
THE ASCETIC IDEAL: UNDERSTANDING OF GANDHI'S OBSERVANCES

DR. A. KISHORE KUMAR REDDY

Abstract: It is obvious that Gandhi is understood and perceived in a multi-faceted angle, like that of; 'Political Gandhi', 'Gandhi of the constructive work' and 'Gandhi as a being of relentless spiritual quest'. Mohandas Gandhi, the most visible figure of Indian nationalism is often hailed as a saint in the political arena. Richard G Fox's comments "Gandhi was perceived as powerful for his ability to hold back threatened violence from the Indian masses. That power was taken as spiritual."

Gandhi categorically denied of becoming an ascetic, but he introduced and valorized several ascetic practices like fasting and sense-mortification. By reading his extensive discourses on brahmacharya that he wanted to apply on the life of the householder satyagrahis including himself, is proposed and may be claimed that it is at the heart of Gandhi's mechanism to control and deny the individual body is a micro-politics of control. It can be contended that, Gandhi's selection of ascetic practices without becoming one is a political action that manipulated to wrestle the controlling power in the public sphere of British India.

I would like to further look at the connection between Gandhi's asceticism and the warrior ascetics of India. Warrior ascetics traversed a strange territory. Being ascetics they were supposed to be beyond the pale of the mundane affairs, but they participated at the highest level of statecraft. Gandhi as a charismatic champion of nonviolence is apparently the furthest person from the ideal of a warrior ascetic. However, I contend that there are certain important similarities between the two that are worth revisiting in post-colonial India's religious history.

Keywords: Ascetic Ideal, Brahmacharya, Nationalism, Satyagraha.

Introduction:

I. The Ascetic Ideal: The ascetic ideal functioned differently for different Indian nationalist ideologues in the 19th and the early 20th century. The ascetic ideals were revered. However, where contextualized by ignoring the old content, and the mentioned practices and teachings. Most of the Indian Hindu nationalist ideologues, interpreted the ideals exclusively in terms of the period in which they lived and also according to their own experiences. These interpretations of the ideals might be different from the one's mentioned and practiced from time immemorial in the Indian subcontinent. The nationalist ideologues looked as if were clear about their unconcernedness with what the old ascetic ideals meant, followed and practiced historically by ascetics of various religious sects, for the 19th and 20th century nationalists saw the ascetic ideals as the embodiment of a living truth with which they identified. The belief and practice of the ascetic ideals was true and to know what that truth is in a different time period and context from that of its (human author) old ascetic ideals, easily results in seeing those ascetic ideals in ways unseen by others in the tradition-period who know truth differently.

In India the ascetic ideals can be said have been depicted in various religious literatures. This depiction seems to have given a theoretical authoritativeness, which was sensed as a direct obtained truth. But, it also becomes important look at the mediated ways. The ascetic ideals that were designated - constitutionalised through hearing and remembering have functioned as basic principles for

the ascetics in India who were in search of liberation. From the Vedic period, a vast collection of religious texts reflected and constructed a variety of positions concerning the ascetic ideals that are to be the basic principles followed and implemented by the ascetic in search of liberation. As time passed, it becomes clear that the material concerning the ascetic principles when received, taught, understood and revered in a manner that can be more contextualized to the time period in which they were practiced.

The ascetics and their ideals – had their own special reference – in the Vedas, retained their position in the Upanishads and later sustained through/even in the Bhagavadgita.

The ideals that are prescribed in the Vedic/Upanishadic/Puranic to the ascetics as official commentaries were taken as words of inspired sages or the ones that were liberated, or the ones to have become one with God. The ascetic ideals had to survive and go through the growing variety of religious options seeking moksha.

The Ashram – a secluded residence of the ascetic, became an important institution in the hands of some of the nationalist ideologues. The ashram was brought into the midst of the societal plane, by retaining its same old principles. The conceptualization was made through a community of people living together with rituals as well as a well-regulated routine of diet, exercise, seva, celibacy and devotion. It was necessitated that the ashramite had to discipline the body and mind in the service of god, in order to become the ideal devotee, who then will be the ideal Indian devoted to the service of the

people. It is remarkable that even in the face of severe contradictions, Indian nationalists were able to sustain the ascetic ideal throughout the nationalist phase and after. However, it is to be remembered as a presumption that the ideal lifestyle preached during the Indian nationalist phase, by some of the Hindu nationalists, was diverse in form. Further, it can be stated that there were certain forms of ideal lifestyle in relation to the ascetic ideal practices, as practiced and preached, within the Hindu nationalist discourse. It is observed that the ascetic figures, by the late 19th century “gained some currency of the notion of a political sannyasi”. The need for a new indigenous national identity also helped to constitute a discipline of the body, which promoted physical education in the country. It is also seen that this discipline included concepts like brahmacharya, maintaining celibacy and the act of controlling semen. These were some of the steps which were considered important in maintaining self-discipline in order to fight for the nation. The concepts of devotion to God and duty towards one’s nation were two other important aspects. The nationalists considered that discipline was “empowering and repressive”. (Hardiman, 26) It is seen that some nationalists identified virility and valor with masculinity and this masculinity was to be embraced by the people who had to fight for the sake of their country’s freedom. They believed that it was a “quality that could be possessed spiritually”. (Chowdhury, 126) Such a “muscular spirituality”, to use an oxymoron, hence also worked with the concept of devotion. Taking off from colonial and Orientalist constructions, the Indian nationalists were able to create a history that stretched way back into the mythological past. As a result, “spiritual” domain emerged as one of the primary nodes of Hindu Indian identity. The concept of “the ideal lifestyle” was rendered as an important issue by most of the Indian nationalist literati. To mention, the praxes of an ‘ascetic’, in most of the situations, were given first priority and considered as important factors for implementing an ideal lifestyle. However, it should be noted that ‘internally’ the modus operandi of an ascetic have been dealt with, in a very radical fashion by some of the Hindu nationalists during the freedom struggle movement, by taking their ‘time’ and ‘space’ into consideration, in addition, without leaving the essence of the ‘ways’ of the ‘ascetic ideal’ that were in practice prior to them. The ‘ascetic ideal’ during the nationalist period was indeed a politicized notion, with repercussions that has shown impact on and is still showing on our contemporary lives. To achieve its own purposes and goals, it seems as if the later ‘body politic’ was giving new dimensions to the modes – that were followed and practiced among the ascetics from time immemorial. These new dimensional modes, were

thought by the ‘body politic’, would be propitious to the prevailing conditions of the Indian nationalist phase. They should have thought these altered modes of the ‘ascetic ideal’ would help them in preaching about the ideal style of life – which would deploy the people for building a Hindu ‘nation’ and oppose the British rule in India. This can be said was done by some of the Hindu nationalists, who were mainly worried about the power of the British, and moreover the influence of the Western culture that was slowly penetrating into the nerves of the people.

It is clear that the nationalists were trying to authorize a “national” identity which was different from the “one assigned to the ‘native’ by the dominant colonial discourse”. This can be said was done mainly to “theorize culture and civilization”, (Chowdhury, 11) which would help in bringing the question of self-discipline into the foreground of Indian nationalist discourse. However, it can also be stated that this later led to new questions of gender, caste and subjectivity.

It seems as if the whole idea of the ideal lifestyle by the Indian nationalists was done as a normative construction – keeping the ascetic figure in view. The Indian nationalist phase was one important period when the new stylized ‘texts’, can be said, were used for constructing and manipulating the pre-notions of the reader to make them realize their duty and devotion towards their motherland. This can be assumed was done mainly to concretize the idea of the ‘nation’. Further, the ‘hero worship’ was also an important aspect that was slowly soaked into the brains of the people, which made them feel that they had come out with a great discovery. The concepts, discipline, devotion and duty towards one’s nation were intercalated into the minds of, esp. Hindus through the use of the ‘texts’, which were stylized. The ‘mythical’ characters were attributed with virtues and heroic qualities, which can be said was a kind of interpolation. The characters were given a shape. These characters were made ideal and were given the image of a hero or can be said, a hyper male. The people started to worship these heroes, who were the ideal figures to guide the people to fight the British.

II. The Bhagavadgita and Bankim: The Bhagavad-Gita, presumed to be the single most important religious text of Hinduism, is filled with the notions related to the ascetic way of life – self-discipline, devotion and duty. It tries to bridge the chasm between ascetic disciplines and the search for emancipation, on the one, and the exigencies of daily life on the other. The Gita as a ‘text’ teaches the Hindu to follow the ways – similar to that of an ascetic life – which are considered to be paths to gain ‘spiritual essence’.

It is a well known fact that the Bhagavadgita assumed a place of importance in the India of the 19th and

20th centuries, both popularly and among its elite religious thinkers. It played a crucial part in Indian nationalism, in the rise of a 'Hindu' consciousness and also has shaped the ascetical ideas in the minds of the Indian Hindu nationalist ideologues.

The modern period that is the 19th and 20th Centuries in the Indian sub-continent, was a period of "great ideological, political, and sociological upheaval" and the Gita was taken up by the Indian nationalist ideologues to create a basis for "an active response to British rule". The aspect of Arjuna surveying the warriors assembled on the battlefield, some being relatives and teachers on the one and the other side – his dropping of the weapon and deciding not to partake in the battle – Krishna, Arjuna's charioteer, asking for an active response from Arjuna's part – in a manner, which was meant to be doing one's duty, without displaying any interest or importance for the outcome of the battle. The admonition to act from the God Krishna was considered appropriate – moreover was used for the execution of ideas of the nationalist ideologues in their attempt for gaining freedom from the imperialistic rule. The actions of Krishna and Arjuna in the Gita were interpreted and signified for constructing a base for communal action and social reform in British India by the nationalist ideologues. Moreover, they strongly inclined to depict that Indian religions are concerned with aspects pertaining to the above matters. The expounding of Krishna was done as "the *Karmayogin* par excellence, working unceasingly and with total selflessness".

It can probably stated that the ascetic ideals found their way into the Indian Hindu nationalism in 19th century through Bankimchandra Chatterjee's novel *Anandamath*. However, the beginning of the 19th century, which was witnessing criticism of some of the social and religious practices of Hinduism by Christian missionaries, generated a reaction among the Hindus. This reaction to the western religious ideological criticism focusing on the old customs and traditions of Indic religions, brought the ascetic practices, and traditions to the foreground. The ascetic who is considered as a recluse and not part of the societal cultural norms came to become a hyper hero or leader, guiding the masses and the leaders to defend the Western imperialistic attitude.

The ascetic practices were reformed, polished and only certain aspects that looked ideal for 'popular Hinduism' were taken into consideration and preached. Most of the nationalist ideologues relied on the *Gita* as they thought that it would stimulate the nationalistic tendencies that were in need. The cause for the dependency happened mainly due to the interpretations given. Most of the Hindu leaders construed the *Bhagavad-Gita* as a text depicting "Hinduism as a religion of action". Further, the

ideologues depicted the *Bhagavad-Gita* as an authority "to an interpretation that provides motivation for supreme sacrifice at the altar of the nation". By using the *Bhagavad-Gita*, as a function, the Indian nationalists tamed the public, and as a result came out with the fabrication of a docile and obedient subject. The ascetical practices were revived in a situation which required immediate response from the masses.

The *Bhagavad-Gita* acted as one good handbook in this predicament to the Indian nationalist ideologues. Even though Bankimchandra Chatterjee's commentary on the *Bhagavad-Gita* was implied to the Western educated Bengalis, it was a program undertaken by him to revive Hindu purity. Bankimchandra Chatterjee's commentary on the *Gita* preached *svadharma* (duty of a person in a community) and *nishkama Karma* (selfless action). Bankim justifies that the duty of a commentator is to interpret a text "in the light of prevailing conditions of the time, no matter whether the text belonged to the Gita, or to the Bible" (42, Ed. Minor). Bankim was not keen on the synthesis of the old and new, but "an evaluation of the old in the light of the new, so that it could be understood properly in the mind of modern humanity". Bankim sees to that his interpreting of the *Bhagavad-Gita* is done in such a mode, that he intertwines the aspect of duty of fighting for the sake of one's motherland with that of Krishna's dealing with the issues on duty and *Karma* in the *Bhagavad-Gita*. He takes verses from *Bhagavad-Gita* – Chapter 2, verse 42-4, 47, Chapter 3, verse 9 and 30 – to make it a point that "your mission to serve your country is the result of your feeling as though her afflictions were your own", and further he mentions that, 'serving your country is your duty'. (*Dharmatattva*, 138).

III. Gandhi And His Observances: It is a well known fact that the first reading and even a personal discovery of the *Gita* for Gandhi came through Edwin Arnold's translation. Gandhi strongly expected and preached that "there are no politics devoid of religion. They subserve religion. Politics bereft of religion are a death-trap because they kill the soul". (*Young India*, 3 April 1924) For Gandhi, "the *Gita* is a pure religious discourse given without any embellishment. It simply describes the progress of the pilgrim soul towards the Supreme Goal. Therefore there is no question of selection". (*Harijan*, 5 December 1936)

It can be assumed that some of the Hindu religious texts are interpolated, 'misread' and misinterpreted. We can even find that these religious texts have been analyzed, preached, in such a way that they would circumscribe according to circumstances prevailing at that point of time.

It has been in vogue that Gandhi was a Stern follower of truth and ahimsa (non-violence). He claims that he is a follower of Hinduism. Further, he is found to be saying, "I have, for years past, been swearing by the Bhagawadgita, and have said that it answers all my difficulties and has been my kamadhenu, my guide, my 'open sesame', on hundreds of moments of doubts and difficulty. I cannot recall a single occasion when it has failed me". (*What is Hinduism?* 38) Gandhi incites, not to take into account such aspects that are against the ways of looking at ahimsa (non-violence) and truth. "It does not matter that animal sacrifice is alleged to find a place in the Vedas. It is enough for us that such sacrifice cannot stand the fundamental tests of Truth and Non-violence. I readily admit my incompetence in Vedic scholarship. But the incompetence, so far as this subject is concerned, does not worry me, because even if the practice of animal sacrifice be proved to have been a feature of Vedic society, it can form no precedent for a votary of ahimsa". (*What is Hinduism?* 48)

VI. The Indian nationalist movement was entangled with the aspect of spirituality to a great extent. Here, the ashram – usually confined as the abode of the ascetic, played an important role in most of the activities that were in conjunction to the nationalist discourse in British India. Gandhi as an important ideologue of the above aspect, following the spiritual and political entanglement with great reverence – from the beginning of his career – established the Satyagraha Ashram at Kochrab on May 25, 1915. As he was not ready to accept that he was leading a life of the sannyasi claims that he had "established two ashram-like in South Africa". Further, it has been noted that the concept "Ashram like, as he steadfastly refused to describe them as ashram or math. One was merely a settlement - the Phoenix Settlement - while the other a farm, the Tolstoy Farm. Phoenix was established in 1904 under the 'magic spell' of Ruskin's Unto This Last but acquired an ashram-like character only after 1906." (Tridip Suhrud 49). Gandhi's participation in the Boer war, in which he acted as Sergeant Major in the Ambulance Corps, brought him to a determination to take up the "vow of brahmacharya, initially in the limited sense of chastity and celibacy. This particular period had brought drastic changes in the lifestyle of Gandhi. He says; "from this time onward I looked upon Phoenix deliberately as a religious institution." Thus, observance of *Vrata*, which often, inadequately translated as vows, is the defining characteristic of the ashram." (Tridip Suhrud, 49)

Gandhi's belief in the aspect of non-violence had made him to acquire the habits of self-mortification, which, if looked from the perspective of the Indian ascetic, to an extent is an act of violence over one's body to achieve godliness and disciplining of the

body. One such method that Gandhi followed was *satyagraha*, "not only a method based upon the moral superiority of self-suffering; but is a mode of conduct that leads to self-knowledge." (Tridip Suhrud, 49-50) Gandhi wanted his followers to implement the idea of "Pure means" that he believed are means of non-violence and adopted by pure persons. The self search process was an act of purifying oneself and aiming to seek Truth. Moreover, *Satyagraha* became a method of self-search process, which in turn was directly linked with *Swaraj*. The idea of *Swaraj* gained its full meaning to Gandhi, "when we learn to rule ourselves. This idea of ruling the self was fundamentally different from self-rule or home-rule. To rule ourselves means to be moral, to be religious, and to have control over our sense." (50)

Gandhi's *brahmacharya*, which in way had similar terms, with that of the ascetic ideals was to be implemented through the observance of duty, as this could assist in achieving mastery over one's mind and passions. By following this, one could know about himself. This depicts Gandhi's experiment and his search as being ingrained in the above idea. "His quest is to know himself, to attain moksha that is to see God (truth) face to face. In order to fulfil his quest, he must be an ashramite, a satyagrahi and a seeker after *Swaraj*." (50) Gandhi's experiments were mainly attempts to attain self-knowledge through the observance of *Brahmacharya*, also to be understood as an attempt to gain mastery over the body and self. Most of his experiments with Truth were possible by the ways of ashram and its observations. Gandhi believed that violence would make a person withdraw from his search of the self, which is on par with the search for Truth. Moreover, it would lead a person to self-forgetfulness, and the act of self-realisation would become unaccomplished. Gandhi supposed that one would be lead to *Brahmacharya* if one's, only object is truth, and is faithful to anything but truth. He describes it as a *Mahavrata* and his realization was "that service of the community was not possible without observance of brahmacharya. At the age of 37, in 1906 Gandhi took the vow of brahmacharya." (52) The ascetical practices like fasting, disciplining the body were undertaken by Gandhi as early as a student in England. But he comprehended the relationship of observing a celibate life and the control of Palate much later. The practicality of *ahimsa* and his experiments with truth, he thought, could be implemented and practiced only if *Brahmacharya* was accomplished in thought, word and deed. It has been noted that Gandhi, "by making observance of *Brahmacharya* essential for truth and ahimsa, made it central to the practice of *satyagraha* and quest for *Swaraj*. *Satyagraha* involves recognition of truth and steadfast adherence to it. It requires self-sacrifice or self suffering and use of pure, that is, non-

violent means by a person who is cleansed through self purification. Satyagraha and Swaraj are both modes of self recognition. This understanding allowed Gandhi to expand the conception of Brahmacharya itself. He began with a popular and restricted notion in the sense of chastity and celibacy, including celibacy in marriage. He expanded this notion to mean observance in thought, word, and deed. However, it is only when he began to recognize the deeper and fundamental relationship that Brahmacharya shared with satyagraha, ahimsa and Swaraj that Gandhi could go to the root of the term Brahmacharya. Charya or conduct adopted in search of Brahma, that is truth is Brahmacharya. In this sense, Brahmacharya is not denial or control over one sense, but it is an attempt to bring all senses in harmony with each other. Brahmacharya so conceived and practiced becomes that mode of conduct that leads to truth, knowledge and hence moksha." (52-53)

V. Conclusion: The ascetical mode of attaining God and becoming his instrument was to self-purify oneself. This Gandhi claimed was well prepared and was willing to become an instrument to speak through for God. However, as the belief with him was that God wanted an untainted apparatus to converse through, he was advancing towards perfection without arriving at it. Gandhi made claims that were never distinctive and restricted. As a student of the *Bhagavadgita*, his conviction was that God conversed through those people who had attained absolute impassiveness. Gandhi supposed that prayer, an act of devotion and fasting had an intimate relationship

and were inviolable. The act of fasting, termed in Sanskrit as *Upavas*, a regular performance of the ascetic, is assumed by Gandhi, would facilitate one to reside closer to Him. Gandhi claimed that there was a difference between denial of food to oneself and a fast as *Upavas*.

The ascetical practice of mortification of the flesh was not taken as a spiritual characteristic by Gandhi and moreover, he believed that it generated no specific sacredness. However, the act was considered by him, would assist and do "some good from a medical point of view and it produced no particular spiritual effect." Gandhi supposed that there is no prayer without fasting and vice versa. He speculates the relationship in the following terms: "Complete absorption in prayer must mean complete exclusion of physical activities till prayer possesses the whole of our being and we rise superior to, and are completely detached from, all physical functions. That state can only be reached after continual and voluntary crucifixion of the flesh. Thus all fasting, if it is a spiritual act, is an intense prayer or preparation for it."(57-58) The above lines state that Gandhi asserted the idea of violence over one's own body to discipline it through spiritual devotion, which was a part of the Indian traditional ascesis. The proposal of self-realisation through rigorous self-denial and active self-restraint was emphasized by Gandhi, by embracing even the actions in the political realm. All were said to have been intended for attaining *moksha*, and become one with God. The notion of asceticism for Gandhi was the greatest form of art.

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Dr. A. Kishore Kumar Reddy
Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University
Hyderabad, Assistant Professor