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Create Sattva in ourselves¹

Remarks on Gandhi's interpretation of Gita

a) Introduction

In my contribution, I would like to analyse some of Gandhi's considerations on Gita². Throughout his meditation on Gita, Gandhi aims to show that the knowledge of the Revelation of Gita can give to the persons the correct moral education and the correct moral foundations. Exclusively the process of learning obtained through the meditation on the whole Gita can give us the knowledge of Truth, of God, of reality and of ourselves, and only through this process can we be able to organize and to modify our own mind towards goodness: learning proves to be, therefore, indispensable for realizing in ourselves our good component (sattva) and for diminishing in us the influences exercised by rajas and by tamas³. Correspondingly, without the process of learning and without the maturation produced in us by this process we will have no possibility to rise the composition of sattva in us and to fight against the presence of rajas and of tamas⁴. Hence, learning the Revelation of Gita is the right way for the individual to reach greater and greater degrees of correct ethical disposition. The improvement of the individuals has a consequence the improvement of the political and social order in which individuals live. Through and thanks to Gita education finds the due foundation⁵: this is the basis of a correct political and social order; it represents the indispensable foundation of the dialogue between individuals and of the pacific coexistence between individuals.

¹ The title of my contribution refers to the following statement of Gandhi: "If a person overcomes rajas and tamas, he can create sattva. (All the three exist in us. We should make a special effort to cultivate that which we want to strengthen.) (see "The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927", p. 316). Gandhi's intent and programme is already clear in this statement: constitutively, the three factors are in us; morally, we ought to decide which factor we want to strengthen. If we wish to strengthen sattva, we ought to follow the learning process which enables us to understand what we ought to know, what we ought to do and what we ought to avoid.

² For my analysis of Gandhi's interpretation of Gita, as regards Gandhi's works I resorted to and will refer within my contribution to Gandhi's "Discourses on the "Gita"", contained in "The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi", XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927), pp. 94-376. I also resorted to and within my contribution will also refer to the work of Mahadev Desai, "The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi". As regards commentaries and studies on Gita (besides the analysis contained in Desai's work), I consulted the following works: S.M. Srinivasa Chari, "The Philosophy of Bhagavadgītā"; "The Bhagavad Gita. With Text, Translation, and Commentary in the Words of Sri Aurobindo"; "The Bhagavad Gītā (Sanskrit Text, Transliteration, English Translation & Philological Notes). Introduction by W. Douglas P. Hill. Translated by John Davies", Ithamar Theodor, "Exploring the Bhagavad Gītā. Philosophy, Structure and Meaning". All the pieces of information regarding the bibliography used for this contribution can be found in the bibliography at the end of this analysis.

³ Sattva, Tamas and Rajas are defined, in the translation of Gita contained in Desai's work, in the following way: "Of these sattva, being stainless, is light-giving and healing; it binds with the bond of happiness and the bond of knowledge, O sinless one. Rajas, know thou, is of the nature of passion, the source of thirst and attachment; it keeps man bound with the bond of action. Tamas, know thou, born of ignorance, is mortal man's delusion; it keeps him bound with heedlessness, sloth and slumber, O Bharata. Sattva attaches man to happiness, rajas to action, and tamas, shrouding knowledge, attaches him to heedlessness." (see Desai, "The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi", p. 330). To be noticed, among other things, is the connection of sattva with knowledge.

⁴ The relations holding between the three forces is modified by the strengthening of one of them over the others: "Sattva prevails, O Bharata, having overcome rajas and tamas; rajas, when it has overpowered sattva and tamas; likewise tamas reigns when sattva and rajas are crushed." (see Desai, "The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi", p. 330).

⁵ If the person allows tamas to flourish, the effect will be ignorance: "The fruit of sattvika action is said to be stainless merit; that of rajas is pain and that of tamas ignorance." (see Desai, "The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi", p. 332). The only remedy against ignorance is the learning process to be found in Gita.

b) Summary of Gandhi's position

In the following summary, we can find the main ideas of Gandhi which I am going to develop in my contribution:

- i) To follow truth does not admit any exception, since God is truth. Gandhi firmly believes in the power of transformation exercised, on individuals, by the knowledge of truth. Knowledge of the Truth expressed in the Revelation of Gita successfully modifies men as regards their moral dimension⁶. The essential feature of this kind of knowledge consists, therefore, in being a transformative knowledge.
- ii) Knowledge of truth and the learning process needed in order to obtain this kind of knowledge is indispensable in order to reach the foundation both of an individual morally correct disposition and of a politically correct order.
- iii) Individuals are morally battle fields: they are mentally divided in good factors and in bad factors. The responsibility of every individual consists in strengthening the good factors.
- iv) Individuals are morally limited entities: they cannot completely eliminate bad factors within their own corporeal dimensions.
- v) Individuals ought to become aware of their own limits, ought not to despair, but to be confident in what they can actually do.

c) The human condition: Human beings are battle fields

As I have anticipated in the introduction, I think that one of the causes of the intent of Gandhi for Gita lies in Gandhi's searching contents for education, wherein education consists in establishing in individuals a correct disposition that will enable individuals to take the morally correct decisions and to have the morally correct dispositions. This is for Gandhi the more urgent, the more we reflect that the Revelation of Gita explains us, among other things, that our own condition corresponds to that of a battle field: the human condition is to be compared with a battle field in which reciprocally hostile moral potencies fight against each other. Our moral starting point is, all in all, not so positive and not so easy: The first step we ought to do in order to begin a process of moral self-improvement consists in our becoming aware of our certainly – at least at the beginning – not easy condition, of our essence, of our constitution: only through this awareness can we understand the necessity of finding a correct formation for our moral constitution.

As regards our moral condition, Gandhi expresses the following positions, founding his reflections on his general interpretation of Mahabharata:

⁶ The connection between knowledge and sattva can be found in the following statement of Gita: "When the light – knowledge shines forth from all the gates of this body, then it may be known that the sattva thrives." (see Desai, "The Gospel of selfless action or The Gita according to Gandhi", p. 331). The development of sattva clearly depends on the presence of knowledge.

“... the epic describes the battle ever raging between the countless Kauravas and Pandavas dwelling within us. It is a battle between the innumerable forces of good and evil which become personified in us as virtues and vices.”⁷

As we can see, Gandhi interprets the Mahabharata in a metaphorical way: the battle of Mahabharata is, actually, the battle between the good and evil present in ourselves; this means that we are composed out of forces of evil and of good. Our mental condition is not void: forces of evil and of good are present in us. Therefore, we cannot wait and see: we ought to take a decision on our moral constitution⁸. Gandhi adds on this subject:

“... here the physical battle is only an occasion for describing the battle-field of the human body. In this view the names mentioned are not of persons but of qualities which they represent. What is described is the conflict between opposing moral tendencies imagined as distinct figures. (...) It is the human body that is described as Kurukshetra, as *dharma-kshetra*.”⁹

As we can see, we are constitutively divided in different forces which are able to produce in us virtues or vices: such is our own constitution. There is a conflict in us: we have in ourselves mutually conflicting forces. Therefore, once again, we cannot wait and see. We ought to act. Our responsibility begins: Once we know that we are divided entities, our responsibility is to decide whether we want to let grow virtue or vice in ourselves.

d) Truth

I would now like to take into exam some of Gandhi's observations on truth and on the necessity of following truth. The learning process of truth and the assimilation to truth are the remedy, the antidote against the forces of evil present in us; truth gives us the contents, the foundations in order that we can successfully develop the forces of good which are present in us. Gandhi express the following general consideration on truth:

“... there can be no exception in the matter of following truth, for truth is God and, if exceptions were admitted in relation to it, God also would be sometimes truth and sometimes non-truth.”¹⁰

This statement lies at the basis of Gandhi's research: Truth ought to be followed. Truth is to be followed by everybody: there can be no exception to the rule. In order to follow truth, a learning process is indispensable. Learning and knowledge are indispensable aspects of the process of education of individuals. Gandhi clearly affirms that the obtaining of spiritual knowledge is open to everyone: nobody is excluded; to understand reality depends on knowledge, that is, knowledge is needed in order to reach the development of one's own nature.

⁷ See “The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927)”, p. 95.

⁸ Since we have to follow truth, as we will see in a further passage of Gandhi's meditation, we cannot allow ourselves to avoid any decision; we ought to follow truth, therefore our decision ought to be for the learning process which leads us to truth and, therefore, to the knowledge of reality (and, consequently, to our moral transformation). No decision is a decision to the advantage of the evil forces.

⁹ See “The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927)”, p. 96.

¹⁰ See “The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927)”, p. 106.

“It is stated in the Gita itself that everyone, whether a woman, a Vaisya or a Sudra, can acquire spiritual knowledge if they have devotion to God. All the same, learning should not be slighted. To understand any matter, one must have the knowledge which comes from learning.”¹¹

We can see the following contents in the following passage:

- Spiritual knowledge comes from the devotion to God.
- Learning is indispensable.
- The knowledge which derives from learning is at the basis of our understanding of everything.

Learning proves to be fundamental: the spiritual knowledge is the foundation for the understanding of everything. Gandhi's fundamental attitude towards Revelation, Truth and the individual ethical growth consists in the conviction that knowledge of Revelation modifies the mind of the individual: the meditation on and the absorption in the Revelation will modify the individual.

The Revelation gives us the knowledge, the knowledge modifies us. Knowledge is the basis of sattva: sattva is the compresence in us of our developing knowledge. The condition, the foundation for creating sattva in ourselves consist in developing knowledge. The way to knowledge is the way to sattva.

One of the duties we have during our corporeal life is the to let sattva grow and to let rajas and tamas diminish. The composition everyone of us finds between sattva, tamas and rajas in ourselves should be shifted through our own deeds to the advantage of sattva and to the disadvantage of rajas and tamas. The development of education lies at the basis of the moral improvement of the individuals and, consequently, at the basis of the moral improvement of the whole society.

e) Foundations

The knowledge is knowledge of the very principles of reality: Gandhi is searching for the foundations of the correct ethical behaviour and finds the answer to his own searching in Gita. We have here a questioning and investigating Gandhi: Gandhi is asking himself and other people where we can find solutions for the foundation of a correct ethical behaviour and how this foundation can be translated into the correct ethical behaviour.

In order to know how to behave, I need to know who and what I am. I have to know the composition of my own nature, the composition of my own self in order to see whether, how and in which measure I can influence and modify; for Gandhi, my own nature. This modification cannot have the needed elements if I do not meditate on the Revelation, if I do not lead my learning process following the contents of the Revelation.

Gandhi is seeking for a foundation in order to receive directions for the political action: from the individual condition up to the Revelation, and from the Revelation back to the particular circumstances of life together with the modification of the Revelation. The possibility of coexistence in a society finds its foundation in atman being the common essence for everybody:

“And so Krishna says:

¹¹ See “The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927)”, p. 95.

“Though I was never born in time, though I am the Lord of all creatures, I incarnate Myself and am born as a human being.”

This is the essential nature of the *atman*. If we realize this truth, we would always act in conformity with that nature; we then act, though born as human beings, as if we were never born. If the *atman* in each of us is identical with the *atman* in everyone else, one *atman* born in a body means all of them born, and all others born means that one born too. This is a difficult idea to grasp. “This is *maya*,” says Shri Krishna, “and through it I incarnate Myself in this world time and again.”

We can follow reason only up to a point. What, then, does avatar mean? It is not as if God comes down from above. It would be right to say, if we can say it without egotism, that each one of us is an avatar. The *atman* in every body is as potent as the *atman* in any other, though outwardly we see differences. In our awakened state all are one, though in our ignorant state we may seem separate existences. In real truth, there are not several, there is only one.

If we constantly reflect over this essence named the *atman*, we shall regard no one as an enemy to be killed and shall have nothing to get angry about. We shall then see that anyone who hits us hits himself too.”¹²

The common belonging to Atman is the foundation of the connection between the living beings: if we are mutually connected by our common belonging to Atman, if our authentic Self is Atman, to commit injustice against other persons means to do something bad to ourselves. Thus, the belonging to Atman represents the foundation of our solidarity with the other beings. The foundation of the good behaviour lies in the truth of reality, lies in the very structure of reality: it is the structure of reality which gives the foundation and the programme of our good behaviour. Even the principle of non-violence has its own foundation in the Revelation:

“One should see oneself in the whole world and the world in oneself, and act towards others accordingly. The ideal of non-violence also had its origin in this realization that, when human life as such is full of suffering, we should cause suffering to none”¹³.

f) Limits of individuals and responsibility of individuals

As anticipated, Gandhi insists on our limits. We are not perfect; we have constitutively defects that can only be limited, diminished, but that cannot be completely eliminated, since they belong to our very nature. Our being constituted by the senses, whose influence is one of the main hindrances for our elevating to the truth, can be limited, but cannot be eliminated:

“... the cravings of the senses die away only when we cease to exist in the body. This is a terrible statement to make, but the Gita does not shrink from stating terrible truths. Truth does not remain hidden because it is not stated. *Moksha* is the supreme end, and even yogis can experience it only in contemplation. We must, therefore, say that the Dweller in the body cannot be free while He dwells in it. The prisoner is in jail and the king promises him that he will be released; but till he is actually released he cannot be said to have come out of cage.

¹² See “The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927)”, p. 189.

¹³ See “The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927)”, p. 270.

He can only imagine his condition after release. In the same way, if there is anyone waiting to receive and greet the *atman* on its release, he cannot do that as long as it remains imprisoned in this cage of the body.

And this cannot but be so. How can it be otherwise that the state after release will be different from the state before it?

Truth is so profound and great a thing that, as we think more and more about it, we realize that to have a direct experience of it, we should completely shed our attachment to the body and year every moment for *moksha*. As we think of *moksha* in this light, its value in our eyes should daily increase. If it is the most important thing in life, it should be clear to us that it cannot be attained while we live in this body. Till the gate of the body prison has opened, the fragrance of *moksha* is beyond our experience. Whether terrible or not, this is the truth.”¹⁴

Truth is not to be reached until we are bound to the body. This is a precise limit we have; in the same way, the fact that we are in the corporeal dimension entails that we have some form of violence:

“The only way of rising to this state beyond the three *gunas* is to cultivate the *sattvik* quality, for in order to rise to that state one is required to cultivate the virtue of fearlessness, humility, sincerity, and so on. So long as we live in the body, there is some evil, some violence. The most, therefore, that we can do is to be *sattvik* in the highest degree possible.”¹⁵

We are condemned to have some form of violence in us because of our corporeal dimension as such. We constitutively cannot be free from any form of violence until we are in the corporeal dimension. We ought to cultivate the virtues connected to *sattva* in order that the balance existing in us between *sattva*, *tamas* and *rajas* could be shifted to the advantage of *sattva*; *sattva* will increase, whereas *tamas* and *rajas* will diminish. Notwithstanding, even in the best condition of development for *sattva*, *tamas* and *rajas* present in us will not completely disappear:

“... the reign of the three *gunas* prevails throughout the universe. A cooking or other utensil is pervaded by the spirit. Existing apart from the three *gunas* is God. We have to merge in Him. Even if we cultivate the *sattvik* qualities to their highest perfection in us, something of *rajasik* and *tamasik* will remain. But, without worrying ourselves about this, we should continue to strive and continue fined and finer *sattvik* qualities in us, for the impulses which agitate us the least and consume the least amount of our energy are *sattvik* impulses.”¹⁶

In spite of the fact that negative components will always be present in us, we ought to continue our work of self-improvement. The fact that we are constitutively imperfect beings entails that we have to educate ourselves continuously: nothing is given; we must reach ethical foundation, and nothing is unfortunately reached once and for all. We must steadily pay attention to the stability and endurance of our ethical character, and we must try to reach, maintain and strengthen it. Gandhi clearly expresses that we cannot manage, in the corporeal dimension, to fully follow *ahimsa*:

¹⁴ See “The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927)”, p. 137.

¹⁵ See “The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927)”, p. 320.

¹⁶ See “The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927)”, p. 336.

“It is impossible in this body to follow ahimsa fully. That is why *moksha* is laid down as the supreme end of life. Violence is inescapable. (...) Evil is inherent in action, the *Gita* says further on.”¹⁷

There are clear limits put to the human capabilities. In spite of all efforts, elements of violence and of evil will remain. Gandhi clearly states, as regards the possibility to follow and to realize ahimsa in a complete, in a perfect way, that this realization is not possible for human beings. Everyone has to be aware of one's own limitations: in the corporeal dimension, it is not possible to concretize in ourselves a perfect doctrine of ahimsa. This point, of course, may not lead to the renounce at trying to realize ahimsa as best as possible: on the contrary, the awareness of one's own defect ought to lead everyone to multiply the efforts towards the realization of ahimsa.

g) The dangers represented by the ego and by the senses

One of the remedies against the presence of evil forces in us is represented by our detachment from our ego. The attachment to the ego can only bring to false dimension, since the ego imprisons us in a limited dimension. The root of the possibility of a correct moral behaviour lies in our abandonment of the ego: the morally correct decision can be taken only after our detachment from the ego. Gandhi is clear about the necessity of abandoning the ego:

“The Gita does not decide for us. But if, whenever faced with a moral problem, you give up attachment to the ego and then decide what you should do, you will come to no harm. This is the substance of the argument which Shri Krishna has expanded into 18 chapters.”¹⁸

To renounce of the attachment of the ego implies to be able to adopt a universal point of view, no longer restricted in the limitation of the individuality. Until we remain enchained in our self, we will not be able to reach a point of view which is compatible with the other ones. Abandonment of our own self is liberation towards universality:

“We can follow truth only in the measure that we shed our attachment to the ego.”¹⁹

The attachment to the senses too is a danger for the person:

“... the man whose senses are completely out of his control and whose mind is totally enslaved by one of them will be ruined through gradual stages explained earlier as the consequences of attachment. If the mind is enslaved by even a single sense, one is lost.”²⁰

Gandhi clearly states that senses are a danger:

“He who lives his senses no longer subject to attachments and aversions and perfectly under his control becomes fit for God's grace. (...) What is the natural work of the ear? We describe a man as established in *samadhi* when

¹⁷ See “The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927)”, p. 106.

¹⁸ See “The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927)”, p. 109.

¹⁹ See “The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927)”, p. 107.

²⁰ See “The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927)”, p. 142.

his *atman* abides in serene content in itself. His senses must be under his perfect control. The ears of a man whose mind has become one-pointed must have become the servants of his *atman*. Actually, however, we are the slaves of our senses. From this slavery we must win swaraj for the *atman*. The ears should in fact listen only to the divine music of the *atman*.”²¹

The senses and the corporeal dimension represent a hindrance for us: they enslave and enclose us into limited, particular dimension. To have control of the sense-dimension is the first, indispensable step in order to reach Atman.

h) Conclusion

I will now conclude my remarks with a quotation of Gandhi which connects firmness of mind and satyagraha:

“Let us, therefore, cultivate firmness of mind; if we do not let the senses distract the mind, we can become fit for satyagraha.”²²

The condition for reaching satyagraha lies in the education of the mind: in order to be able to be fit for satyagraha we ought to reach the condition of firmness of mind; this condition can be reached, though, only through the assimilation to Truth and to the meditation on Revelation. The very foundation of our whole behaviour and, in particular, of our morally correct behaviour depends on the meditation on Revelation and on the change in ourselves produced by the knowledge of Revelation.

²¹ See “The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927)”, p. 139.

²² See “The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. XXXII (November 1926 – January 1927)”, p. 141.