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Gandhi's Philosophical Ideals Rooted on Religion in Ancient India

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Abstract

The purpose of this research study is to investigate the significant development of Mahatma Gandhi's faith and belief in Hinduism. Gandhi follows his spiritual journey from initial skepticism to firm conviction. The present study discusses an important influence of Blavatsky's "Key to Theosophy," the direction provided by Raichandbhai, and the revival of Hinduism that was led by Swami Vivekananda. In this connection, Gandhi's comprehensive conception of religion, stress on action, humanitarianism and his rational, yet pragmatic approach to Hinduism are further investigated. Particularly, the article focuses on Gandhi's emphasis on Ahimsa having the pursuit of truth by non-violent means.

Keywords: Truth; Non-violence; Skepticism; Intuition; Moksha

1.Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi's spiritual and religious development was a vibrant process, culminating in a deep and personal adherence to Hinduism that transcended orthodox interpretations. His early life was noticeable by a degree of skepticism, particularly before his essential in South Africa, various intellectual and spiritual encounters gradually solidified his faith. This paper aims to delineate the significant influences that shaped Gandhi's understanding of Hinduism, his unique philosophical approach, and his transformative role as a Hindu reformer and humanist.

1.1 Review of literature

The rich tapestry of Indian philosophy and religion has been a subject of extensive scholarly inquiry, revealing deep historical roots, diverse interpretative traditions, and its profound influence on key figures like Mahatma Gandhi. This literature review synthesizes insights from various texts, exploring the historical interaction of philosophy and religion in India particularly Gandhi's exclusive contribution to understanding and stimulating Hinduism.

From the historical point, philosophy and religion in ancient India shared a close connection, extremely interwoven to lead individuals toward a nobler existence. Indian philosophy transcended mere rational inquiry, aspiring to a "way of life" availed at liberating the soul from ordinary existence and achieving self- realization. The concept of pursuit is frequently involved in reflective and mystical twist, emphasizing intuitive and empirical understanding having discursive and experimental knowledge of human beings. Moksha is the ultimate goal of human desire in Hinduism. Salvation can be achieved through self-discipline, self-realization, ascetic practices, and concentration. Sages of ancient India and saints know about life and Reality through their pious insight (darshana), and transmitting their experiences of Truth to subsequent generations as philosophical guidance for their life and paths to attend in moksha (liberation).

Initially Gandhi's commitment was marked by scepticism, evolved into an insightful and personal faith, significantly shaped by various influences. In South Africa, his interest was in Hinduism spurred by texts like Blavatsky's "key to Theosophy" and his communications with the Theosophical Society.

Raichandbhai guided Gandhi and offered intelligibility on religious matters, further helping to dispel Gandhi's doubts. An enormous influence that in 1893 Swami Vivekananda revitalized Hinduism by emphasizing its universalist aspects and leading a resurgence of the faith. Vivekananda's approach deeply influenced Gandhi, leading him to advocate for a non-sectarian and broad understanding of Hinduism.

Gandhi's philosophy of Hinduism was both rational and pragmatic, focusing extremely on constructive action and humanitarianism. For Gandhi, religion is not merely custom or ritual; but rather a fundamental human institution designed to address both practical and spiritual concerns. Gandhi strictly differentiated between historical Hinduism, which he critiqued for practices like untouchability, superstitious worship, animal sacrifice, Hinduism of the Gita, the Upanishads, and Patanjali's Yogasutras. On the other hand, Gandhi represented the essence of Ahimsa (non-violence) and the oneness of all creation, advocating for the worship of a single, immanent, formless, and imperishable God. He firmly declared that Ahimsa was solely for Sannyasis (renunciates), arguing that it was a universal way of life that India had to demonstrate to the world.

Gandhi's explanation of the Hindu creed was remarkably extensive and inclusive. Gandhi distinctively stated, "If I were asked to define the Hindu creed I should simply say: search after truth through non-violence means" (Gandhi, 1995:18). For him, one might not believe in God and still recognize as a Hindu, underscoring Hinduism's inborn broadmindedness and all-embracing nature. Such pursuit of truth was insistent and dynamic, with Gandhi believing that Hinduism, regardless of periods of fatigue, would re-emerge with unparalleled brilliance. His broad sight extended to other faiths, as he accomplished, "all religions are true," possess "some error," and are "almost as dear to me as my own Hinduism" (Lal, 1973:129-130). His foundation of religion was to help individuals become better practitioners of their own faith, rather than converting them, reflecting a profound commitment to interfaith understanding and spiritual development.

The notion of Hindu identity itself has been a subject of scholarly discourse. Modern reformer of Hinduism, Lokamanya Tilak, "A Hindu is he who believes that the Vedas contain self-evident and axiomatic truths" (Bhardwaj, 1993:39). His view towards Hinduism highlights the initial role of Vedic texts, such as the Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, and Atharva Veda, in shaping Hindu thought. The authority of scriptures like the Bhagavad Gita, the Mahabharata, and the various Upanishads, including the Chandogya Upanishad and the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, further illustrates the diverse textual foundations of Hinduism. Gandhi's self-recognition as a 'Sanatani Hindu' indicates his connection to these enduring traditions while simultaneously seeking to reform and modernize their interpretations. Swami Vivekananda's "Hinduism: An Introduction" further strengthens the complexity and breath of Hindu philosophical and religious traditions. There is an interconnection between Indian philosophy and ancient religion from the point of intellectual and spiritual tradition. Thus, Gandhi was influenced by various contemporary and historical sources, which played a vital role in reinterpreting Hinduism, moving it towards a universal, action-oriented, and ethically grounded philosophy. His stress on truth, non-violence, reform of customary practices has left an ineradicable mark on both religious thought and social action in India.

2. Materials and Methods

The study draws upon biographical accounts, Gandhi's own writings and speeches, and secondary analysis of his religious and philosophical thoughts. Textual materials include references to Blavatsky's "Key to Theosophy," the philosophical guidance of Raichandbhai, and the impact of Swami Vivekananda's teachings. Moreover, the study incorporates Gandhi's statements on religion at Sabarmati in 1938 and his views on the Hindu creed, as well as perspectives from figures like as Hindu identity of Lokamanya Tilak. This analysis consists of a chronological and thematic approach to trace the evolution of Gandhi's religious convictions and practical manifestations.

3. Results and Discussion

Gandhi's faith and confidence in Hinduism grew in due course of time. He did not solely believe the tenets of Hinduism before his days in South Africa. Blavatsky's key to Theosophy grew his interest in Hinduism when he thoroughly read the text. He even had contacts with the atheist Bradlaugh. Theosophical society too inculcated in him which cannot be ignored. Raichandbhai's guidance too was important for him at this point. Raichandbhai was not a Hindu in the orthodox sense, but he helped Gandhi in dissipating much scepticism about religious matters. In South Africa Gandhi got an opportunity to hear a lecturer of Swami Vivekananda who opened a glorious chapter to Hindu religion by focusing on its universalism from the days of Parliament of Religions of 1893, which was the way of the stimulative and revival of Hindu religion. Gandhi was highly influenced by the particular lecture of Swami Vivekananda on approach to Hinduism. In 1905 Gandhi was invited to speak on Hinduism by the Theosophical Society of South Africa. Gandhi delivered a stimulating lecture that Hindus and Indians were not a separate entity but are an identical one. Lokamanya Tilak stated, "A Hindu is he who believes that the Vedas contain self-evident and axiomatic truths" (Bhardwaj, 1993:39). Again, according to Western Scholars, the people living on the eastern banks of the river Shindhu were known as Hindus. The actual meaning of religion was a means to the realization of God. In this manner, the concept of Almighty and religion became synonymous.

Mahatma Gandhi stated at Sabarmati in 1938 that, "after long study and experience I have come to the conclusion that (1) all religions are true, (2) all regions have some error in them, (3) all religions are almost as dear to me as my own Hinduism, in as much as all human beings should be as one's close relatives. My own veneration for other faiths is the same as that for my own faith; therefore, no thought of confrontation is possible. The aim of fellowship should be to help a Hindu to become a better Hindu, a Mussalman to become a better Mussalman, and a Christian a better Christian. Our prayer for others must be NOT "God, give him the light thou hast given me." BUT "Give him all the light and truth he needs for his development" (Lal, 1973: 129-130).

Philosophy and religion were closely tied in ancient India. Both play a pivotal role in making an individual's life nobler. Philosophy was not only a view of life since it aspired to liberate the soul from the enslavement of mundane existence. It was an approach to spiritual realization. The Indian Philosophy takes a contemplative turn and develops into a sort of mysticism in order to emphasize the inner spiritual aspect and the focus is developed more on the intuitive and empirical side of life than on the discursive and experimental knowledge. Knowledge opens the door of liberation (mokshanubhava) and wisdom opens the door of salvation. It is to be achieved by self-discipline, ascetical practical and concentration (yoga). Intuition is of paramount importance. Logic must not be neglected in the process

of attaining knowledge. It is worthwhile and practical for the systematic exposition of the truth that is intuitively perceived.

The great sages (rishis) and saints in ancient India discharged the part of philosophers and their spiritual insight and perception (darshana) of Truth was handed over to the following generations as guide to life and as assistance and as succour to liberation (moksha). Gandhi followed the pathways travelled by the Indian sages of old and converted his life into a continual and relentless search for truth as a means to attain liberation and relied on his intuition.

The philosophy of Gandhi is based on a spiritual perception, which became a guiding force to attain the supreme experience of spiritual liberation. For him, spirituality plays a dominant role in developing inner consciousness. This philosophy is so deep and profound that words feel short to describe it but made real by life. He exhibited this philosophy throughout his life. He began his search for Truth not in the solitary forest caves of the recluse, neither on the mountain tops of high speculation, but in the innermost self of man and in the midst of the hustle and bustle of daily life. One can look deep into Gandhi's mind only with the assistance of a special frame of mind, and grasp and share his vision. It may rightly be called 'darshana', a deep and rich word in the Indian religious-philosophical context.

Gandhi's appraisal of Hinduism is rational and he approached it in a pragmatic way. His prime focus was the action of constructive programmes. It was his spirit of love and altruism towards humanity that were reflected deeply in his speeches, writings and actions. Raichandbhai greatly influenced him to develop his religious faith in Hinduism. Mahatma Gandhi was a talismanic figure embodying many deserving qualities such as a philosopher, freedom fighter, but also a Hindu reformer and a humanist. Gandhi was of the belief that religion need not be customary or formal; religion is that which underscores all religions. According to Gandhi, religion was an institution of humans constructed and shaped by human resourcefulness to address and solve not only practical affairs but also spiritual matters. He did not have a totally esoteric idea of religion. He tried to do away with the rituals as best as he could. He believed that it is the permanent element in human nature which counts no cost too great in order to find full expression and which leaves the soul utterly restless until it has found itself. The teachings and messages of the Bhagavad Gita had a profound influence on Gandhi's religious life and had an ardent faith in the karma theory of Hinduism. He preferred to call himself a sanatani Hindu. He addressed, spoke and wrote about Hinduism on different occasions in various capacities in diverse ways. "There are two aspects of Hinduism: There is, on the one hand, historical Hinduism with its untouchability, superstitious worship of stones, animal sacrifice and so on. On the other, we have the Hinduism of the Gita, the Upanishads and Patanjali's Yogasutras which is the root of Ahimsa and oneness of all creation, pure worship of one immanent, formless, imperishable God (Nath, 2022: 121). Ahimsa, which for Gandhi's main tenet of Hinduism, has been explained as meant for Sannyasis only. He does not share that view. He has held that it is a way of life and India has to show it to the world.

4. Conclusion

Mahatma Gandhi's profound faith in Hinduism developed through a rich tapestry of intellectual engagements and personal experiences, culminating in a rational, pragmatic, and deeply humanistic interpretation of the religion. Influenced by Theosophy, Raichandbhai, and Swami Vivekananda, Gandhi reshaped his understanding of Hinduism, emphasizing its core tenets of truth, Non-violence

(Ahimsa), and universal fellowship over rigid dogma and ritual. His philosophy, centred on spiritual liberation attained through action and inner consciousness, transformed him into not only a freedom fighter but also a significant Hindu reformer whose teachings championed an inclusive and active spirituality for the betterment of humanity.

Mahatma Gandhi said, “It is a good fortune or the misfortune of Hinduism that has no official creed. In order to protect myself against any misunderstanding I have said truth and non-violence is my creed. If I were asked to define the Hindu creed I should simply say: search after truth through non-violent means. A man may not believe even in God and still he may call himself a Hindu. Hinduism is a relentless pursuit after truth and if today it has become moribund, inactive, irresponsible to growth, it is because we are fatigued and as soon as the fatigue is over, Hinduism will burst forth upon the world with brilliance perhaps unknown before. Of course, therefore, Hinduism is the most tolerant of all religions. Its creed is all-embracing.” (Gandhi, 1995:18).

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