

## Spiritual Thoughts of M. K. Gandhi in *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*

**Sambhaji Dattu Suryavanshi**

Lecturer in English

K. P. Patil Institute of Technology (Polytechnic) Mudal,  
Tal- Bhudargad, Dist- Kolhapur.

According to Prof. K. R. S. Iyengar, Gandhi was no writer properly so called, nor was he at any time particularly interested in the art of writing; but, he had to talk or write a great deal, even as we have to work, or eat or breathe. The period between the two world wars and comprising them both was the Gandhian age in India. Gandhi left tremendous influence on Indian languages and literatures, both directly through his own writings in English and indirectly through the movements generated by his revolutionary thought and practice. Under these circumstances, we have to consider Gandhi as a writer. Gandhi achieved greatness through a long process of trial and error, aspiration and endeavour.

*"The Story of My Experiments with Truth"* is one of the imperishable classics of modern time. In this autobiographical record he described in candid detail the events and circumstances of his life from birth to the launching of the Non-cooperative movement in India in 1920. In the last chapter Gandhi wrote- ***"To describe truth as it has appealed to me, and in the exact manner in which I have arrived at it has been my ceaseless effort. The exercise has given me great mental peace....."*** Gandhi used language as a necessary tool, just as he used his spectacles, his walking stick; writing with him was not for writing's sake, but rather for achieving communication for conveying information, for converting people to his point of view. He had no time or no inclination to cultivate the so-called art of writing. He merely wrote straight on, with no straining after emphasis, no colour, no irradiating brilliance, yet they are Gandhi's words, and their very bareness constitutes their strength.

In his introduction to *"The Story of My Experiments with Truth"* Gandhi points out that it was not his purpose to attempt a real autobiography or story of his life. He simply wanted to tell the story of his numerous experiments with Truth, and as his life consists of nothing but those experiments. The story would take the shape of an autobiography. Here he narrated his experiments in the spiritual field which are known only to himself. Gandhi says, **"The experiments I am about to relate are spiritual or rather moral for the essence of religion is morality."**

Once, the Educational Inspector, Mr. Giles had given a spelling exercise of five words. Gandhi had misspelt the word 'kettle'. The teacher prompted Gandhi to copy the spelling from his neighbour's slate but Gandhi ignored the prompting as he thought that the teacher was there to supervise students against copying or malpractices. Gandhi never could learn the art of copying. However, this incident did not lessen his respect for his teacher. By nature, he was blind to the faults of elders. He had learnt to carry out the orders of elders, and not to look critically at their actions. The lines show the good impression his parents had

made on Gandhi in his childhood. They show his love of truth which later became the guiding principle of his life.

Gandhi relates the impressions made on him by the story of *Shravana* and *Harishchandra*. One day while reading a play about *Shravana*'s devotion to his parents, he saw a picture in which *Shravana* was shown as carrying, by means of slings fitted to his shoulders, his blind parents on a pilgrimage. *Shravana*, a young ascetic, was extremely devoted to his blind parents whom he carried in a hammock for a pilgrimage. This picture and the book left an indelible impression on his mind. He felt that it was an example for him to copy. Gandhi got a chance to see the play *Harishchandra* which captured his heart. To follow truth and to go through all the ordeals *Harishchandra* went through was the one ideal the play inspired him. Like *Harishchandra* and *Shravana*, Gandhi too had great devotion to his parents. He took every opportunity to serve his father and tried to keep vows given to his mother. Like *Harishchandra*, Gandhi remained a true follower of truth throughout his life.

One of the friends of Gandhi told him that by many people in Rajkot secretly took meat and wine as it gave them strength. Gandhi was further informed that the English were able to rule over us because they were meat eaters. Gandhi was very much impressed by this argument as he was feeble, a coward and afraid of thieves or ghosts. Gandhi began to enjoy meat dishes and he had to tell a lie to his mother. But slowly he realised how his parents would be shocked to know that he had become a meat eater. He came to the conclusion that deceiving and lying to one's parents was worse than not eating meat. He resolved not to eat meat in future and he had never since gone back to meat. It shows how Gandhi was a truth-loving person.

Gandhi and his relative had a bad habit of smoking. They found a sort of pleasure in sending out clouds of smoke from their mouths. As they had no money, they began stealing stumps of cigarettes thrown away by their uncle and also they began stealing coppers to purchase cigarettes. At last, feeling disgusted, they decided to commit suicide. They collected *Dhatūra* seeds and went to commit suicide. They swallowed two or three seeds, but their courage failed them. They dared not take more seeds and dismissed the thoughts of suicide. Gandhi did not conceal his failings and did not try to defend them. Gandhi had failings like others but his greatness lies in the fact that he soon got over them. But according to Gandhi- **“a clean confession, combined with a promise never to repeat the same act, is the purest type of repentance.”**

Gandhi developed the quality of toleration for all religions. In order to cure Gandhi's fear of ghosts and spirits, his nurse advised him the repetition of *Ramnama*, a never failing remedy for him. Gandhi listened *Ramnama* that laid the foundation of his deep devotion to the *Ramnama*. It made him friendly to all branches of Hinduism and sister religions. He used to listen more and more on religious subjects when *Jain Monks*, *Mussalman* and *Parsi* friends visit his father. These many things combined to teach him toleration for all faiths. He believes that morality was the basis of things and that truth is the substance of all morality. A Gujarati verse also impressed him and its teaching return good for evil became his guiding principle.

Indians received bad treatment at the hands of the whites. Indians were regarded as the 'coloured' and treated as 'coolies'. Once Gandhi was travelling in the first class compartment and the railway officials asked Gandhi to go to the van compartment which Gandhi refused as he had a first class ticket. At last the constable took Gandhi by the hand and pushed him out of the first class compartment. His luggage was also thrown out. This incident shows how **Gandhi did not compromise with his self-respect, come what may. It also shows Gandhi's determination if he took a thing to mind, he would do it no matter whatever its consequences.**

Once in Durban, a large crowd gathered and they pelted Gandhi with stones, brickbats and rotten eggs. Someone snatched away Gandhi's turban and others began to beat and kick him. Gandhi fainted, but still they came upon him boxing and beating. At this time police superintendent sent a few men to bring Gandhi safely to the police station but Gandhi declined the offer. He pointed out that the crowd would calm down when they realized their mistake. Gandhi expressed trust in their sense of fairness. This incident throws light on Gandhi's courage in spite of harm to his life. He did not get angry with the crowd, instead expressed faith in their sense of fairness.

Gandhi said, "To me, the *Gita* became the guide of conduct." He had faith in and a fascination for the *Gita*. It became his dictionary of daily reference. Words like '*non-possession*' and '*equability*' charmed him. He decided to cultivate and preserve that equability. He realized that he could not follow god unless he gave up all he had. He cancelled his insurance policy as he had become convinced that god, who created his wife and children as well as himself, would take care of everybody. He wrote a letter to his brother that he had given him all that he had saved so far, but then afterwards he should expect nothing from him. He had made up his mind to utilize his future savings for the benefit of the community. There are many a people who read and admired the *Gita*, but Gandhi must be the first person / reader who put its teachings into practice in his own life.

One of the Gandhi's friends named Mr. Polak had given a book entitled "*Unto This Last*" written by Ruskin, a famous English writer and philosopher of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In a chapter in his Autobiography (Part IV, chapter XVIII) entitled 'The Magic Spell of a Book' Gandhi tells us how he read the book "*Unto This Last*" on the 24 hours journey from Johannesburg to Durban. This book left a magic spell on Gandhi. It charmed him so much that it made him uneasy and at the end of the journey to Durban he was determined to change his life according to the ideals of the book. He understood the teaching of "*Unto This Last*" in the following manner.

1. The good of the individual is contained in the good of all.
2. A lawyer's work has the same value as the barber's, as all have the same right of earning their livelihood from their work
3. A life of a labour i. e. the life of the tiller of the soil and the handicraftsman is the life worth living.

Once, on the occasion of a festival and Kasturba specially prepared for Gandhi a sweet wheat porridge with oil added to it instead of ghee. Gandhi liked this dish very much and instead of eating sufficiently, he took it too much and as a result of this he suffered so much from dysentery. He had 30-40 times loose motions in a day but he would take no medicine. He fasted the appetite had all gone and he was at the death's door. Dr. Dalal advised Gandhi to take milk, iron and arsenic injections. As Gandhi had come to know that the cow and the buffalo were subjected to the process of phuka, he had taken a strong disgust for milk. However, he was ready to take injections. Upon this Kasturba remarked that in case Gandhi could take goat's milk. Thus, **he never broke promises and forgot vows once taken.** A strong desire to live made him to survive. In fact, he held that milk was not a natural diet for man, but Gandhi could not free himself from that subtlest of temptations the desire to serve which forever held him. Then Gandhi felt better. His desire to live revived. Gandhi believed that it was especially because God had kept work in store for him.

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