study of His Basic Ideas* (London: Curzon Press, 1991) 8.

²⁷ Cf. Gandhi *My Experiments with Truth* 404.

²⁸ Cf. Erikson *Gandhi's Truth* 412.

²⁹ Cf. Thomas *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* 195.

³⁰ Cf. T. Merton, ed., *Gandhi on Nonviolence: A Selection from the Writings of Mahatma Gandhi* (New York: A New Direction Paperbook, 1965) 24.

³¹ Cf. Merton, *Gandhi on Nonviolence: A Selection from the Writings of Mahatma Gandhi* ed. 33.

³² Cf. Datta *The Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi* 74.

³³ Cf. R. Ambler, "Gandhi's Concept of Truth," *Gandhi's Significance for Today: The Elusive Legacy*, ed. J. Hick and L. C. Hempel (London: Macmillan, 1989) 90.

³⁴ Cf. A. De Riencourt, *The Soul of India*, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1986) 301. Cf. also Datta *The Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi* 91.

³⁵ Cf. Nanda, *Gandhi and His Critics* 156.

³⁶ Cf. Datta *The Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi* 75.

³⁷ Cf. Nanda, *Gandhi and His Critics* 156.

³⁸ Cf. Thomas *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* 196.

³⁹ Cf. Nanda, *Gandhi and His Critics* 8.

- ⁴⁰ Cf. J. W. Gould, "Gandhi's Relevance Today," Hick and Hempel *Gandhi's Significance for Today: The Elusive Legacy*, eds. 16.
- ⁴¹ Cf. P. Mundschenk, "The Heart of Satyagraha: A Quest for Inner Dignity, not Political Power," in Hick and Hempel *Gandhi's Significance for Today: The Elusive Legacy*, eds. 24-25.
- ⁴² Cf. M. K. Gandhi, *Indian Home Rule* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1945) 79.
- ⁴³ Cf. De Riencourt *The Soul of India* 298-299.
- ⁴⁴ Cf. Mahadevan and Saroja *Contemporary Indian Philosophy* 138.
- ⁴⁵ Cf. T. Mathew, *Caste and Class Dynamics: Radical Ambedkarite Praxis* (New Delhi: D'Tech, 1992) 49.
- ⁴⁶ Cf. Mahadevan and Saroja *Contemporary Indian Philosophy* 143.
- ⁴⁷ Cf. Mahadevan and Saroja *Contemporary Indian Philosophy* 143.
- ⁴⁸ Cf. Mahadevan and Saroja *Contemporary Indian Philosophy* 138. Cf. also R. Duncan, ed., *Selected Writings of Mahatma Gandhi* (London: Fontana, 1971) 124. Cf. also E. Zelliott, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on Ambedkar Movement* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1992) 155.
- ⁴⁹ Cf. S. R. Bakshi, *Gandhi and Status of Harijans* (New Delhi: Deep and Deep, 1987) 11.
- ⁵⁰ Cf. M. K. Gandhi, *The Removal of Untouchability* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1954) 39-53.
- ⁵¹ Cf. Odey, *Active Nonviolence as a Theory of Liberation* 83.
- ⁵² Cf. Richards *The Philosophy of Gandhi: A Study of His Basic Ideas* 71.
- ⁵³ De Bary *Sources of Indian Tradition* 802-803.
- ⁵⁴ Cf. Datta *The Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi* 10.
- ⁵⁵ Cf. Erikson *Gandhi's Truth* 412.
- ⁵⁶ Cf. V. Palshikar, "Gandhi and Ambedkar," *Political Thinkers of India*, ed. V. Grover (New Delhi: Deep and Deep, 1992) **16**:161-162.
- ⁵⁷ Cf. Datta *The Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi* 153-154.
- ⁵⁸ Cf. Richards *The Philosophy of Gandhi: A Study of His Basic Ideas* 32.
- ⁶⁰ S. Hossain, *Gandhi: The Saint as Statesman* (Los Angeles, 1937) 44, as cited in Nanda, *Gandhi and His Critics* 142.