

# The Idiosyncratic Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi towards Embodied Empiricism: An Analysis

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## Abstract

The concept of the body as a mere carrier of our soul is widely discussed and explained in many Hindu scriptures. This paper proposes to discuss the use of the human body as an object to transmit the skills of self-control and sharing of experiences to identify the ultimate objective of our life. According to Charles Wolfe and Ofer Gal\* they refer to 'embodied empiricism, to the keen interest in the body as both an object and an instrument of experience'. Danish ethnologists launched the body near concept of life-form analysis and the Swedish "cultural analysis" approached modernity as a transformation of bodily practice.

The German Communist psychiatrist **Wilhelm Reich** was the first, during the 1920 and 30s, to give the body a central place in therapeutic practice and psychoanalytical theory, especially "body armour".

What was neglected was one's own body, which is a field of dynamic human interaction, of movement, it is the movement of culture in plural form. In movement, human subjectivity develops through bodily dialogue with others. Studies in body culture have again and again shown that bodily existence is more than just 'the body' as an individual bag of skin and bones, which is under the control of an individual mind.

Bodily practice is going on between the different bodies. This questions two current types of thinking 'the individual' – the epistemological individualism and the thesis of "late-modern individualization". The body is the material basis of human existence. Studies of body culture contribute to fundamental philosophical orientation.

On the one hand, the body is a part of human life, which the individual cannot choose freely. On the other hand, the body is not determined from the very beginning. Between the given body on the one hand and intentional body management on the other, body culture develops in a process, which is historical and collective. The study of body culture throws light on this process and its contradictions between 'just doing' and trying to steer and control. People 'make' their bodies but do not make them of their own will. People say one thing, mean another – and do something else.

One such bold example of using the body as an object for self-realization and resistance against evil, was Mahatma Gandhi who experimented with his body and promoted various concepts like Brahmacharya (to lead a celibate life), fasting as a means of satyagraha, passive resistance and promotion of Ahimsa (non-violence), restraining his diet to control the senses, etc.

According to him "The body doesn't belong to us while it lasts, we must use it as trust handed over to our charge, treating in his way the things of the flesh we may one day expect to be free from the burden of the body". The art of controlling the mind through the body was mastered by him and was strongly reflected in his method of resistance against the imperialist powers. He believed if physical fasting is not accompanied by mental fasting, it is bound to end in hypocrisy and disaster the human body is the universe in miniature. His philosophy on the use and abuse of the human body was, 'we abuse it when we use it for selfish purposes for self-indulgence or to harm others'. It is out of right use if we exercise self-restraint and dedicate ourselves to the service of the whole world. The human body is a part of the universal spirit or God. When all our activity is directed towards the realization of this link, the body becomes a temple for the spirit to live.

**Keywords:** Mahatma Gandhi, Satyagraha, Body Experiment, Indian History, Freedom Movement.

## Introduction

The famous verse of the Bhagavadgita from the second chapter "For a man who is fasting his senses, Outwardly, the senses objects disappear, leaving the yearning behind, but when he has seen the highest, even the yearning disappears".

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Gal\* they refer to 'embodied empiricism, to the keen interest in the body as both an object and an instrument of experience'.

Since the 1920/the 30s – especially Norbert Elias, of the Frankfurt School, and some phenomenologists like **Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu** built bridges towards the new studies of body culture. The **Frankfurt School**, also known as the Critical Theory, started in the 1920s as a cooperation of German-Jewish sociologists who combined Marxist and Freudian approaches.

The bodily practice soon came into focus, when for instance **Siegfried Kracauer** compared the scene dancing of the taller girls, a troupe of the entertainment industry, with the capitalist rationalization of industrial work. Mass ornaments of the commercialized bodies and mass production were related to each other.

**Walter Benjamin** followed up by reflecting on the aestheticization of the bodily display in Fascist politics.

The French philosopher **Maurice Merleau-Ponty** (1945) placed the body in the centre of human existence: It is through bodily existence that the human being is in the world and experiences the world, by focusing on the body as a source of understanding, love, and identity.

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Studies of body culture have shown the different levels of what is called 'culture' in human life. *Body culture* can be understood side by side with *symbolic culture*, which consists of the ideas, expressions, and meanings of societal life, and with *material culture*, which is the world of human-made things, instruments, and technology.

The body is not only a certain substance or materiality, as it was, and is often treated in natural sciences. Nor is the body just a sign or construction, as recent theories of constructivism claim. By reducing the body to discourse, meaning, interpretation, symbolic expression, and semiotic patterns, constructionist thinking treated the body as a text, which can be 'read'. Bodies in movement practice are what the study of movement culture is about.

However, the concept of 'movement' touches upon at least three very different dimensions of human life:

- 1) Bodily movement
- 2) Emotional movement and
- 3) Social movement.

**First dimension:** People move in concrete bodily activities like sports and dance, games and meditation, outdoor activities, and festivals.

**Second dimension:** People are moved by feelings, emotions, and humor. Emotions (i.e. emotions), motives, and motivations demonstrate that there is emotional movement – fascination and euphoria, anger and fear, pain and laughter. This is what the psychology of social interactions and social relations is about.

**Third dimension:** People unite in social movements. They meet in associations and peer groups, informal networks, and formal organizations.

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The processes and working of the Gandhian dialectic is creative and inherently constructive." The anti-thesis of Gandhi is creative and constructive, it aims to destroy the evil and not the evil door. His victory is not one-sided, and it is a victory over the situation and not over the opponent. What Gandhi aims at is the creative resolution of conflict.

Broadly speaking, the human body is the field, because man sows seeds of action in it, and reaps their fruits.

### **Nonviolence**

He felt that spiritual upliftment is something like the fragrance of a flower. The gardener can only tend his garden, choose proper seeds or saplings, and take all care of them that he can; and if his efforts are right, the fragrance would appear of its own in the flower. In the same manner, if a man lives rightly in his social life, trying to remove injustices, and through a constant effort of re-

affirming the brotherhood of man- if he makes this his sole concern – then, in course of time, his inner spiritual life will also bear a fragrance like that of a beautiful flower which grows in a well-kept garden. Violence was wrong because through violence one tries to impose one's view of truth upon another using punishment, while through non-violence one tries to convert someone else to one's point of view. In course of such an endeavor, one also constantly re-examines one's position, changes it where necessary, and even accepts whatever seems to be right in the viewpoint of one whom he opposes. Violence leads to the suppression of one worldview by another, not through moral means.

### **Identifying and Defining Satyagraha**

In his own words, Satyagraha is but "an attempt to introduce religious spirit into politics, we may not meet hatred by hatred, violence by violence, evil by evil, but we have to make a continuous and persistent effort to return good for evil". Satyagraha has thus a spiritual font. It implied three-dimensional progress in truth, non-violence, and love. Satyagraha implies and demands a spiritual awakening and growth. Being spiritual in nature and spirit, it knows no despair. Satyagraha is thus nothing but a soul force.

All that he accomplished and demonstrated was "that the standards of moral and gentlemanly conduct that are good in individual relations are also good and efficient in inter-group relations. Also, that truth and non-violence can be organized into external effective action. The strength of Satyagraha comes from truth. Its strength flows from truthfulness. Satyagraha says Gandhi, "is essentially a religious movement. It is a process of purification and penance. It seeks to secure reforms or redress of grievances by self-suffering.

A potent force, once set in motion, it 'becomes a dominant factor in the community', and no Government can ignore it. Satyagraha is soul-force in the sense that 'death does not mean the cessation of the struggle but a culmination. Where there is repression, Satyagraha flourishes all the more, and the force of the repressor is fizzled out until the object of the struggle is gained. It is the most harmless and yet the most potent remedy against wrongs. It could be launched even against the whole world. Satyagraha is a dynamic concept with a dynamic

technique. Its dynamics require one to be continuously active in the pursuit of its ideal. There is no stop, no resting. It is a relentless pursuit after truth. The truth may sometimes be relative and involve new experiments. Satyagraha constitutes "gradual evolution" and is, therefore, a science "still in the making". It is a selfless endeavor and calls for the mortification of self. In Gandhi's own words, 'Satyagraha is an attitude of mind'. He who has attained the Satyagrahic state of mind will remain ever victorious at all times, places, and under all conditions.

One can physically control, or dominate the body of the adversary, but not his soul. No power on earth can make a person do a thing against his will. Satyagraha is a direct result of the recognition of this great law and is independent of the numbers participating in it. Satyagraha is a synthesis of the various elements which constitute human nature – the emotional, mystical, and rational. It is the soul set in motion. The non-violence it demands as a technique, is of a higher form.

In an introspective mood in 1938, he once wrote: Satyagraha as conceived by me is a science in the making. It may be what I claim to be a science may prove to be no science at all and may well prove to be the musings and doings of a fool, if not a madman.

### Role of a Satyagrahi

A Satyagrahi cannot help undertaking struggle. He faces the difficulties cheerfully. The more he suffers the more he is tested. A Satyagrahi is a sort of moral and spiritual hypnotist. Therefore, he requires rigorous training in moral and spiritual disciplines. Self-purification involves self-suffering. Real suffering bravely borne melts even a heart of stone. Such is the potency of suffering or tapas. And there lies the key to Satyagraha. This brings Satyagrahi closer to the adversary and enables him to understand his weakness and his point of view. The spiritual identity with the adversary is established. The purer the suffering, the greater the progress, and the Soul force develops fearlessness.

A Satyagrahi is not afraid of man, society, and government. According to Gita, fearlessness is essential for spiritual life. Without fearlessness, all other virtues are turned into dust. In contrast to this, Satyagrahi's aim is not to inflict defeat upon the enemy. He opposes a wrong by refusing to cooperate with it. For it was Gandhiji's firm

conviction that no wrong could ever endure unless the wrong door, as well as the wronged 'co-operated' with one another in its continuance one through the love of power and the other through the love of gain or fear.

### Approach to Fasting

Fasts should be preceded by due deliberation. Frequent resort to fasting reduces the value of the weapon. Fasting unto death is an integral part of Satyagraha doctrine, Fast is its reward, it is a duty. It serves a threefold purpose; it makes one calm and introspective, it is a process of self-purification and it softens the adversary. It is a matter between oneself and God.

The demand of fasting is firm resolve, single-mindedness, perfect calmness, patience, and absence of anger. Physical capacity is no qualification. One should have a living faith in God. Truth is the basis. Spiritual fasting is tapas. Mortification of flesh is essential for spiritual progress. The soul finds the means to merge in the

### Conclusion

Gandhi may be regarded as the first discoverer of the infinite potentialities of soul force in its application to individual and collective life, he strongly advocated that 'Soul-force is inherent in man it has only to be developed'.

Gandhi preached that "The highest place in India is assigned to the *brahmadhama*. which is soul force. Therefore, he recommended *tapascharya*, which according to him is the very essence of Satyagraha. The very concept of passive resistance, as a means and instrument for opposing and redressing a wrong or an evil, is thus entrenched in Indian tradition and philosophy.

The first President of independent India Dr. Rajendra Prasad once said that Gandhi's 'greatest contribution to Indian politics and perhaps to suffering humanity in the world at large lies in the unique method which he has prescribed and employed for fighting wrongs'.

In the present age, when the world is swept by large-scale organizations both in the industry as well as in politics, the individual seems to have lost nearly all his importance and worth. And if in such an age, Gandhiji stands forth as a symbol of what the individual can be, and even can do, naturally he has an appeal to those who seem to be overwhelmed by the technical and political

forces which engulf mankind from all sides. But as we see him in the historical context, we realize that he was not merely an educator, and one who refused to be beaten by the enormity of the social task which challenges us, but like a valiant knight he hurled himself against every wrong which confronted him, and also called to battle every one of his neighbours, however humble he might appear to others to be. Gokhale is reported to have said of him that he was capable of turning heroes out of clay. If that is true, it was indeed substantially true in many cases.

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