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## **Gandhi: Contradictions and Consistency**

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### **Abstract**

Gandhi, his philosophy and his way of life had a deep impact on the social, economic, cultural and political milieu of not just India but the entire world. There was no aspect of life Gandhian thought didn't touch. Gandhi was not a theorist, he was rather a practical philosopher, and his writings emerged mainly during the many social, economic and political actions he undertook. His approach to answering questions is more realistic and practical rather than being academic and consistent throughout. Many apparent inconsistencies emerge in Gandhi's writings and speeches. Being a practical-idealist, he was not consistent but changed his views according to practical needs. Many inconsistencies can be found in his writings and he readily admits to these. He is much criticised because of his seemingly changing and sometimes contradictory words. However, on closer reading, his writings and his philosophies which reflect his world view, reveal a clarity of thought with which he could evaluate and assess each idea and situation in a specific context. He did not pretend to have unswerving views but changed them as required. He readily admits himself to being inconsistent and contradicts his previous stands whenever he feels the need. These inconsistencies, rather than being flaws, were a reflection of an ever-developing personality who believed in the relativity of truth.

**Keywords** – Gandhi, inconsistency, Gandhian philosophy, Anektavad

### **Gandhi: Contradictions and Consistency**

My aim is not to be consistent with my previous statements on a given question, but to be consistent with truth as it may present itself to me at a given moment. The result has been that I have grown from truth to truth.

- Gandhi

### **Introduction-**

Gandhi was a complex and sometimes contradictory personality. He could both be a moderate or an extremist, he could be very rigid or fluently change. It is difficult to classify Gandhi in terms of conventional political categories, he could be a conservative or a radical or a mixture of both at once. Writing in Young India on 16<sup>th</sup> April 1931, he says, "Friends who know me have certified that I am as much a moderate as I am an extremist and as much a conservative as I am a radical. Hence, perhaps, my good fortune to have friends among these extreme types of men. The mixture is due, I believe, to my view of ahimsa."

Gandhi acknowledged himself the fact that he was a bundle of contradictions. He writes in young India, "I must admit my many inconsistencies. But since I am called 'Mahatma', I might well endorse Emerson's saying that 'Foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.' There is, I fancy, a method in my inconsistencies. In my opinion, there is a consistency running

through my seeming inconsistencies, as in Nature there is unity running through seeming diversity.”<sup>1</sup> Gandhi wrote extensively, but not systematically. His writings which are in simple language but contain varied political, philosophical, religious, social, and cultural assumptions and claims, do appear to be sometimes contradictory. Gandhi himself says that his writing is concise and lacks precision therefore it is open to several interpretations.

Scholars and writers have given different views on Gandhi, while some agree that his philosophies and thoughts have consistency, others disagree. Professor Morris-Jones writes, “The wonder begins to be that over a half century of social change, over a number of diverse situations, so much consistency should remain.’ Gandhi did not deliberately construct a system of philosophy; his ideas and principles were applied by him in practical situations and they become a part of his life and work. He often revised his opinions and his responses were mostly in accordance with the context and circumstances of the time. Despite these seeming contradictions, his conceptual framework remained the same, and he never altered his basic philosophies.”<sup>2</sup>

Gandhi’s philosophies are not firm, or inflexible, but contain a set of beliefs and principles which are applied in different ways at different times, according to socio-historical settings and situations. Gandhi was a practical-idealist, he was not consistent but changed his views according to practical needs. If seen and reviewed without the context, his ideas sometimes produce the impression of inconsistency or even contradiction, but if read and reviewed with context, they form a clear whole. The context is important as it provides the background, situation, and outline of an event. It is a complex concept and needs exploration.

It sometimes appears that Gandhi is inconsistent with his statements, but he is, in his own words, consistent with the truth of the moment. He explains, “Whenever I have been obliged to compare my writing even fifty years ago with the latest, I have discovered no inconsistency between the two. But friends who observe inconsistency...should try to see if there is not an underlying and abiding consistency between the two seeming inconsistencies.”<sup>3</sup> He wanted to put his philosophy into obvious action. Gandhi’s thought process involves fluidity of thought in all directions, and presents another way of making sense of every situation and ultimately moulding your opinion in accordance with time and situation. He explored new concepts which might be more equipped to make sense and mould the ideas with more rationality rather than consistency.

Since, he was a practical idealist, his principles/philosophies evolved even during his own lifetime. Therefore, many inconsistencies can be found in his writings and he readily admits to these. He also reiterates that if there is ever any confusion regarding a particular point of view held by him, the reader should refer to his last thought on the matter. In April 1933, he wrote in *Harijan*, "I would like to say to the diligent reader of my writings and to others who are interested in them that I am not at all concerned with appearing to be consistent. In my search after Truth, I have discarded many ideas and learnt many new things.... What I am concerned with is my readiness to obey the call of Truth, my God, from moment to moment, and therefore, when anybody finds any inconsistency between any two writings of mine, if he still has any faith in my sanity, he would do well to choose the later of the two on the same subject."<sup>4</sup>

Gandhian values, ideas and philosophies changed, evolved and developed through human experience; they are not static. What are termed as contradictions in Gandhian philosophy are in reality his capacity to see situations and things in their appropriate context. On closer reading, his writings and his philosophies which reflect his world view, reveal a clarity of thought with which he could evaluate and assess each idea and situation in a specific context. Thus, he is able to modulate and change his views accordingly. He never makes sweeping generalisations of any kind, rather, with time and experience he discovered new truths, and changed his stand from what he might have stated earlier. He admits freely that he is not consistent, and neither wished to be so because dynamic thought and action should never be consistent but keep evolving and changing. Gandhi believed in the idea of relative truth, which reveals itself in diverse forms, inconsistencies and contradictions. His opinions changed with a change in context.

To illustrate the point, Gandhi advocated Ahimsa, which was a means to an end. A way to achieve the ultimate sat or Satya, which is a state of being equated with God. Yet, Gandhi advises to choose violence over cowardice or violence under certain circumstances as being more honourable. He says, "I have been repeating over and over again that he who cannot protect himself or his nearest and dearest or their honour by non-violently facing death may and ought to do so by violently dealing with the oppressor. He who can do neither of the two is a burden. He has no business to be the head of a family. He must either hide himself, or must rest content to live for ever in helplessness and be prepared to crawl like a worm at the bidding of a bully."<sup>5</sup> This cannot be termed as a contradiction with his idea of ahimsa and Satya, but a response to a certain situations and different context.

He was ceaselessly engaged in not just deducing but changing the socio-political realities of the country in certain directions which never seemed to remain fixed. Writing in Harijan in 1933, he says, 'I have never made a fetish of consistency. I am a votary of Truth and I must say what I feel and think at a given moment on the question, without regard to what I may have said before on it. ... As my vision gets clearer, my views must grow clearer with daily practice. Where I have deliberately altered an opinion, the change should be obvious, only, a careful eye would notice a gradual and imperceptible evolution.'<sup>6</sup>

Thus, it can be concluded that Gandhi's views and ideas were often contradictory but only if analysed without knowing or understand the context in which it was said or written. Gandhi knows and admits that his views changed over the course of time and as his experiences increased so his philosophies and ideas evolved. He might contradict something he had said a few years ago, but the underlined beliefs and truths always remain the same. He insisted that he was not inconsistent with respect to fundamental concepts.

In the book, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, R. Iyer says, "Gandhi explicitly declared that the right to err and the freedom to experiment constitute the universal and indispensable condition to all progress. Evolution is always experimental; all progress is possible only through mistakes. This, he felt is the law of individual moral growth as well as of social and political evolution. Although we must be prepared to visualize Absolute Truth, in practice we must ever regard truth as a cast-iron dogma, a final statement or a fixed formula, but rather as a many-sided, evolving and dynamic dialectics."<sup>7</sup>

Gandhi was not an absolutist, and had the ability to see and understand things in their proper context. For instance, he supports the British during world wars and advocated unconditional non-violent support for Britain on the grounds that they were fighting against the oppressive side, but at the same time opposes the British in India.

Gandhi explains how differences in perspective can lead to diverse points of view. He wrote in *Young India*, "It has been my experience that I am always true from my point of view, and often wrong from the point of view of my honest critics. I know that we are both right from our respective points of view. And this knowledge saves me from attributing motives to my opponents or critics. The seven blind men who gave seven different descriptions of the elephant were all right from their respective points of view, and wrong from the point of view of one another, and right and wrong from the point of view of the man who knew the elephant."<sup>8</sup> Through the story of the blind men trying to describe an elephant; he tried to explain that each of the blind men was right in his own description.

Gandhi's contradictions or changing ideas can also be explained through his references to himself as an *Anekantavadi*, the Jain doctrine of the manyness of reality, which recognises relativity of views. Gandhi was deeply influenced by the Jain doctrines of *syadvada* and *Anekantavada*. *Syadvada* says that we cannot affirm or deny anything absolutely as there can be many different ways of thinking and expressing. *Anekantavada* implies that we know only some aspects of reality and therefore all judgements are necessarily relative and can change.

## Conclusion

Gandhi was not a systematic writer, and he was not bothered by theoretical inconsistencies. Being a practical person, he did not pretend to have unswerving views but changed them as required. He readily admits himself to being inconsistent and contradicts his previous stands whenever he feels the need. These inconsistencies, rather than being flaws, were a reflection of an ever-developing personality who believed that truth could change with changing context and is not something that could remain unchanged. In his Mahatma Gandhi Centenary Lectures, P. Nagaraj Rao, said, “The Gandhian concept of Truth is no abstract correspondence to facts, not a photograph of facts. It is a total creative concept”<sup>9</sup>

Gandhi’s unsystematic and varied writings contain many apparent contradictions and inconsistencies throughout. As he himself said, “I write the truth as I personally see it. Absolute truth alone is God. It is beyond reach. At the most we can say it is *neti neti* (not this, not this). The truth that we see is relative, many sided, plural and is the whole truth for a given time.”<sup>10</sup> His writings need to be closely analysed and requires a deeper understanding to unearth the solid foundations and consistencies in his ideologies.

It cannot be denied that there were substantial changes in Gandhi’s views on diverse subjects over time. Gandhi explains it thus: “[A]s I read them [his writings] with a detached mind, I find no contradiction between the two statements, especially if they are read in their full context”<sup>11</sup> He makes it clear that before passing judgements, the friends who refer to his inconsistencies may try to notice an underlying and enduring consistency amid his two seemingly inconsistent statements given at different times. Gandhi described his own life as a process of constant development undertaken slowly and at every step. Throughout his life he continually ‘experimented with truth’ in every way in order to steer truthful path in life. The truthful path, which can deviate from consistencies is mostly a matter of reason, context, situation and conscience.

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