

# LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 11 : 7 July 2011

ISSN 1930-2940

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## Gandhi's *Autobiography* as a Discourse on His Spiritual Journey

K. R. Vijaya, Ph.D.



### Truth and Experiment

Gandhi's *My Experiments with Truth* is one of the imperishable classics of India. It originally appeared week by week in *Navajavan* (in Gujarati) and in *Young India* (in English). Later, it was translated by Desai and issued in book form in the year 1925.

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The book is basically about how Gandhi arrived at the principles he held and how they came about from his search for truth. In this autobiographical record, he describes in detail, the events of his life from birth to his higher education in England, his formative years as Lawyer and activist in South Africa, his return to India, and his subsequent entry into and his reshaping of the Independence movement.

Gandhi clearly states “I simply want to tell the story of my numerous experiments with truth, and as my life consists of nothing but those experiments, it is true that the story will take the shape of an autobiography” (Autobiography xii). He says “I shall try to be as harsh as truth as I want others also to be” (Autobiography XII). This book is a tool for him to express his concepts of *Satyagraha*, the holding onto *satyam* (truth) in negotiations, *Swaraj* (self-rule or Home rule), *ahimsa* (non-violence) and so on. He does this by reviewing and evaluating his life with the lens of truth.

Gandhi decided to write his autobiography at the age of fifty-six in the mid 1920's during the period between his involvement in the politics and his return to *satyagraha* campaigns. When he was in prison from 1922 to 1924, he read avidly on the books on Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism. The shift of focus from active politics to spirituality made him draw inspiration from these religious text books. This decision to write the autobiography was not taken on his own initiative. Gandhi felt that at that point that his life had become so public that there was no need for him to write about it. But his followers and his friends repeatedly requested him to write out a story of his life for others to examine. He decided to write his life story in the weekly column in *Navajavan*. It was a period of self-assessment as well as the assessment of his principles in his vision of India.

### **The Purpose of Autobiography**

An autobiography can be said to have the purpose of affirming, confirming and reinforcing the self. But Gandhi's autobiography seems to contradict Gandhi's purposes. Right at the outset of his project, Gandhi declares that his purpose is not ‘to attempt a real autobiography’ (CW 39: 2). He elaborates that, ‘I simply want to tell the story of my numerous experiments with truth’ (CW 39: 3). Gandhi quotes the song of Nishkulanand while talking about desires. “Renunciation of objects without the renunciation of desires is short lived however hard you may try.” (Autobiography)

### **The Goal of Gandhi's Autobiography Hid Depiction of Self**

Gandhi's book accurately reflects the general goal and intent of his life - the search for truth and his firm belief in that truth. He believes that truth is God and all his experiments attempt to achieve truth and purity. In self-presentation, Gandhi presents himself as a person with the list of personal weaknesses. In his childhood, he was fearful and timid. He was swayed by his friend's idea that through meat-eating he could acquire strength. He began to envision the act of eating meat to be necessary for the Indians to overthrow

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the British. But the same person, after taking the vow not to touch wine, woman and meat, keeps the vow till his last breath. He began his experiments with vegetarianism while he was in England with Dr. Mehta.

One of the reasons for his experiments is his vow to his mother. One element of truth in Hinduism is purity of the mind and body and this is the purpose of many of Gandhi's experiments. He seeks to rid himself of lust through diet and to purify his body so his mind controls thought. No matter how ill he is, he will not eat meat or even beef broth or eggs. His family pretty much follows his lead. When Kasturbai was close to death, she did not accept meat or eggs as advised by the doctor. His experiments with dietetics are a life-long deal, and he seeks to find the perfect diet according to his belief - one that wipes out lust and allows man to control his mind and thoughts.

### **Search for Morality**

During teen years, he also seems to be searching vigorously for a true religion. He talks of what does and does not impress him about religion. It is at this time that Gandhi develops his convictions about morality. He says:

But one thing took deep root in me - the conviction that morality is the basis of things, and that truth is the substance of all morality. Truth became my sole objective. It began to grow in magnitude every day, and my definition of it also has been ever widening. (Autobiography 34).

### **Choice of Religious Beliefs and Social Practices**

Gandhi's study of religion takes place throughout his life. His practice of Hinduism is not based on the worship of any of the gods. For him, truth is god. He doesn't follow all of the Hindu practices and customs except the ones that he can accept. Even as a child and young man, he did not accept many of the Hindu customs. Before he leaves for England, the Sheth makes him an outcast because he will not heed their wishes and give up his chance of studying in England. Being an outcast means nothing to him. He is not concerned about it when he returns from England either. Yet, caste is a very important part of Hinduism. The constraints of caste are not something that he accepts. The parts of Hinduism that he can accept are those that fit in with his view of God as truth. Even as he studies other religions, he still searches for God and truth as he knows it.

### **Secular Beliefs and Personal Practices**

To Gandhi, God is truth. Everything he does is based on truth. In his law practice, he will not allow any misrepresentation of facts. Clients have seen him withdraw from their case in court if he finds any misrepresentation. His life is based on the search for truth which is the purpose of all of his experiments. His vow to his mother not to touch women, wine or meat while in England is an example of this. The only lies he tells are lies of omission

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like not telling people that he is married with a wife and child during his school years in England.

### **Spiritual Growth Blocked by Human Passions**

Gandhi finds that human passions can lead one away from spiritual growth. Lust, pride and greed are also included in this list. Gandhi does not spare details in recounting struggles with his carnal desires. He shares even his lustful moments even at the hour of his father's death. "The shame to which I have referred in a foregoing chapter was this shame of my carnal desire even at the critical hour of my father's death, which demanded wakeful service" (Autobiography 26). He speaks of the shame of his lustful desires, never once acknowledging the fact that they are normal for a teenage male. Even Later Gandhi tries to control his lust by taking the vow of *brahmacharya* and moves out of Kasturbai's bedroom. Gandhi sees all of these experiments as a way of becoming one with truth.

### **"Fight" Against the Colonial Rulers – Non-violence is not Enough**

Non-violence and Satyagraha are basically the story of how Gandhi and his followers fight the British government. There is only one time in the whole autobiography where Gandhi resorts to violence and slaps one of the boys at his settlement. The boy does not listen to Gandhi and follow his orders and he responds by striking him. It is one of the few outbursts of anger that is revealed in the book and Gandhi does not feel good about it. To him it represents a lack of control on his part and he feels that he should be strong enough to control his own reactions and anger. When he is attacked by the crowd as he returns to Natal, he does not strike back even when they are hitting him. He seems to learn that just telling people to be non-violent is not enough.

The demonstrations and the day of *Hartal* show what happens when people are provoked and react with violence. There are a lot of people hurt and killed, especially in the Punjab where the massacre occurs. He responds that they did not receive proper training in his principles of self-restraint and that it proves his point of what happens when people are provoked and respond with retaliation.

### **Prayers as Source of Guidance, Good and Wicked Deeds**

Gandhi suggests the readers that prayer can be used as, a source of guidance. He feels that prayer combined with utmost sincerity and humility can cleanse the heart of desires. He feels:

Man and his deed are two distinct things. Whereas a good deed should call forth approbation and a wicked deed disapprobation, the doer of the deed, whether good or wicked, always deserves respect or pity as the case may be. Hate the sin and not the sinner is a precept which, though easy enough

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to understand, is rarely practiced, and that is why “the poison of hatred spreads in the world.” (Autobiography, 276)

### **An Array of Life Experiences**

Gandhi offers his autobiography as an array of experiences that open for others the possibilities of similar spiritual journeys.

The book is written in the first person. Everything the reader sees is seen through Gandhi’s eyes and perspective. All background information and viewpoints are through Gandhi. All of the characters are presented through him. He shows both sides of the arguments and discussions throughout the book but the reader is still aware that it is presented from Gandhi’s perspective.

Gandhi at some times comes across as being very opinionated because of this. At times the reader wants to criticize Gandhi as being stubborn and narrow-minded because he is so principled. But in an autobiography written in the first person there is no other way the material can be presented.

### **Gandhi’s Language and Style**

For the most part, Gandhi tells his story in clear, easy English. The book is well-written. He does not elaborate on the meaning of various Hindu terms and the reader will have a problem understanding some of Gandhi’s points if he is not somewhat acquainted with Hinduism. For example, Gandhi does not explain the meaning of caste and the basis of Hinduism or some other religions that he comes into contact with. His constant striving for purity cannot be understood without some prior knowledge of Hinduism. It would be much easier for the reader to understand Gandhi and some of his beliefs if the reader understands something of Hinduism.

Gandhi uses various Hindu terms throughout the book. He does a fairly good job of explaining the meaning of terms like *tinkaithia* and *brahmacharya*. Gandhi quotes the Gita and other books in his autobiography. The reader can grasp enough to figure out that it somehow fits into his concept of truth.

### **The Structure and Function**

Gandhi’s autobiography is divided into five parts with the divisions mostly based on geography. There is a part for his childhood in India and another for his stay in England. His return to India and his time in South Africa are two other parts. His final return to India is the last part.

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Each Part is subdivided into twenty-five to forty-seven short chapters. The parts are chronological but the chapters jump around within the part's time frame as Gandhi goes from topic to topic. The biggest problem is the lack of use of dates.

Most of the chapters in the book are very short, just two or three page long. In many cases they refer to a thought or incident. Since Gandhi, wrote most of his autobiography while he was in prison, did not have the use of notes and diaries. When he remembers something, he writes it in a separate chapter.

### **Gandhi on the Road Less Travelled by Others**

On the whole, "The Story of My Experiments With Truth" is about Gandhi's physical, social and personal experiments with Truth and his efforts to remove any falsehood from himself and those around him. This is the emotional journey that led him to the destination of God and Truth.

The autobiography is also a book capable of spectacular insight. It is in essence the road less travelled. Gandhi's life is that of an exercise of the human will trying to control the darker side of the human nature. Using himself as an example, he preaches the principles of simplicity, honesty and charity. It is an invaluable book aimed at passing through the darkness of life like "Everyman" of John Banyan; a spiritual journey of human psyche.

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