UNIT 9 FASTING

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9.1 INTRODUCTION

My religion teaches me that, wherever there is distress which one can not remove, one must fast and pray.

I believe that there is no prayer without fasting, and there is no real fast without prayer.

Mahatma Gandhi

'Gandhiji's own life was a unique record of research in the technique of fasting. When he found any sort of ill-will copping up in himself, a fast took the feeling away and transformed it into love. Gandhiji's fasts were meant for self-purification or arousing the consciousness of people for justice' (Kapoor and Gupta, p.98). Gandhi himself acknowledged many a time that his thoughts and methods have roots in traditional elements and religious sources. Fasting is one such method, which he evolved into a method of Satyagraha. It was a moral weapon which he considered as effective to counter violence and which can be used as a strategy to make the opponent begin the work on the resolution of a problem. It is a method of self-suffering and self-purification that has to be adopted to work effectively towards conflict resolution.

Aims and Objectives

After reading this Unit, you would be able to understand

- The meaning and importance of fasting
- Fasting as a method of conflict resolution
- Gandhi's insistence on fasting as a means of self-purification

9.2 FASTING: MEANING AND PURPOSE

Fasting has a great religious significance. Many religions prescribe fasting (though not mandatory) to attain control over one's senses and not to give in to materialistic

inducement. It also serves the purpose of spiritual progress. As has already been discussed in one of the earlier lessons, fasting is a method that can be employed both at the individual and group/ mass levels. At the individual level, fasting is meant to convey one's displeasure or disagreement; it is largely employed in families or small groups as a means of arousing the conscience of a loved one (Iyer, p.261). When employed by a group, it conveys a message to redress the wrong done by the offending party/parties. It conveys the urgency of the need to resolve the conflict and is usually employed as a last resort to make the opponent take note of such urgency. It is less coercive in nature. It is, in a way, a non-violent coercion. Unless it is done as 'fast unto death', fasting is taken as a moral awakening to do the right thing or follow a right path. It is also viewed as having an element of coercion. It is interesting to note here that John Bondurant suggests that Satyagraha, as a method, contains a positive element of coercion. Moral coercion has become a more acceptable form of conflict resolution for it rules out physical coercion and further, the use of force.

Fasting as a means of conflict resolution or as a part of Satyagraha had immense significance during the course of our freedom struggle. The learner is already familiarised with the concept of Satyagraha as a non-violent weapon and also the other modes of conflict resolution in the present and previous courses. Therefore, it would be imperative to discuss here about the method of fasting and the importance Gandhi attached to this method of mass awakening. According to him, it is a 'fiery weapon' and a device of the last resort.

Jacques Maritain, the Catholic Philosopher, calls Satyagraha as the means of spiritual warfare. It is a non-violent direct action and is meant for self-purification. Gandhi stressed that the result of such action should not only lead to self-purification but also the paralysis of the government that continues to suppress the poor and ignorant masses. Fasting and public prayers have been the two most universal self-purification phases of Satyagraha in India (J.N.Sharma, 2008, p.34). They can also act as great morale-builders. Further, fasting is a way of voluntary suffering (which a satyagrahi undertakes most willingly) and self-denial (a worthy principle which is unselfish in nature). These indicate that a satyagrahi is willing to suffer for a noble purpose and is also willing to fight till the end with his/ her moral weapon. These, in a way, convey the message to the opponent that they harbour no ill-will. 'The satyagrahis, by emphasizing the spirit of self-sacrifice and suffering, endeavour to raise the level of the issue. It ceases to be a matter of wrangling. The issue revolves around the bringing about of a just settlement of the dispute. Thus the level of fight is raised. The opponent is forced to operate at higher, less ruthless level' (Ibid, p.36). It is precisely with this motive that Gandhi undertook periodic fasts to make his opponents get down to working on the solution of the problem.

As Raghavan Iyer put it, 'Gandhi regarded fasting as a great institution in Hinduism, provided it is undertaken entirely voluntarily and also does not have a trace of coercion over others. Fasting unto death is, however, more a Gandhian than a traditional device. Gandhi's fasts were often dubbed as coercive in nature, considering the fact that the opponents are required to act in order to save a human life. His opponents largely perceived his fasts as a technique of 'blackmail'. Iyer rightly summarises what Gandhi said about fasting, that 'a particular device like fasting has its own well-defined limits. Fasts are coercive when they are intended to attain a selfish object. No doubt the dividing line between a selfish and an unselfish end is often very thin, but a person who regards the aim of another's fast to be selfish should resolutely refuse to yield to it' (*Harijan*, May,

1933). Fasting is a powerful means of purification, as Gandhi said, and occupies an important part in the life of human family (CWMG, vol.55, p.345).

9.3 GANDHI ON FASTING

Gandhi opined that 'a fast should be characterized by perfect truth and non-violence, and should be undertaken only upon the prompting of one's inner voice and not in blind imitation of somebody. One should never undertake a fast for selfish end; the aim behind a fast should always be common good. A fast should never be undertaken for any object which is inspired by ill will towards somebody' (CWMG, vol.51, p.316). Gandhi believed that fasting is one of the most important means to achieve control over senses. He says, 'if our senses cannot be controlled, we should undertake a fast. During a fast, impure desires will probably subside; but fasting alone does not yield the required result. Something more is needed. If we see God, our instinctive desire for objects of senses will also subside. After a person has seen god, it is all one to him whether he eats or does not eat' (CWMG, vol.32, pp.131-132).

Gandhi's experiments with fasting began with the purpose of self-restraint. It was purely for health reasons, as he acknowledges in his *Autobiography* (Autobiography, p.276). It is fascinating to note its beginnings in his words: 'Having been born in a Vaishnava family and of a mother who was given to keeping all sorts of hard vows, I had observed, while in India, the *Ekadashi* and other fasts, but in doing so I had merely copied my mother and sought to please my parents. At that time I did not understand, nor did I believe in, the efficacy of fasting….' (Ibid, p.276).

Gandhi, during his stay in South Africa, took up this practice for self-purification and encouraged others like the Hindus, Parsis and Christians, especially during the Ramzan days (Month of fasting by the Muslims). He said, 'I explained to them that it was always a good thing to join with others in any matter of self-denial'. Gandhi further states that it had a tremendous impact as 'all were convinced of the value of fasting' and a spirit of solidarity grew among them. Gandhi admits its positive impact on him, both physically and morally. He was certain that 'fasting can help to curb animal passions, 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. 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' (pp.277-278). Further he reiterated that 'fasting for the sake of personal gain is nothing short of intimidation' (Weber, p.58). Since fasting is a spiritual instrument or weapon, Gandhi cautioned, it should not be handled by unqualified persons.

Gandhi considers that 'fasting for the sake of loved ones is a forcible and unmistakable expression of love and therefore affects those for whose sake it is undertaken. Those whose love encircles the whole of life cannot but affect the whole creation by a supreme act of love' (CWMG, vol.55, p.345). Fasting has an ethical dimension, which Gandhi emphasised time and again. If the necessity of fasting is admitted, the argument that it is unnatural or an act of violence to one's own body falls to pieces. Just as a fast for regaining lost health is neither unnatural nor criminal self-torture, so is not a fast for purification of self or others (Ibid.,). To the critics/skeptics who questioned his frequent spells of fasting, Gandhi's reply was that they need not be convinced by past testimonies

or his arguments. 'Let them acquaint themselves with the rules and the science of fasting for purification and then test its efficacy themselves. That fasting does not appeal to people brought up in the midst of the dazzling materialism is an additional reason for people not to reject summarily one of the most potent methods of purification and penance' (Ibid, p.346).

9.4 FASTING FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Gandhi did not approve of fasting as a weapon of coercion, as coercion rarely leads to conversion. Gandhi himself had observed that things done under the pressure of a fast have been undone after the fast is over. If such a thing happens it would be a tragedy of the highest degree (cit in Weber, p.58). If a fast converts an opponent towards positive mindset, the fast cannot be termed as coercion as it enables one to gauge the logic of the problem and look for aspects of justice. It should not be taken up to extort rights but to work for a reform; moreover, most importantly, a fast cannot be used as means of conflict resolution if the opponent is a tyrant or not sympathetic. It can be used effectively only in cases where there is a possibility of change in the heart of a person. Gandhi was also against taking up fast randomly by anyone and reiterated that it should be undertaken only by those who are capable of doing it in the most non-violent manner and with steel resolve. During his fast in the Ahmedabad Textile Mills case, he dissuaded the labour from fasting along with him.

Bondurant points out the example of Rowlatt Satyagraha as the true Gandhian Satyagraha. "Preparation of satyagrahis was undertaken through self-purificatory fasting and instruction in non-violent action. However, in the light of the results, it may be said that this stage of preparation should have been extended, both in breadth and in intensity. Fasting, it should be noted, was used only for the purpose of self-discipline and later by Gandhi as a penance for the outbreak of violence; but fasting as coercion was no part of the campaign" (Joan Bondurant, p.85). Gandhi was against yielding to pressure in the context of fasting. Rather, he wanted a genuine change of heart or a positive conversion in an opponent. Gandhi was categorical about his fasts as a means of working out towards a solution. He felt that the non-violent aspect of Satyagraha determines 'the aim of converting rather than coercing the opponent. The conversion is not meant to take place purely by an appeal to reason but rather through *tapas* or self-suffering'. It is apt to cite from Iyer's work in this context. "When Gandhi was told that 'moral pressure' was involved in his Rajkot fast, he replied: If my fast …is to be interpreted as pressure, I can only say that such moral pressure should be welcomed by all concerned". He thought that moral pressure was justified insofar as it evoked a moral response, i.e., if the conversion was genuine (Iyer, p.333). Gandhi further justified his fasts on the following grounds (CWMG, vol.55, p.412):

'My definite opinion is that the general result of my numerous fasts was without doubt beneficial. They invariably quickened the conscience of the people interested in and sought to be influenced by fasts. I am not aware of any injustice having been perpetrated through those fasts. In no case was there any idea of exercising coercion on anyone. Indeed, I think that the word coercion is a misnomer for the influence that was exerted by the fasts under criticism. Coercion means some harmful force used *against* a person who is expected to do something desired by the user of force. In the fasts in question, the force used was against myself. Surely, force of self-suffering cannot be put in the same category as the force of suffering caused to the party sought to be influenced. If I fast in order

to awaken the conscience of an erring friend whose error is beyond question, I am not coercing him in the ordinary sense of the word'.

Gandhi laid down certain conditions for undertaking fasts. The conditions were meant to be adopted in the good spirit of self-purification and voluntary suffering rather than coerce the adversary into resolving conflicts. Fasts are part of the Satyagraha technique and are conducted in a specified manner. R.R.Diwakar has summarily described the terms and conditions of fasting in his work on 'Saga of Satyagraha' (pp.107-108).

- Fasts may be limited or unto death. Even when they are limited and are against the lapses of friends, wards, relatives, or colleagues they have to follow a certain method.
- Fast should not be undertaken in a huff or in anger.
- The motive must not be either punishment or publicity. Nor should the fast be unsystematic.
- The body should not be roughly handled during the fast. There should be no violence against it. It should be treated gently and with a view to cleanse it.
- The purpose of the fast should be made known to the person concerned. But even here a fast should be the last remedy.
- During the fast, most of the time should be devoted to prayer, introspection, meditation and the things that ennoble the mind.
- Since fasting is a fiery weapon and a great ordeal, one must sift one's motives very carefully before one undertakes it. There should not be even a trace of impurity.
- One who has not followed the path of ahimsa and studied how to fast should not rush into it. One must earn the right to fast.

A satyagrahi should strictly follow the conditions of fasting in order to achieve the desired results. Fast unto death constitutes the last step in the scheme of achieving the right ends. Fast unto death should be taken up only as a last resort, only when all other means of conflict resolution have failed, only when there is no hope of resolution and utter darkness and despair. The step should be taken believing that this last resort would vindicate the truth one is fighting for. It should neither be taken lightly nor resorted to without absolute necessity. At no stage should there be resort to violence, lest the purpose of the fast is lost. There is often a thin line between the effective use and abuse of the method of fasting; it is too thin to be noticeable. In this context, it is necessary to exercise an utmost caution.

As Gandhi often emphasised, one has to study deeply before contemplating to use the method of fasting as the means of conflict resolution. Fasting as a weapon can only be used against 'a friend, a follower or co-worker for they easily realise the mistake and correct themselves' (CWMG, vol.24, p.90). Further, fasting should not make the opponent yield because of the pressure or obligation of saving the affected party's life. There should be consideration for actual realisation. As Gandhi put it, 'this is the worst form of compulsion which militates against the fundamental principles of satyagraha' (Ibid, p.91). In case of mass fasting, it should open the eyes of the government towards the injustices wrought by them and work for conciliation. No help should be taken from outsiders as the opponents would believe in its inefficacy and this, in turn, affects the strength of one's

sacrifice. Gandhi remarked that, 'the volunteers (who are fasting) fed and financed with outside help, appear to the opponent more as mercenaries than like satyagrahis who are prepared to sacrifice their all for their principles. Such a fight is the trial of material and not spiritual strength. Non-violent assertion of your rights with outside help may be passive resistance but no satyagraha' (Ibid, p.92). The act of fasting should not be inclined to humiliate or subdue the opponents. This was rightly reflected in Gandhi's method of Satyagraha to which he adhered steadfastly. The methods employed in conflict resolution have to be non-violent at all costs and at all times. Gandhi's epic fasts stand testimony to this fact and have been successful to a large extent.

9.5 GANDHI'S EPIC FASTS

Fast against the Communal Award (1932)

In 1932, the British government announced the communal award, wherein the depressed classes were recognised as a minority community and were given separate electorate. Gandhi was against this separate representation of the deprived sections, for which he had been vociferously voicing his concerns. He was against their segregation from the mainstream and being dubbed as minorities. The British government refused to accept his stand and therefore, Gandhi announced his decision to fast unto death from September 20th, 1932. Prominent Congress leaders persuaded Dr.B.R.Ambedkar, who was one of the most significant champions speaking for the rights of the untouchables, to withdraw the demand for separate electorates. It was suggested that a scheme of primary and secondary election for a limited number of seats (while simultaneously addressing the issue of joint electorate) would be worked out to enable the depressed classes to choose their leaders. It was followed by the question of timeframe after which the system of primary and secondary elections would come to an end. No conciliation was achieved on this timeframe between Gandhi and Dr.Ambedkar. In the meantime, Gandhi's health was deteriorating gradually due to the fasting; after thorough discussions between the Congressmen and Ambedkar, it was decided that the issue of timeframe would be postponed until a future date and until it would be decided by a mutual agreement. The weapon of fast that was used by Gandhi aroused strong public opinion. Various public meetings held at different places endeavoured to bring together the caste Hindus and the Depressed Classes. Fervent appeals were made to the Depressed Classes not to pursue the demand for separate electorate. Following this, the Poona conference was conducted and the Poona Pact was signed. Consequently, the British too accepted this Pact in full and Gandhi finally broke his fast on September 26th. It is necessary to note that through his fast, Gandhi brought about an attitudinal change in Dr.Ambedkar apart from making the British accept the Poona Pact to show that the Indians are united. Ambedkar rejected Gandhi's stance on Communal Award from the beginning. This incident indicates that 'Ambedkar was most reluctant to change his position throughout the negotiations, that Gandhi very definitely placed before Ambedkar the clear alternatives of accepting his terms or the responsibility for his death and the former made each concession most reluctantly with the progressive deterioration of Gandhi's condition' (J.N.Sharma, p.95). Eventually, Dr.Ambedkar and Gandhi realised as to how close they are ideologically; nevertheless the Poona Pact was signed under moral compulsion, owing the fasting that Gandhi undertook. Nevertheless it prevented further segmentation of the Hindu community, a need of the hour.

Fasts for Hindu-Muslim Unity

Here we deal not with any specific case of Gandhi's fast for Hindu-Muslim unity but mention a few that he undertook at different stages of freedom struggle. While in South Africa, Gandhi could bring together all the Indians but on his return to India, the issue of Hindu-Muslim unity posed major challenge to him all through. In one instance in 1924, the Hindu-Muslim unity was severely disturbed in the neighbourhood at Delhi. Gandhi, throughout his life, immensely struggled to keep both the communities together and observe solidarity and goodwill with each other. The tension caused immense grief to Gandhi as one riot after another wrought havoc among the people. On 17th September, he decided to undertake a fast for twenty-one days as atonement. As he remarked, "my penance is the prayer of a bleeding heart for forgiveness of sins unwillingly committed". He further said that 'to revile one another's religion, to make reckless statements, to utter untruth, to break the heads of innocent men, to desecrate temples or mosques, is the denial of God'. Though there were efforts to dissuade him to refrain from fasting, Gandhi was unrelenting in his resolve and commenced his fast on 18th September. Consequently, the leaders belonging to both the communities addressed their respective communities and resolved to remove the cause of the fast and suffering the communities had imposed on Gandhi with their inadvertent acts. Gandhi appealed to people to forge the unity of hearts and not a mere display of affection for each other in order to appease him. As Gandhi's condition deteriorated, they expressed their genuine concern to end the untold suffering. The *Statesman* of Calcutta wrote, 'where political arguments, obvious and cogent, had utterly failed, the religious emotions generated by Mr.Gandhi's fast succeeded. There remains the yet harder task of inducing the millions to practise toleration' (8th October). Another instance may be cited regarding his travel to Noakhali during the independence time, wherein he chose to soothe the pain suffered by the riot-affected people in the said area. While eminent leaders were celebrating the independence, Gandhi decided to render his assistance to the aggrieved people. He even underwent fast in order to bring the people together and as a result, people responded by resolving not to target each other's community again. Gandhi's fast was most aptly summarised by Most Rev. Foss Westcott (Lord Bishop of Calcutta): "…Mr.Gandhi entered on his fast, to enthrone God in the hearts of all men, must be accomplished if peace is to reign, for only thus can the warring wills of men be brought under the supreme control of the one Will of God" (cit in S.Radhakrishnan, p.253).

Chronology of some of Gandhi's Fasts

- 1913, Phoenix: penitential fast for a week for moral lapse of two inmates at Settlement.
- 1918, Ahmedabad: during the mill workers' strike, settlement reached after three days fast.
- 1919, Sabarmati: fast against violence by people at Nadiad.
- 1921, Bombay: five days fast following rioting and bloodshed on occasion of Prince of Wales' visit.
- 1922, Bardoli: Fast against violence in Chauri Chaura incident.
- 1924, Delhi: 21 days fast against Hindu-Muslim riots in Kohat.

- 1932, Yervada prison: Fast against Communal award.
- 1933, Yervada Prison: self-purificatory fast for better treatment towards untouchables.
- 1939, Rajkot: against Rajkot ruler for breaking solemn pact with people.
- 1943, Aga Khan Palace: 3 weeks fast in detention as appeal from the Government of God for justice.
- 1948, Delhi: against communal riots following the partition of India. It was an indefinite fast to awaken all the communities to their sense of duty; broke the fast after a written assurance from all the communities involved that pledged not to aggravate tension again. This was the last fast of Gandhi that attracted worldwide attention and was accompanied by good wishes for the successful breaking of the fast.

9.6 SUMMARY

As discussed in the Unit, non-violent methods of conflict resolution do have great significance. Fasting is one of them provided it is taken up with good intention rather than with the aim of coercing the opponent. Gandhi mastered the task of undertaking fasts. His fasts, though were criticised for being coercive and compelling, had a telling effect on the psyche of the masses. He successfully and artistically mastered the art of fasting wherein it evoked mass responses with an immediate result. He undertook fasts for numerous causes- communal unity, against untouchability, against the repressive British policies, against the violation of ethical code of conduct by Ashrams' inmates, against violent outbreaks during freedom struggle and so on. Gandhi's method of fasting as a means of conflict resolution is unique. As Gilbert Murray said, 'In a world where the rulers of nations are relying more and more upon brute force and the nations trusting their lives and hopes to systems which represent the very denial of law and brotherhood, Mr.Gandhi stands out as an isolated and most impressive figure…A battle of unaided human soul against overwhelming material force; and it ends by the units of material force gradually deserting their own banners and coming round to the side of the soul' (cit in S.Radhakrishnan, pp.157-158). Such was the power of non-violent moral weapons of Gandhi that had higher spiritual and moral superiority!!

9.7 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. Analyse the meaning and purpose of fasting. What religious significance does it hold?
2. Examine Gandhi's views on Fasting and its relevance today.
3. Fasting is an effective means of conflict resolution. Do you agree with this? Justify.

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