



Vol. 03, No. 01; Jan – Mar' (2024)

Quing: International Journal of Multidisciplinary
Scientific Research and Development

Available at <https://qingpublications.com/journals/ijmsrd/>



Gandhian Experiments in Community Living with Special Reference to Gandhiji's Ashram

Dr. R. Mani*

Professor and Head i/c, Department of Gandhian Thought and Peace Science, GRI (DBTU) Gandhigram, TN, IND.

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Received: 27-12-2023 Received in revised form: 12-02-2024 Accepted: 16-02-2024 Available online: 30-03-2024</p> <hr/> <p>Keywords: Community Living; Gandhian Experiments; Gandhiji's Ashram; Indian Families.</p>	<p>This article highlights the Gandhian Experiments in Community Living with special reference to Gandhiji's Ashrams. Indian families have a long history of living together in a family system that has been strong, stable, flexible, and enduring for centuries. At present, this family system is slowly disappearing for various reasons. As a result, quarrels, intolerance, inequality inaction, lack of parental attention, disintegration in the family, and many other problems arise. To bring the community living with special reference to Gandhi's experiments. a Universal model was established by Mahatma Gandhi, The father of our Nation, through his ashrams both in South Africa and in India, such as Phoenix Settlement (1904), Tolstoy Farm (1910), Kochrab Ashram (1915), Sabarmati Ashsram and Sevagram Ashram (1936). Ashram inmates were following Eleven Vows, and the essential features in the Indian context are unity in diversity, cordial relationships, a democratic way of decision-making, simple living and high thinking, etc., which can bring peace and harmony.</p>
<p>© 2024, The Author(s), Published by Quing Publications. This is an open-access article under the CC-BY 4.0 license, which allows use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.</p>	
<p>DOI: https://doi.org/10.54368/qijmsrd.3.1.0006</p>	

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Indian families have a long history of living together in one family system for centuries, which is strong, stable, flexible and enduring. These families functioned as a system involving a lot of tolerance, respecting others, and leading happy and working-together lives. Likewise, Mahatma Gandhi and his inmates lived in a community observing Truth and Ahimsa, tolerance and cooperation. They were also given training in practising inter-faith prayer and practised Eleven Vows in the Ashrams established by Gandhiji in South Africa and India.

Mahatma Gandhi was invited to South Africa by Dada Abdullah Seth, a wealthy businessman of Indian origin, to plead his case legally, which he eventually settled through arbitration. Gandhiji took up the case of Indians who suffered racial discrimination and became a Satyagrahi. Arriving in South Africa in 1893 as a young barrister, Mahatma Gandhi established Phoenix Settlement and Tolstoy Farm Ashrams in South Africa. Gandhiji also created three Ashrams in India in which he

* Corresponding author's e-mail: grirmani@gmail.com (Dr. R. Mani)

started a school for children in the settlement and for Indian children from outside; conducted daily community prayer; introduced craft-oriented training for the betterment of the inmate students, eight hours training in physical labour for youth and two hours of book learning. The Ashramites adopted Sathya and Ahimsa, who worked and lived together and prepared for the nonviolent struggle to uphold freedom and justice. All were treated equally, and every Ashramite respected and tolerated other religions and caste groups and observed inter-religious prayers inside the Ashram campus. Gandhiji introduced eleven vows to the Ashram inmates to practice for their spiritual advancement.

Phoenix Settlement is considered the most important centre of Satyagraha. It is located fourteen miles away from Durban. From 1904 to 1908, Gandhiji evolved and gave concrete shape to his doctrine of Satyagraha. Gandhiji experimented with several intermittent civil resistance movements in South Africa.

The following Gandhian experiments in community living, which Mahatma Gandhi conducted for holistic development and spiritual advancement, are given below as models for the 21st-century fragmented society.

2.0 SALIENT FEATURES OF GANDHIAN ASHRAMS IN COMMUNITY LIVING

The following are some of the Salient features of Gandhian Ashram in Community Living.

- a) **Living Together:** The inmates of the Ashram lived like a family. There was only one kitchen, and the inmates had to dine from the kitchen. The elderly and children had to live together, which helped them learn and share their experiences/lessons. It is a way of learning by living together that helps for transformation and holistic development.
- b) **Working Together:** Community living paved the way for working together, wherein the inmates shared the ashram activities. The activities of the ashram are general labouring, cooking, scavenging, simple carpentry, teaching and messenger work being carried out by the inmates on rotation
- c) **Equality:** Though the ashram inmates belonged to different religions and castes, they were treated as the same. Cutting across religious, caste, cultural, and ethnic barriers, all were treated equally, and every Ashramite respected and tolerated the other religions and observed inter-religious prayer inside the ashram community.
- d) **Training & Skill Development:** Training young men, women, and children for skill development, particularly in serving Mother India, was considered essential. Every Ashramite was taught agriculture, Hand weaving, carpentry, metal craft, etc. The basic feature of learning skills is to become skilled, and no one denies learning skills. He tried to learn skills associated with activities prohibited by his caste.
- e) **Self-Reliance:** Gandhi experimented with self-reliance in his Ashrams. Vegetables and fruits were also grown to make the Ashram self-reliant, along with khadi work and growing fodder crops for cattle. The young inmates were trained in manual labour, kitchen work, scavenging, chappal making, carpentry, and message-sending. There were no servants; everyone had to clean their dishes. Every Ashramites cleaned the common pots in turn.
- f) **Egalitarian Social Order:** The ultimate objective of community Ashram living is creating an Egalitarian Social Order where everyone must lead a contented life. Sharing Ashram's work, equality in action, respecting others, and developing a sense of forgiveness and fraternity lead to an egalitarian social order that will replace the existing rugged material-centric world.

3.0 DAILY ROUTINE

3.1 Ashram Activities

Time Schedule	Activities
Forenoon	
4:00	Wake Up from bed
4:15 to 4.45	Inter-religious Prayer
5:00 to 6:10	Bath, Manual Work, Reading
6:10 to 6:30	Breakfast
6.30 to 7:00	Prayer for Women
7:00 to 10:30	Physical labour, Education and Cleaning Work
10:45 to 11:15	Lunch
11:15 to 12:00	Rest
Afternoon	
12:00 to 4:30	Shramdan
4.30 to 5:30	Brain Storming Games
5:30 to 6:00	Supper
6:00 to 7:00	Recreation
7:00 to 7:30	Closing prayer
7.30 to 9:00	Recreation
9:00	Lights Off - Bed

Note: These hours are subject to change whenever necessary.

Source: M. K. Gandhi, *Ashram Observances in Action*, p.70.

The following ashram community living experiments of Mahatma Gandhi for holistic and spiritual development are given below as models for the 21st-century fragmented society.

3.2 Phoenix Settlement (1904)

The racial discrimination against Gandhiji brought about a deep spiritual awakening in him. Gandhiji began looking at British colonialism with new eyes. The newspaper he founded in 1903, **Indian Opinion**, was a weekly journal published in four languages. **Phoenix Settlement** was intended to put into practice the values he stood by during his lifetime: self-help, dignity of labour and simplicity. Gandhiji purchased one hundred acres of land for £1000, containing a beautiful spring, mango, orange orchard, and cottage. This was situated four kilometres from the Phoenix stations. Phoenix was started in the year 1904. Indian carpenter, mason and colleagues of the Boer war helped him erect the shed for the press. Within a month, a structure of 75 feet long and 50 feet wide was ready, supervised by Mr West and others significant personal risk. The place was overgrown with grass, uninhabited, and infested with snakes. It was dangerous and life-threatening to live in that Ashram. At first, Gandhiji and the Ashramites lived under canvas. Finally, they shifted everything within a week. **Indian Opinion** Press was transferred from Durban to Phoenix. The settlers were divided into two clauses: the schemers and the paid workers. The schemers had to make a living by manual labour. They were given 3 acres of land around the press. Gandhiji started a Basic Education school for the Ashram children and the Indian children of South Africa. Bodily labour and teaching were combined and taught on an everyday basis. Every Sunday, all the residents met in his room for

a community prayer. This is the maiden experiment of Mahatma Gandhi's Community Living in an Ashram Community.

3.3 The Tolstoy Farm (1910)

At the **Tolstoy Farm** in Johannesburg, Gandhiji introduced vocational training for the all-round development of the students between the ages of 6 and 16. They underwent an average of eight hours of physical work training daily and 2 hours of classroom teaching/learning. The Ashram encouraged the male and female students to do everything jointly. The young pupils were taught cooking, labouring, scavenging, chapel making, simple carpentry and messenger work. Mahatma Gandhi aimed to train them at a young age in all the activities. Forty young men, three older men, 5 women and 30 children were the inmates, and they adopted the principles of satya and ahimsa, living and working together and ready to sacrifice in the Satyagraha struggle. Gandhiji decided to have only one kitchen and one dining hall at the Tolstoy farm, and all had to dine in the same dining hall. There were no servants, and everyone had to clean their dishes. The vessels were to be cleaned by all the Ashramites in rotation, and everybody respected and tolerated other religious traditions.

3.4 Kochrab Ashram (1915)

This ashram is in Ahmedabad. Gandhi invited a **Harijan** family to his **Kochrab Ashram** to start what today is known as the movement to eradicate untouchability. Gandhi asked the Harijan teacher, Dudabhai and his family to come to stay in the ashram. Some of the inmates did not like it. But Gandhi was very firm. Besides, there was also trouble from outside. Monetary help to the ashram was stopped. Gandhi wanted to close the ashram and go to the Harijan quarters to live due to the financial crisis and other reasons. Very shortly, a wealthy man drove to the ashram and donated a handsome amount even without giving his name. The ashram was saved.

3.5 Sabarmati Ashram (1917)

The Sabarmati Ashram aimed to impart training to all the inmates to respect and be involved in the service of India. Every pupil was trained in agriculture, weaving, carpentry, metal craft, and manual labour. They also indulged in cooking, gardening, housekeeping, scavenging, hair cutting, and shaving. Mahatma Gandhi also learned new skills which were prohibited by his caste. Gandhiji, in turn, taught the skills he learned to his children, wife and colleagues. In Gandhiji's prayer meetings, Idol worship was avoided, and songs from all religious traditions were combined with scriptural readings.

3.6 Sevagram Ashram (1936)

Gandhiji decided not to come back to Sabarmati until Indian Independence and decided to establish another Ashram in the central part of India to continue his activities. On invitation by Shri Jamnalal Bajaj, Gandhiji visited **Wardha** in 1934 and stayed as his guest. Later, Gandhiji had set up the ashram on the outskirts of Wardha. It was known as Sevagram Ashram and became his abode from 1936 until his demise in 1948. **Sevagram** is located about 8 km from Wardha town in Maharashtra, which means **Village of Service**. The ashram functioned mainly as a laboratory for the further development of the village industry, to which Gandhi attached great importance. Gandhiji introduced the Eleven Ashram Vows to the Ashram inmates so that they could practise for their spiritual growth. They are given, in detail, in the following lines. Gandhiji was concerned that the

locally available raw materials, talent and tools were fully utilised. According to him, a rural economy cannot be developed without the foundation of essential village industries.

4.0 THE ELEVEN ASHRAM VOWS

According to Gandhiji, all the Ashram members should qualify themselves physically and spiritually for the independence and development of India. Gandhiji prescribed the following eleven Ashrams Vows to fulfil this:

- 1) **Truth:** According to Gandhiji, Truth is the prime and foremost thing. Everything is based on Truth. Gandhiji wanted to see Truth face to face. According to him, Truth and Nonviolence are like two sides of the same coin. In 1921, Gandhiji said I made a paradigm shift from "God is Truth" to "Truth is God". He even named his autobiography "The Story of My Experiments with Truth".
- 2) **Non-violence or Love:** *As far as Gandhiji is concerned, Truth is the 'God' or 'End', and Nonviolence is the 'means'.* He wanted to achieve everything through the practice of Ahimsa. Nonviolence, as practised by Gandhiji, has different dimensions. Nonviolence involves Non-killing, Non-injuring, not hurting and humiliating others, etc.; according to Gandhiji, "Nonviolence is as old as hills", and he successfully implemented at the mass level in the name of 'Satyagraha' during the Indian independent struggle and earlier in the South African soil. Gandhiji said, "Nonviolence is the weapon of the strongest, and the weak cannot practice it".
- 3) **Brahmacharya:** According to Gandhiji, Brahmacharya means more than controlling the seminal fluid. It is a broader concept known as absolute control over the five senses. Both men and women can practice Brahmacharya. Gandhiji recommended it for those dedicated to working to uplift the weaker sections of society and national independence.
- 4) **Palatal Control:** Gandhiji gave a new interpretation of palatal control, which means to have absolute control over one's tongue through moderate eating and speaking soft and gentle words. He suggested that everybody not eat Rajasic and Tamasic food and always avoid harsh and violent words.
- 5) **Non-stealing:** Gandhiji said it is a sin to amass another's wealth without permission. One becomes guilty of theft even by using anything that one has received in trust for use in a particular way differently and by using a thing longer than the period for which it has been borrowed. It is also theft if one receives anything he does not need. The fine truth at the bottom of this principle is that Nature provides just enough, and no more, for our daily needs.
- 6) **Non-possession:** According to Mahatma Gandhi, if one amasses more wealth than one needs, it equals theft. If there is more wealth concentrated on one side, there will naturally be the emergence of poverty on the other side. So, one must not possess anything that one does not need. Possessing unnecessary foodstuffs, clothing, or furniture would breach this principle. For instance, one must not keep a chair if one can do without it. Observing this principle leads to a progressive simplification of one's own life.
- 7) **Bread Labour:** Bread labour is an important component of the Ashram Vows. Man can be saved from injuring society and himself only if he sustains his physical existence by physical labour. Non-disabled adults must do all their work themselves and not be

served by others except for proper reasons. But they must also remember that service of children, as well as of the disabled, the old and the sick, is a duty incumbent on everyone with the required strength.

- 8) **Swadeshi:** Neighbourliness is Swadeshi. Gandhiji instructed everyone to use locally available materials and resources. Swadeshi is a multi-dimensional concept. Socially, it is better to be with the neighbours and help the neighbours whenever necessary. Economically, we should buy the products of our neighbours instead of buying foreign goods. If we buy foreign goods, our economy will go outside the country, and our people will become poor. Though it is not fashionable, it is better to buy our local products so that our local weavers, carpenters, peddlers and others will be much benefitted. During the Indian freedom struggle, Gandhiji used Swadeshi as a weapon to attack the greedy British economy and made the Indian economy flourish by boycotting foreign clothes and materials.
- 9) **Fearlessness:** Fearlessness is the most important component of the Eleven Ashram Vows. According to Gandhiji, Fearlessness is like a Rail engine that pulls all the train coaches. Without an engine, the train will not move. In the same way, even though one practices all the Ashram vows, it is useless if one doesn't practice fearlessness. So, among all the Eleven Ashram vows, Fearlessness plays a very important role.
- 10) **Removal of Untouchability:** According to Gandhiji, Untouchability is a Sin against humanity. In God's creation, everyone is equal, and so how can we be segregated based on caste? Gandhiji was aware that this was a deep-rooted practice in Indian social stratification, and he made stern efforts to eradicate it. That is why Gandhiji call the oppressed class brothers and sisters as "Harijan" (children of God) instead of "Durjan". Gandhiji established 'Harijan Sevak Sangh' for the upliftment of the Hartijans, and he even named his journal "Harijan".
- 11) **Equal Respect for All Religions:** This is a very important Ashram Vow in a country where all religions exist. According to Gandhiji, everyone must respect other religions and tolerate them. During the time of Gandhiji, Hindus and Muslims were fighting with one another. India and Pakistan were also bifurcated into two nations. Knowing this fully well in advance, right from their South African days, Gandhiji made every Ashramite and friend practice "Inter-religious Prayer", where people from different faiths used to gather under one banner. This practice has been happening in various parts of the globe. Gandhigram Rural Institute has been conducting interfaith prayer daily in the morning and weekly on all Fridays.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Gandhiji's principles and practices are more relevant today than ever to the entire world as it has become more materialistic and self-centric. All his efforts are vital for making the Indian soil more fertile for a peaceful and happy life, as India stands for a pluralistic society. The essential features in the Indian context are unity in diversity, cordial relationships, a democratic way of decision-making, simple living and high thinking, etc., which can bring peace and harmony. No doubt, the Ashrams established by Gandhiji in South Africa and India very well state that they played a leading role in different aspects of community living, grass-roots development for sustainability and Global Peace. The Gandhian Principles practised by the Ashram inmates in South Africa and India are more relevant even today as models for the 21st-century fragmented society.

REFERENCES

- Gandhi, M. K. (1927). *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Ahmedabad, Navajeevan Publishing House.
- Gandhi, M. K. (1928). *Satyagraha in South Africa*. Ahmedabad, Navajeevan Publishing House.
- Mark Thomson (1993). *Gandhi and his Ashrams*. Mumbai, Popular Prakashan Private Limited.
- Gandhi, M. K. (1932). *From Yervada Mandir*. Ahmedabad. Ahmedabad, Navajeevan Publishing House.
- Gandhi, M. K. (1948). *Ashrams Observances in Action*. Ahmedabad, Navajeevan Publishing House.