



## The Story of My Experiments with Truth: An Analysis of Mahatma Gandhi's Truth

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Autography is "Literature of personal revelation"<sup>1</sup>. The main interest of an autobiography resides in a conscious or unconscious self-portrayal by the author. It may be called a connected narrative of the author's life. In an autobiography great stress is laid on introspection, or on the significance of the author's life against a wider background. Autobiography, says Encyclopedia Britannica,

"is the biography of a person written by himself. Its motivations are various-among others self scrutiny for self-edification, self justification."<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the aim of autobiography has been to give truth about oneself. It may be the truth about one's moral, spiritual and religious beliefs, or the truth of worldly or material achievements, or the truth of one's profession. It may also reveal one's outlook towards the worldly affairs. An autobiography contains comments on crucial incidents and personages one comes across.

*The Story of My Experiments with Truth* is one of the greatest autobiographies of the world. It is as great as Rousseau's *Confessions*, Helen Keller's *The Story of My Life* and De Quincey's *Confessions of an Opium Eater*. An autobiography is a personal revelation. It is a self-portrait of the author. It may be called a narrative of the author's life. According to Mohinder Singh,

"is not an ordinary experiment in self-portrayal, but the product of a life wholly dedicated to truth as understood in its product of a life wholly dedicated to truth as understood in its widest connotation and an outstanding creation standing apart in its lonely grandeur on the Indian autobiographical scene."<sup>3</sup>

Mahatma Gandhi's life is like a beacon light to the rudderless boat of the readers. The revelation of truth has

been Gandhiji's main aim in writing his autobiography. To him Truth was God and he devoted his entire life to the realization of Truth, the God. The narration of his experiences and experiments with Truth aims at the moral and spiritual enrichment of the readers of his autobiography. Gandhiji's himself writes explaining the purpose of writing his autobiography,

“it is not my purpose to attempt a real autobiography. I simply want to tell the story of my experiments with Truth. I believe that all these experiments will not be without benefit to the readers... I call my experiments spiritual or moral. Self-knowledge is the main feature of this book.... I have gone through deep introspection, searched myself through and through, examined and analysed every psychological situation.”<sup>4</sup>

This autobiography has a deep educative and didactic purpose. It was written as a means of education and reform. He again writes about its educative quality;

“The exercise has given me ineffable mental peace, because it has been my fond hope that it might bring faith in Truth and Ahimsa to waverers.”<sup>5</sup>

He wrote this book when he was in his fifties. At this time his outlook of life was formed and fixed. He did not take any autobiography as a model. His Co-workers, Jeramdas and Swami Anand persuaded him to write his life story. At that time he had no diary or documents as the basis of his life-story. He says, “I write just as the spirit moves me at the time of writing”<sup>6</sup> His only aim was it discuss ‘academic principles of Truth.’ He says, “I worship God as Truth only. I have not yet found Him but I am seeking after Him.”<sup>7</sup>

*The Story of My Experiments with Truth* is the autobiography of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, covering his life from early childhood through to 1921. It was written in weekly instalments and published in his journal Navjivan from 1925 to 1929. Its English translation also appeared at the insistence of Swami Anand and other close co-workers of Gandhi, for him to explain the background of his public campaigns. In 1999, the book was designated as one of the “100 Best Spiritual Books of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century” by a committee of global spiritual and religious authorities.

This section is written by Mahadev desai who translated the book from Gujarati to English in 1940. In this preface Desai notes that the book was originally published in two volumes, the first in 1927 and second in 1929. The time of writing this preface, 50,000 copies had been sold in Gujarati but since the English edition was expensive it prevented Indians from buying. Desai notes the need to bring out a cheaper English version. He also mentions that the translation has been revised by an English scholar who did not want his name to be published. Chapters XXIX – XLIII of Part V were translated by Desai's friend and colleague Pyarelal. The greatest quality of this book is its frankness, intimacy and truth. He conceals nothing. He exaggerates nothing. He experiments with Truth as it comes out spontaneously. Here has opened his heart. He says,

“..... I am not going either to conceal or understate any ugly things that must be told. I hope to acquaint the reader fully with all my faults and errors. My purpose is to describe experiments in the science of Satyagrah, not to say how good I am. In judging myself I shall try to be as harsh as truth, as I want others also to be.”<sup>8</sup>

An autobiography is divided into five parts. The first part of an autobiography begins with Gandhiji's birth and parentage and ends with his return after studies from England in 1891. Mohandas Karmchand Gandhi belonged to the Bania caste. His father Karamchand Gandhi, *alias* Kaba Gandhi, was the fifth son of Ota Gandhi. Kaba Gandhi married four times in succession, having lost his wife each time by death. M. K. Gandhi was the youngest son of Kaba Gandhi and his last wife, Putlibai. M. K. Gandhi was born of these parents on 2<sup>nd</sup> October, 1869 at Porbandar. He passed his early childhood in Porbandar. At the age of twelfth he was admitted to the high school. His books and his lessons were his sole companions. At

this time he read *Sharvana Pitribhakti Nataka* and *Harishchandra*. These two plays inculcated in him devotion to parents and undying love for truth respectively. Gandhiji was married at the age of thirteen. As a husband, he wanted to make his wife, Kasturbai, an ideal wife and a learned lady. She was illiterate. He was very anxious to teach her, but lustful love left me no time.

In short, in this part Gandhiji describes his childhood, his shyness, love for truth, his early child-marriage etc. His friend led him to eat meat, but to he gave up that habit afterwards. That friend also led him to be faithless to his wife, but “God in His infinite mercy protected me against myself”<sup>9</sup> He writes truth that four times he had to face similar incidents in his life but on all occasions God saved him. How truthfully he accepts his moral lapses;

“.....from a strictly ethical point of view, all these occasions must be regarded as moral lapses; for the carnal desire was there and it was as good as the act.”<sup>10</sup>

He stole money for smoking and confessed his guilt. He felt that “... there could not be a cleansing without a clean confession.”<sup>11</sup> Gandhiji suffered life-long regret and shame for his lustful relation with his wife. He did not restrain himself from lustfully approaching his pregnant wife, when he should have been holding his dying father in his arms. He calls this shame the

“.....shame of my carnal desire even at the critical hour of my father’s death, which demanded wakeful service..... always regarded himself as a lustful, though a faithful, husband.”<sup>12</sup>

Then he started reading the Bhagavat Gita and Ramayana for self-realization. In 1887 he went to England to study law. There, he became interested in the philosophy of nonviolence, as expressed in the Gita, Hindu sacred scripture, and in Jesus Christ’s Sermon on the Mount in the Christain Bible. He returned to India in 1891, having passed the bar, but found little success in his attempts to practice law. Seeking a change of scenery, he accepted a position in South Africa for a year, where he assisted on a lawsuit.

The second part of an autobiography relates to a year’s stay in India and the first South African phase till 1896. The third part of an autobiography deals with his stay in Duban and the Bombay interlude till 1902. The second and the third parts deal with his experiences in South Africa. As he entered Natal he had to encounter apartheid and colonialism. He was called ‘a coolie barrister.’ Here he became the leader of the suffering Indian Community with the weapons of Truth and Ahimsa. He devoted himself completely to the social service. In South Africa, he proved himself to be a successful lawyer and householder. His faith in God and religion was strengthened. He became very simple and moderate in his food and sex. Whenever he came to India, he met the Indian leaders like Phirozshah Mehta, Madanmohan Malaviya, Tilak and Gokhale. He also attended the Congress Session at Bombay and educated Indian opinion in support of the cause of Indians in South Africa. In these two parts we find the future Mahatma in outline. About this phase of his life Gandhiji’s says; “Thus God laid the foundations of my life in South Africa and showed the seed of the fight for national self respect.”<sup>13</sup> 1914, when Gandhiji left South Africa and returned to India, he was known as a holy man and people called him a “Mahatma” or “great soul.”

The forth part of an autobiography deals with Gandhiji’s personal principles, practicing sexual abstinence, renouncing modern technology and developing *Satyagraha*. At the age of 45 Gandhiji emerged as a man of steel, giving a moral and spiritual message and disseminating the light of love, Truth and non-violence. Here he forged the powerful weapon *Satyagraha* which shook the mightiest and biggest empire the world had known. He asked his disciples to offer mass civil disobedience of existing unjust laws. Gandhiji’s major basic ideas and principles had been formed and he later on applied them with a tenacity of purpose to India’s freedom struggle.

The fifth part of an autobiography deals with his meteoric emergence of Indian political scene. He started his mission in India to liberate the country from the slavery of the British Empire. He successfully

used the weapon of *Satyagrah* for India's liberation. Within six years he became the national leader. He worked with Motilal Nehru, Madanmohan Malaviya and many others. He says,

“I have no doubt that the British Government is a powerful Government, but I have no doubt also that *Satyagrah* is a sovereign remedy”<sup>14</sup>

He used the new weapons of *hadtal* (Strike), fasting and non-cooperation very effectively. He added a few more things like spinning, Khadi, Hindu-Muslim unity and Harijan welfare. Mahatma Gandhiji stopped writing about his life with the Nagpur session of the Indian National Congress, held in December 1920. He writes;

“My life from this point onward has been so public that there is hardly anything about it that people do not know....In fact my pen instinctively refuses to move.”<sup>15</sup>

The Mahatma did not participate in independence day celebrations on August 15, 1947. He was in Calcutta which was in the grip of communal riots. He fasted and prayed all day and did not give any message to the country. He was sad and unhappy but not pessimistic. The Hindu zealots were infuriated by the Mahatma's efforts of Hindu-Muslim harmony and the success of his last fast. On January 30, 1948 Mahatma Gandhi went to the prayer ground. Nathuram Godse, a Maharashtrian, shot at the Mahatma. He fell down and died murmuring “He...Ram ! Ram ! Ram !” Mahatma Gandhi is no more with us but his soul still beacons us to the path of virtue, truth, peace and non-violence. The light he showed is shining still and will shine forever.

Thus, Mahatma Gandhiji's autobiography covers up a very important part of the Indian history. That period was full of social evils, political slavery, exploitation and injustice. He opposed child-marriage because he himself was married at the age of thirteen only. He disliked the differences of caste, colour and creed. He says “All were alike the children and servants of the motherland.”<sup>16</sup> He worked for emancipation of women and untouchables. He bravely fought against economic exploitation.

Mahatma Gandhi holds an important place in Indo-Anglian prose. As a writer of simple, graceful, idiomatic, forceful and clear prose, he has no equals. In autobiography, he expresses his personal beliefs about Truth and Ahimsa. He developed an individual style which bears the stamp of his personality. His prose style is free from artificiality. He expresses his thoughts naturally and effectively. Before this masterpiece, he wrote many articles for “The Indian Opinion”, “Navjivan” and “Young India”. He had also written “The History of Satyagrah in South Africa”, “Key to Health” and many letters and pamphlets. He had drafted many petitions and delivered speeches. In all of them he expressed his thoughts and described his experiments in a lucid, forceful, idiomatic, natural and individual style. Thus before writing this work he had developed his own fine style. He learned the art of ‘condensed expression’ from Carlyle's “Heroes and Hero-worship”, Ruskin's “Unto This Last” and Tolstoy's “The Kingdom of God is Within You.”

Mahatma Gandhiji's autobiography is beset with simplicity, clarity and effortless ease. His prose style is simple, easy, frank, personal, persuasive and graceful. He expressed himself in plain, distinct and impressive manner and imparted to his readers the same views and feelings as he himself had. He firmly persuaded his readers of the truth and importance of what he said. The saying ‘style is the man’ is applicable to Gandhiji's prose style. He was sincere in thoughts, words and deeds. With perfect candidness and sincerity he described even the great secrets of his life and did not conceal anything about his life from his readers. His style reflects the transparent sincerity and frankness of his heart. In this respect he is unique in Indo-Anglian prose. His prose style acquired a prophetic tone, as he had to exercise moral influence on his co-workers. The prophetic tone of his style echoes the prophetic utterances of Carlyle and Ruskin who tremendously influenced him. The following lines illustrate the prophetic quality of his style. He says; “Ahimsa is the basis of the search for truth.”<sup>17</sup> About Truth he says; “The real spirit of Truth lies in love for the meanest of creation”<sup>18</sup>

That way, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* is an immortal work. It is a classic. Mahatma Gandhiji is a trend setter in this respect. His whole life could be summed up in two words, Truth and Ahimsa. So I say frankly that Gandhiji's autobiography deals with his constant search of Truth.

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