

# Cardinal virtues: The pillars of a moral society after M. K. Gandhi

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**Abstract:** Society makes our behavior, learn to our language, attitude to others, morality etc. As a mother, earth gives us so many means (ways) to live in the environment as well as in our society. Gandhi is a great proponent or director and social reformer and he provides us so many disciplines to make a good society. A society is a group of people involve in persistence social interaction. The person who is lived in a Moral society always distinguished between what is good or what is wrong? What is to be ought or ought not to etc. In this respect, Gandhi implements many disciplines and cardinal virtues like-Ahimsa, satya, asteya, Aparigraha and Brahmacharya. Although these are all discussing in the Ancient Indian Ethics but Gandhi added few more disciplines with this like Abhaya, faith in God etc. to make a moral society. These are all help to make a good conduct and behavior. According to Gandhi, if we want to make a good society or moral society then we have a duty to make a true satyagrahi. According to Gandhi, a true satyagrahi is an honest and a sincere person, a discipline soldier (non violence), fearless and virtuous also. He always feels fraternity, brotherhood, sisterhood attitude towards others. So a virtuous person always follows the above mentioned cardinal virtues that help to make a virtuous society or a moral society.

**Key Words:** Cardinal virtues, morality, satyagrahi, non violence.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Gandhi known as Practical Idealist to built a strong and moral society. He is an idealist on account of his theoretical views- on account of the fact that he believes in an 'ideal' that is through and through spiritual. But he is a practical philosopher because he always tries to put his ideas into practice. Therefore, he comes to develop some views regarding society, state and similar other institutions. He tries to show in a concrete manner that his religious and moral views are not merely fanciful flights of the speculative faculties of a thinker-that they could be put to use and practiced. He tries to show that society and state can very well be shaped in accordance with his philosophical and religious views.

It is difficult to every social philosophy to decide that how a society is formed? But Gandhi does not feel the need of entering into the problem regarding the origin of society; he would be prepared to accept any rational conjecture about class formation. Gandhi would not be opposed even to the Hobbesian view, which believes that society was a result of some kind of contract entered upon by individuals who saw that it was not possible for them to have everything for selves and that some kind of understanding with others was essential for a healthier and more peace life.

Gandhi derives "a moral from this and similar other accounts of the origin of society- a moral which at once becomes the ethical basis of society."<sup>1</sup> The origin of society lies in man's realization that complete selfishness has no place in life. Only when man thought of putting some restraints on his brutish and selfish ways that society came into existence. Thus, the very origin of society lies in the man's conscious effort to transcend his egoistic ways- to rise above his selfish motives. Moreover, this also seems to be fairly plausible that the initial contract might have been entered upon only to avoid strife and quarrel. That means that the very reason that led to the formation of society was to avoid violence. Thus, Gandhi has been able to find out the very basis of society, it consists in non-violence and self sacrifice. Even today, whenever we decide to have small groups or society to serve certain common ends, these factors remain at the root. We have to sacrifice, at least to some extent, some of our personal considerations and we have to decide that we shall avoid strife and violence as far as possible.

From this, it naturally follows that in a society there cannot remain any opposition between 'individual good' and 'social good'<sup>2</sup>. If the very origin of society lies in self sacrifice, then there has to be a harmony between our personal considerations and the good of the society. This can be accounted for in a very simple manner. When man was in the completely brutish stage his ways of existence were not different from those of animals. But, when he decided to form groups and tribes his ways became different. His profession also, by that time, had changed from hunting to animal rearing and agriculture. Even in society he had to care for his food and shelter, and for that he had to

work in co-operation with others. Gandhi feels that it is 'work' that distinguishes man from other animals. This works relates every man with every other member of his society and serves the end of satisfying not only his personal needs but also the needs of others.

To make a good society there we have need so many constituents. According to Gandhi peaceful society was making by the concept of morality and religion. But Gandhi provides us some cardinal virtues to make a good society. According to Gandhi, the virtues are nothing but these are the requirements of a satyagrahi. For him, he can be truly moral who has voluntarily chosen for himself the way of satyagrah. Therefore, "satyagrah is the highest morality."<sup>3</sup> Even so, Gandhi has given special emphasis on some of the virtues of life- which, according to him, are essential for a pious and moral life. These virtues have nothing new about them, but the emphasis that has been put on them is both novel and morally expedient.

Indian philosophy has also emphasized the need of some cardinal virtues which everyone should try to practice. In fact, all the systems of Indian philosophy except Carvaka believe that the world is being governed by a moral law, and that the nature of the world is moral. They believe that every kind of action- goods or bad- produces some tendencies and effects which the doer has to face or suffer. This is the belief in "Law of Karma" which, in terms of morality, changes in to the maxim. 'As you sow, so you will reap'. This being so, it is very essential that only such actions are performed which generate good tendencies. Herein comes the need of developing certain basic virtues, which would enable an individual to be on the right path. Indian Ethics talk about five such virtues namely- Non-violence (*Ahimsā*), Truthfulness (*Satya*), Non-stealing (*Asteya*), Non-acceptance or Non-possession (*Aparigraha*), and Chastity (*Brahmacharya*). Gandhi admits all these, and adds some more. The only difference is that Gandhi interprets these virtues in his own way- in the light of his own experiences. His one consideration is that these virtue must be interpreted in an up-to-date manner so that they may be consistent prevalent at the time.

Before elaborating these, one general remark with regard to the practice of these virtues has to be made. Gandhi asserts that these virtues are to be practiced not only outwardly, but in thought, speech and action. The aim of ethical activities is attainment of purity, and complete purity can be attained only when a person is virtuous not only in deeds but also in thought and speech. Now I am going to discuss the above mention cardinal virtues as follows-

## **2. AHIMSĀ:**

Ahimsa according to Gandhi is the most important virtue. The moral aspect of ahimsa is nothing but tolerance and love. It also lays down the maxim that all persons are equal. Therefore, for the realization of God, love for every being is a necessary condition. Gandhi regards "Ahimsa as the highest virtue"<sup>4</sup> (*ahimsā paramo dharma*), and, among other things, the reasons for his preference are the following- a) no virtue can be practiced unless all beings are allowed to live. We cannot do any duty to any fellow being unless he lives, b) all the other virtues presuppose love. All virtues require some amount of self sacrifice and this is not possible without love.

## **3. SATYA (TRUTHFULNESS):**

Satya or Truth is conceived as God according to Gandhi and he says that "truthfulness is virtue". But the question is how can we know the Truth? And, without knowing Truth how can we have regard for Truth? Gandhi is so aware regarding of this difficulty. He also admits the opinion of the Indian philosopher, that the Truth is self-revealing. But that we have become blind on account of our ignorance. But Gandhi believed that, ignorance is not natural or necessary to the self. Gandhi says that moral degradation or perversion of one kind or other causes of ignorance. He explicitly mentions the six deadly enemies which causes prejudice, malice and ill-will to arise, on account of which the person is unable to see or feel the Truth. These deadly enemies are lust, anger, greed, infatuation, pride and falsehood. Therefore, in order to practice, Satya one must constantly Endeavour to free oneself from these evils, one must cultivate moral purity and courage and must not allow these enemies to cloud his vision.

Gandhi is also aware that in the present-day world falsehood appears to be more paying and beneficial. By speaking lies people do get success. Gandhi is aware of it, but very logically he demonstrates the superiority of Truth over falsehood. He says that even when falsehood appears to be succeeding it does so only by passing under the grab of Truth. Only that falsehood succeeds which, for the time being, appears as the Truth. Only when falsehood is presented as the 'Truth,' that it works and gain success. That shows that it is truthfulness and not falsehood that has the intrinsic power of goodness.

There is one condition regarding the speaking of the Truth which Gandhi accepts because of its pragmatic value. Even in accepting this Gandhi is trying to be faithful to the ancient Indian teaching. The condition is that the truth should be spoken in a pleasant way. If the truth is expressed in a blunt, rough and unpleasant manner, it may be

socially injurious as it might give rise to anger and quarrels. In fact in an ancient Indian Philosophy there is a maxim which says, “Speak the truth, speak the pleasant; but do not speak the unpleasant truth”<sup>5</sup>. Gandhi seems to be influenced by the element of practicality contained in this maxim. Therefore, he says that truthfulness has to be practiced, that it is an art which has to be developed by rigorous and constant discipline and practice.

#### **4. ASTEYA (NON-STEALING):**

There are two senses of the word Asteya; it popularly means the observance of the rule of not taking away the belonging or the property of any body unless it is given by the person. But, there is a stricter and a more rigorous meaning of the word ‘asteya’; it forbids the keeping or holding in possession of such things that are not needed. Gandhi uses the word Asteya in both these senses. In fact, in conceiving the nature of this virtue he is influenced by Jainism which believes that stealing is also a kind of himsa. Property is, in fact, outer life, because bodily existence depends upon property. Therefore, to rob one of his properties is to take away his outer life. Non-stealing is a virtue also because stealing is not compatible with the highest virtue of ‘love’. Therefore Gandhi recommends that a truly moral individual has to take a solemn vow to cultivate the virtue of non-stealing.

#### **5. APARIGRAHA (NON-ACCEPTANCE):**

Whereas non-stealing is negative in its import, non-acceptance has a positive significance. This for Gandhi means contentment-being contented with the necessities of life and not to pine for more. Aparigraha is non- possession. Gandhi feels that the tendency to possess things is at once the cause of all evils. Therefore, one must cultivate the discipline of living with what one has. Gandhi, of course, is aware that it is not possible to practice this virtue in the absolute way, because absolute non-possession is impossible in life; even the body is a possession-the things needed for the preservation of the body are also ‘possessions’, and therefore, so long as we are alive we can not completely do away with possessions. Even so, aparigraha has to be practiced to the best of one’s capacity because this does away with the cause of rift in social life and provides a solid foundation for a universal love to flourish.

#### **6. BRAHMACARYA (CELIBACY):**

The word Brahmacharya etymologically means ‘living in the Brahman’. Popularly it means abstinence from sexual relations or at least physical control over the organ of generation. In fact, the ways of the ancient Indian life were such that a student for the first 25 years of life was required to devote his energy to study and learning. He was called a Brahmachari, because he was required to gain knowledge about reality, God and the world. A Brahmachari, thus, was forbidden “to indulge in sexual relation”<sup>6</sup>. On account of this the word ‘Brahmachari’ came to have the association (of celibacy) that popularly goes with it.

Gandhi uses the word Brahmacharya both in its popular sense, in its traditional sense. He emphasized the importance of sexual control, but adds that Brahmacharya is more than that. It is putting a check and restraint over all the senses and the mind. Senses often delude us and misguide us. Immorality is basically born out of a desire to satisfy the demands of the senses. Therefore, we must cultivate a discipline by which we, instead of being led astray by the senses, may be able to keep the senses under control. In fact, even sexual control can not be practiced unless senses are put in check. For example, Gandhi feels that our food-habits have to be changed. The ‘palate’ is responsible for our taking delicious and rich food, which, in its turn, causes sexual urge to arise. Therefore, Gandhi experimented, different kinds of food, just in order to evolve a food pattern, which, without reducing the health-value of food, would not allow amorous and undesirable urges to arise. The name ‘Brahmacharya’ is given to a discipline of this kind.

The above mentioned five virtues recommended and approved by the ancient Indian Ethics. Besides this Gandhi recommends few more from his own side.

#### **7. ABHAYA (FEARLESSNESS):**

We have seen that fearlessness is conceived as an essential condition for the practice of Ahimsa. It is difficult discipline because it requires not only a conquering of ordinary fear, but also a freedom from such fears as the fear of starvation, humiliation, physical violence and even death. Gandhi repeatedly asserts that cowards can never be moral. Fearlessness, therefore, is the virtue of having moral courage even in face of adversity and danger.

#### **8. FAITH IN GOD:**

Gandhi believes that none of these virtues can be practiced unless one has a faith in the ultimate goodness of God. Unless one sincerely believes that the ultimate nature of the universe is moral, he will not feel the need of cultivating any virtue. The practice of ‘love’ also presupposes this faith. The faith in God, therefore, is not only a religious faith; it is a postulate of morality, a condition for a moral and virtuous life.

## 9. CONCLUDING REMARKS:

It is true to say that Gandhi was a social reformer. Any how he tries to solve the social problems in respect of honesty and morality and religious way. So he introduced into his philosophy the concept of ‘non violence’ and ‘satyagrah’. For him, morality is the only way by which a person can be understood what is right and what is wrong? What is good and what is bad? And what we ought to do or what we have not ought to do? These questions are all related to make a good society or moral society. Actually Gandhi tries to solve these problems and tries to make a moral society. As a social reformer he mentioned some cardinal virtues in addition with ancient Indian Ethics like “Abhaya and Faith in God i.e. religious perspective”.<sup>7</sup> According to Gandhi, Ahimsa is used two different senses- one is positive and the other is negative. Ahimsa means non-killing. Actually himsa means causing pain or killing any life out of anger, or from a selfish purpose or with the intension of injuring it. Refraining from doing all this is ahimsa. So Gandhi takes it as a cardinal virtue to make a moral society. Again non violence is another virtue to make a moral as well as good society because; ‘violence’ means any kind of killing or injury of any life. If you anger to someone, pride, hatred selfish consideration, bad intension then these are all fall into the under consideration of violence. So Gandhi emphasized on these two concepts like “Ahimsa and non violence as a cardinal virtue to make a good society”<sup>8</sup>. To make a moral society, it is true that every man who is lived in this society they have ‘we feeling’ and always honest and they show their fraternity, brotherhood, sisterhood attitude. Truthfulness, non-stealing and celibacy are all treated as a condition to make a moral society. After all, according to Gandhi, a true satyagrahi is a person who helps to make a good society because he has so many attributes like honesty, discipline soldier, virtuous, tolerance power, humility, truthfulness etc. these attributes make fraternity attitude towards other which is more important to make a moral society according to Gandhi.

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