

**THE MAHATMA ON HIS EXPERIMENTS
WITH TRUTH**

EXCERPTS FROM GANDHI'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

When, in 1893, I came in close contact with Christian friends, I was a mere novice. They tried hard to bring home to me, and make me accept, the message of Jesus, and I was a humble and respectful listener with an open mind. At that time I naturally studied Hinduism to the best of my ability and endeavoured to understand other religions.

In 1903 the position was somewhat changed. Theosophist friends certainly intended to draw me into their society, but that was with a view to getting something from me as a Hindu. Theosophical literature is replete with Hindu influence, and so these friends expected that I should be helpful to them. I explained that my Sanskrit study was not much to speak of, that I had not read the Hindu scriptures in the original, and that even my acquaintance with the translations was of the slightest. But being believers in *sanskara* (tendencies caused by previous births) and *punarjanma* (rebirth), they assumed that I should be able to render at least some help. And so I felt like a Triton among the minnows. I started reading Swami Vivekananda's *Rajayoga* with some of these friends and M. N. Dvivedi's *Rajayoga* with others. I had to read Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* with one friend and the *Bhagavad-Gita* with quite a number. We formed a sort of Seeker's Club where we had regular readings. I already had faith in the *Gita*, which had a fascination for me. Now I realized the necessity of diving deeper into it. I had one or two translations, by means of which I tried to understand the original Sanskrit. I decided also to get by heart one or two verses every day. For this purpose I employed the time of my morning ablutions. The operation took me thirty-five minutes, fifteen minutes for the tooth brush and twenty for the bath. The first I used to do standing in western fashion. So on the wall opposite I stuck slips of paper on which were written the *Gita* verses and referred to them now and then to help my memory. This time was found sufficient for memorizing the daily portion and recalling the verses already learnt. I remember having thus committed to memory thirteen chapters. But the memorizing of the *Gita* had to give way to other work and the creation and nature of *Satyagraha*, which absorbed all my thinking time, as the latter may be said to be doing even now.

What effect this reading of the *Gita* had on my friends only they can say, but to me the *Gita* became an infallible guide of conduct. It became my dictionary of daily reference. Just as I turned to the English dictionary for the meanings of English words that I did not understand, I turned to this dictionary of conduct for a ready solution of all my troubles and trials. (Part 4, V. *Result of Introspection*, p. 647–649)¹

1 All excerpts are quoted from the English translation of Gandhi's autobiography: Gandhi, M. *An Autobiography. The Story of My Experiments With Truth*. Transl. Mahadev Desai. Introd. Sunil Khilnani. Penguin Books, E-book edition, 2001.

Events were so shaping themselves in Johannesburg as to make this self-purification on my part a preliminary as it were to Satyagraha. I can now see that all the principal events of my life, culminating in the vow of brahmacharya, were secretly preparing me for it. The principle called Satyagraha came into being before that name was invented. Indeed when it was born, I myself could not say what it was. In Gujarati also we used the English phrase 'passive resistance' to describe it. When in a meeting of Europeans I found that the term 'passive resistance' was too narrowly construed, that it was supposed to be a weapon of the weak, that it could be characterized by hatred, and that it could finally manifest itself as violence, I had to demur to all these statements and explain the real nature of the Indian movement. It was clear that a new word must be coined by the Indians to designate their struggle.

But I could not for the life of me find out a new name, and therefore offered a nominal prize through Indian Opinion to the reader who made the best suggestion on the subject. As a result Maganlal Gandhi coined the word 'Sadagraha' (Sat = truth, Agra = firmness) and won the prize. But in order to make it clearer I changed the word to 'Satyagraha' which has since become current in Gujarati as a designation for the struggle. (Part 4, XXVI. *The Birth of Satyagraha*, p. 780, 781)

Fasting can help to curb animal passion, only if it is undertaken with a view to self-restraint. Some of my friends have actually found their animal passion and palate stimulated as an after-effect of fasts. That is to say, fasting is futile unless it is accompanied by an incessant longing for self-restraint. The famous verse from the second chapter of the Bhagavad-Gita is worth noting in this connection:

For a man who is fasting his senses
Outwardly, the sense-objects disappear,
Leaving the yearning behind; but when
He has seen the Highest, Even the yearning disappears.

Fasting and similar discipline is, therefore, one of the means to the end of self-restraint, but it is not all, and if physical fasting is not accompanied by mental fasting, it is bound to end in hypocrisy and disaster. (Part 4, XXXI. *Fasting*, p. 631, 632)

It was quite clear to me that participation in war could never be consistent with *ahimsa*. But it is not always given to one to be equally clear about one's duty. A votary of truth is often obliged to grope in the dark.

Abimsa is a comprehensive principle. We are helpless mortals caught in the conflagration of himsa. The saying that life lives on life has a deep meaning in it. Man cannot for a moment live without consciously or unconsciously committing outward himsa. The very fact of his living – eating, drinking and moving about – necessarily involves some himsa, destruction of life, be it ever so minute. A votary of *abimsa* therefore remains true to his faith if the spring of all his actions is compassion, if he shuns to the best of his ability the destruction of the tiniest creature, tries to save it, and thus incessantly strives to be free from the deadly coil of himsa. He will be constantly growing in self-restraint and compassion, but he can never become entirely free from outward himsa.

Then again, because underlying *abimsa* is the unity of all life, the error of one cannot but affect all, and hence man cannot be wholly free from himsa. So long as he continues to be a social being, he cannot but participate in the himsa that the very existence of society involves. When two nations are fighting, the duty of a votary of *abimsa* is to stop the war. He who is not equal to that duty, he who has no power of resisting war, he who is not qualified to resist war, may take part in war, and yet whole-heartedly try to free himself, his nation and the world from war. [...]

A devotee of Truth may not do anything in deference to convention. He must always hold himself open to correction, and whenever he discovers himself to be wrong he must confess it at all cost and atone for it. (Part 4, XXXIX. *A Spiritual Dilemma*, p. 855, 856, 859)

I was in those days strong enough to roam about a lot, and was fortunately not so known as not to be able to go in the streets without creating much fuss. During these roamings I came to observe more of the pilgrims' absent-mindedness, hypocrisy and slovenliness, than of their piety. The swarm of sadhus, who had descended there, seemed to have been born but to enjoy the good things of life.

Here I saw a cow with five feet! I was astonished, but knowing men soon disillusioned me. The poor five-footed cow was a sacrifice to the greed of the wicked. I learnt that the fifth foot was nothing else but a foot cut off from a live calf and grafted upon the shoulder of the cow! The result of this double cruelty was exploited to fleece the ignorant of their money. There was no Hindu but would be attracted by a five-footed cow, and no Hindu but would lavish his charity on such a miraculous cow.

The day of the fair was now upon us. It proved a red-letter day for me. I had not gone to Hardvar with the sentiments of a pilgrim. I have never thought of frequenting places of pilgrimage in search of piety. But the seventeen lakhs of men that were reported to be there could not all be hypocrites or mere sightseers. I had no doubt that countless people amongst them had gone there to earn merit and for self-purification. It is difficult, if not impossible, to say to what extent this kind of faith uplifts the soul.

I therefore passed the whole night immersed in deep thought. There were those pious souls in the midst of the hypocrisy that surrounded them. They would be free of guilt before their Maker. If the visit to Hardvar was in itself a sin, I must publicly protest against it, and leave Hardvar on the day of Kumbha. If the pilgrimage to Hardvar and to the Kumbha fair was not sinful, I must impose some act of self-denial on myself in atonement for the iniquity prevailing there and purify myself. This was quite natural for me. (Part 5, VII. *Kumbha Mela*, p. 946–948)

I had heard much in praise of the Lakshman Jhula (a hanging bridge over the Ganges) some distance from Hrishikesh, and many friends pressed me not to leave Hardvar without having gone as far as the bridge. I wanted to do this pilgrimage on foot and so I did it in two stages.

Many sannyasis called on me at Hrishikesh. One of them was particularly attracted towards me. The Phoenix party was there and their presence drew from the Swami many questions. We had discussions about religion and he realized that I felt deeply about matters of religion. He saw me bare-headed and shirtless as I had returned from my bath in the Ganges. He was pained to miss the shikha (tuft of hair) on my head and the sacred thread about my neck and said: 'It pains me to see you, a believing Hindu, going without a sacred thread and the shikha. These are the two external symbols of Hinduism and every Hindu ought to wear them.'

Now there is a history as to how I came to dispense with both. When I was an urchin of ten, I envied the Brahman lads sporting bunches of keys tied to their sacred threads, and I wished I could do likewise. The practice of wearing the sacred thread was not then common among the Vaishya families in Kathiawad. But a movement had just been started for making it obligatory for the first three varnas. As a result several members of the Gandhi clan adopted the sacred thread. The Brahman who was teaching two or three of us boys Ramraksha invested us with the thread, and although I had no occasion to possess a bunch of keys, I got one and began to sport it. Later, when the thread gave way, I do not remember whether I missed it very much. But I know that I did not go in for a fresh one.

As I grew up several well-meaning attempts were made both in India and South Africa to re-invest me with the sacred thread, but with little success. If the shudras may not wear it, I argued, what right have the other varnas to do so? And I saw no adequate reason for adopting what was to me an unnecessary custom. I had no objection to the thread as such, but the reasons for wearing it were lacking. [...]

I therefore made a clean breast of the whole matter to the Swami and said: 'I will not wear the sacred thread, for I see no necessity for it, when countless Hindus can go

without it and yet remain Hindus. Moreover, the sacred thread should be a symbol of spiritual regeneration, presupposing a deliberate attempt on the part of the wearer at a higher and purer life. I doubt whether in the present state of Hinduism and of India, Hindus can vindicate the right to wear a symbol charged with such a meaning. That right can come only after Hinduism has purged itself of untouchability, has removed all distinctions of superiority and inferiority, and shed a host of other evils and shams that have become rampant in it. My mind therefore rebels against the idea of wearing the sacred thread. (Part 5, VIII. *Lakshman Jhula*, p. 952–956)

The pilgrimage to the Kumbha fair was my second visit to Hardvar.

The Satyagraha Ashram was founded on 25 May 1915. Shrad-dhanandji wanted me to settle in Hardvar. Some of my Calcutta friends recommended Vaidyanathadham. Others strongly urged me to choose Rajkot. But when I happened to pass through Ahmedabad, many friends pressed me to settle down there, and they volunteered to find the expenses of the Ashram, as well as a house for us to live in.

I had a predilection for Ahmedabad. Being a Gujarati I thought I should be able to render the greatest service to the country through the Gujarati language. And then, as Ahmedabad was an ancient centre of handloom weaving, it was likely to be the most favourable field for the revival of the cottage industry of hand-spinning. There was also the hope that, the city being the capital of Gujarat, monetary help from its wealthy citizens would be more available here than elsewhere.

The question of untouchability was naturally among the subjects discussed with the Ahmedabad friends. I made it clear to them that I should take the first opportunity of admitting an untouchable candidate to the Ashram if he was otherwise worthy.

,Where is the untouchable who will satisfy your condition?' said a vaishnava friend self-complacently. I finally decided to found the Ashram at Ahmedabad. [...]

The first thing we had to settle was the name of the Ashram. I consulted friends. Amongst the names suggested were 'Sevashram' (the abode of service), 'Tapovan' (the abode of austerities), etc. I liked the name 'Sevashram' but for the absence of emphasis on the methods of service. 'Tapovan' seemed to be a pretentious title, because though tapas was dear to us we could not presume to be tapasvins (men of austerity). Our creed was devotion to truth, and our business was the search for and insistence on truth. I wanted to acquaint India with the method I had tried in South Africa, and I desired to test in India the extent to which its application might be possible. So my companions and I selected the name 'Satyagraha Ashram', as conveying both our goal and our method of service. (Part V, *Founding of the Ashram*, p. 961–963)

Just as there was a storm outside, so was there a storm in the Ashram itself. Though in South Africa untouchable friends used to come to my place and live and feed with me, my wife and other women did not seem quite to relish the admission into the Ashram of the untouchable friends. My eyes and ears easily detected their indifference, if not their dislike, towards Danibehn. The monetary difficulty had caused me no anxiety, but this internal storm was more than I could bear. Danibehn was an ordinary woman. Dudabhai was a man with slight education but of good understanding. I liked his patience. Sometimes he did flare up, but on the whole I was well impressed with his forbearance. I pleaded with him to swallow minor insults. He not only agreed, but prevailed upon his wife to do likewise.

The admission of this family proved a valuable lesson to the Ashram. In the very beginning we proclaimed to the world that the Ashram would not countenance untouchability. Those who wanted to help the Ashram were thus put on their guard, and the work of the Ashram in this direction was considerably simplified. The fact that it is mostly the real orthodox Hindus who have met the daily growing expenses of the Ashram is perhaps a clear indication that untouchability is shaken to its foundation. There are indeed many other proofs of this, but the fact that good Hindus do not scruple to help an Ashram where we go to the length of dining with the untouchables is no small proof. (Part 5, X. *On the Anvil*, p. 970–972)

At the same time there came a letter from Shrimati Anasuyabai about the condition of labour in Ahmedabad. Wages were low, the labourers had long been agitating for an increment, and I had a desire to guide them if I could. But I had not the confidence to direct even this comparatively small affair from that long distance. So I seized the first opportunity to go to Ahmedabad. I had hoped that I should be able to finish both these matters quickly and get back to Champaran to supervise the constructive work that had been inaugurated there. [...]

I was in a most delicate situation. The mill-hands' case was strong. Shrimati Anasuyabai had to battle against her own brother, Sjt Ambalal Sarabhai, who led the fray on behalf of the mill-owners. My relations with them were friendly, and that made fighting with them the more difficult. I had consultations with them, and requested them to refer the dispute to arbitration, but they refused to recognize the principle of arbitration.

I had therefore to advise the labourers to go on strike. Before I did so, I came in very close contact with them and their leaders, and explained to them the conditions of a successful strike:

1. never to resort to violence,

2. never to molest blacklegs,
3. never to depend upon alms, and
4. to remain firm, no matter how long the strike continued, and to earn bread, during the strike, by any other honest labour.

The leaders of the strike understood and accepted the conditions, and the labourers pledged themselves at a general meeting not to resume work until either their terms were accepted or the mill-owners agreed to refer the dispute to arbitration. [...]

We had daily meetings of the strikers under the shade of a tree on the bank of the Sabarmati. They attended the meeting in their thousands and I reminded them in my speeches of their pledge and of the duty to maintain peace and self-respect. They daily paraded the streets of the city in peaceful procession, carrying their banner bearing the inscription 'Ek Tek' (keep the pledge).

The strike went on for twenty-one days. During the continuance of the strike I consulted the mill-owners from time to time and entreated them to do justice to the labourers. 'We have our pledge too,' they used to say. 'Our relations with the labourers are those of parents and children ... How can we brook the interference of a third party? Where is the room for arbitration?' (Part 5, XX. *In Touch with Labour*, p. 1036, 1038–1040)

Champanan being in a far away corner of India, and the press having been kept out of the campaign, it did not attract visitors from outside. Not so with the Kheda campaign, of which the happenings were reported in the press from day to day.

The Gujaratis were deeply interested in the fight, which was to them a novel experiment. They were ready to pour forth their riches for the success of the cause. It was not easy for them to see that Satyagraha could not be conducted simply by means of money. Money is the thing that it least needs. In spite of my remonstrance, the Bombay merchants sent us more money than necessary, so that we had some balance left at the end of the campaign. [...]

For the Patidar farmers, too, the fight was quite a new thing. We had, therefore, to go about from village to village explaining the principles of Satyagraha. The main thing was to rid the agriculturists of their fear by making them realize that the officials were not the masters but the servants of the people, inasmuch as they received their salaries from the tax-payer. And then it seemed well nigh impossible to make them realize the duty of combining civility with fearlessness. Once they had shed the fear of the officials, how could they be stopped from returning their insults? And yet if they resorted to incivility it would spoil their Satyagraha, like a drop of arsenic in milk. I realized later that they had less fully learnt the lesson of civility than I had expected. Experience has

taught me that civility is the most difficult part of Satyagraha. Civility does not here mean the mere outward gentleness of speech cultivated for the occasion, but an inborn gentleness and desire to do the opponent good. These should show themselves in every act of a Satyagrahi. [...]

While these things were going on, one of Sjt Shankarlal Parikh's tenants paid up the assessment in respect of his land. This created a sensation. Sjt Shankarlal Parikh immediately made amends for his tenant's mistake by giving away for charitable purposes the land for which the assessment had been paid. He thus saved his honour and set a good example to others.

With a view to steeling the hearts of those who were frightened, I advised the people, under the leadership of Sjt Mohanlal Pandya, to remove the crop of onion from a field which had been, in my opinion, wrongly attached. I did not regard this as civil disobedience, but even if it was, I suggested that this attachment of standing crops, though it might be in accordance with law, was morally wrong, and was nothing short of looting, and that therefore it was the people's duty to remove the onion in spite of the order of attachment. This was a good opportunity for the people to learn a lesson in courting fines or imprisonment, which was the necessary consequence of such disobedience. For Sjt Mohanlal Pandya it was a thing after his heart. He did not like the campaign to end without someone undergoing suffering in the shape of imprisonment for something done consistently with the principles of Satyagraha. So he volunteered to remove the onion crop from the field, and in this seven or eight friends joined him.

It was impossible for the Government to leave them free. The arrest of Sjt Mohanlal and his companions added to the people's enthusiasm. [...]

A procession escorted the 'convicts' to jail, and on that day Sjt Mohanlal Pandya earned from the people the honoured title of 'dungli chor' (onion thief) which he enjoys to this day. (Part 5, XXIV. *The Onion Thief*, p. 1062–1064)

He said: 'I cannot rebuild your body unless you take milk. If in addition you would take iron and arsenic injections, I would guarantee fully to renovate your constitution.' 'You can give me the injections,' I replied, 'but milk is a different question; I have a vow against it.' 'What exactly is the nature of your vow?' the doctor inquired. [...]

I succumbed. My intense eagerness to take up the Satyagraha fight had created in me a strong desire to live, and so I contented myself with adhering to the letter of my vow only, and sacrificed the spirit. For although I had only the milk of the cow and the she-buffalo in mind when I took the vow, by natural implication it covered the milk of all animals. Nor could it be right for me to use milk at all, so long as I held that milk is not the natural diet of man. Yet knowing all this I agreed to take goat's milk. The will to

live proved stronger than the devotion to truth, and for once the votary of truth compromised his sacred ideal by his eagerness to take up the Satyagraha fight. The memory of this action even now rankles in my breast and fills me with remorse, and I am constantly thinking how to give up goat's milk. But I cannot yet free myself from that subtlest of temptations, the desire to serve, which still holds me.

My experiments in dietetics are dear to me as a part of my researches in *Abimsa*. They give me recreation and joy. But my use of goat's milk today troubles me not from the view-point of dietetic *Abimsa* so much as from that of truth, being no less than a breach of pledge. It seems to me that I understand the ideal of truth better than that of *Abimsa*, and my experience tells me that, if I let go my hold of truth, I shall never be able to solve the riddle of *Abimsa*. The ideal of truth requires that vows taken should be fulfilled in the spirit as well as in the letter. In the present case I killed the spirit – the soul of my vow – by adhering to its outer form only, and that is what galls me. But in spite of this clear knowledge I cannot see my way straight before me. In other words, perhaps, I have not the courage to follow the straight course. Both at bottom mean one and the same thing, for doubt is invariably the result of want or weakness of faith. 'Lord, give me faith' is, therefore, my prayer day and night. (Part 5, XXIX. *The Rowlatt Bills and My Dilemma*, p. 1102–1105)

My uniform experience has convinced me that there is no other God than Truth. And if every page of these chapters does not proclaim to the reader that the only means for the realization of Truth is *Abimsa*, I shall deem all my labour in writing these chapters to have been in vain. And, even though my efforts in this behalf may prove fruitless, let the readers know that the vehicle, not the great principle, is at fault. After all, however sincere my strivings after *Abimsa* may have been, they have still been imperfect and inadequate. The little fleeting glimpses, therefore, that I have been able to have of Truth can hardly convey an idea of the indescribable lustre of Truth, a million times more intense than that of the sun we daily see with our eyes. In fact what I have caught is only the faintest glimmer of that mighty effulgence. But this much I can say with assurance, as a result of all my experiments, that a perfect vision of Truth can only follow a complete realization of *Abimsa*. [...]

Identification with everything that lives is impossible without self-purification; without self-purification the observance of the law of *Abimsa* must remain an empty dream; God can never be realized by one who is not pure of heart. Self-purification therefore must mean purification in all the walks of life. And purification being highly infectious, purification of oneself necessarily leads to the purification of one's surroundings.

But the path of self-purification is hard and steep. To attain to perfect purity one has to become absolutely passion-free in thought, speech and action; to rise above the opposing currents of love and hatred, attachment and repulsion. I know that I have not in me as yet that triple purity, in spite of constant ceaseless striving for it. That is why the world's praise fails to move me, indeed it very often stings me. To conquer the subtle passions seems to me to be harder far than the physical conquest of the world by the force of arms. Ever since my return to India I have had experiences of the dormant passions lying hidden within me. "The knowledge of them has made me feel humiliated though not defeated. The experiences and experiments have sustained me and given me great joy. But I know that I have still before me a difficult path to traverse. I must reduce myself to zero. So long as a man does not of his own free will put himself last among his fellow creatures, there is no salvation for him. *Ahimsa* is the farthest limit of humility. (Part 5, *Farewell*, p. 1217–1220)