

Gandhiji's concept of Non-Violence: It's relevance in Present society

Dr. Swarupa Pal,
Assistant Professor,
Kanchrapara College

1. Abstract

Non-violence or Ahimsa is one of the cardinal virtue. It is the harmless to self and others under every condition. Truth and non-violence are the cornerstone of Gandhian Philosophy. Non-violence is specially the principal of searching for the truth. Man as animal is violent, but as spirit he is non-violent, the moment he awakes to the spirit within, he cannot remain violent. Non-violence has 'active' and activists elements, in that believers accept the need for non-violence as a means to achieve political and social change. For example, Mahatma Gandhi leading a successful decades long non-violent struggle against British rule in India. Martin Luther king's and James Bevel's adoption of Gandhiji's non-violent methods in their campaigns to win civil rights for African Americans and Cesar Charaz's campaigns of non-violence in the 1960s to protest the treatment of farm workers in California. The 1989 "Velvet Revolution" in Czechoslovakia that saw the overthrow of the communist government is considered one of the most important of the largely non-violent Revolution 1989. Truly speaking today we see violence everywhere, in the family, in the community, in the state and also in international sphere. In this scenario does non-violence carry any sense? Yes it is possible. Violence never solves any problems; rather it creates new problems and sows the seeds of future violence. But by practicing non-violence we can save our world. In this paper I want to explain the concept of non-violence and the relevance of Gandhi in present society.

Keywords: Non-violence, Truth, Conflict, Destruction, Inconsistent.

The term 'Ahimsa or non-violence is an important tenet of Jainism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. 'Ahimsa' means 'not to injure' and compassion and refer to a key virtue in Indian religion. The word is derived from the sanskrit root hims – to strike, himsa is injury or harm, a himsa is the opposite of this, i.e., cause no injury, do no harm. Non-violence refers specially to the absense of violence and is always the choice to do no harm or the least harm and passively is the choice to do nothing. Non-violence signifies a typical religious and ethical world view and philosophy of life and culture. The norms of non-violence began to emerge in the later stage of the Vedic traditions (1500-900 BC) as a reaction against the practice of ritual sacrifices sanctioned in the early Vedic text. The rudiments of the ethics of non-violence began to take shape by the time of the Upanishads. With the growth of Buddhism and Jainism in India, the ethics on non-violence passed from a purely personal, idealistic and moral plane of acceptance to the collective way of life of people. It is true that non-violence is not a new concept which Gandhiji invented as he said, "I have nothing new to teach the world. Truth and non-violence are as old as hill." According to Gandhiji ahimsa in theory no one

knows. It is as indefinable as God. But in its working we get glimpse of the Almighty in his working amongst us and through us.¹ His non-violence is a principle: "I believe, he says, 'in the principle of non-violence.'" ² Truth and non-violence are the main pillars on which rested the entire framework of the magnificent edifice of Gandhiji's glorious life and work. Non-violence is the means and truth is the end. We have no means of realising truth in human relationships except through practice of non-violence.³

Non-violence and truth he wrote "are so closely entwined that it is practically impossible to untangle them and separate them from each other." They are like the two faces of a single medal, or rather of a smooth and unmarked metal disc: who can say which the front is and which is the back?⁴

In his concept of ahimsa or non-violence, Gandhiji was greatly influenced by Tolstoy, according to whom; non-violence involved not only the negative attitude of freedom from anger or hate but also the positive attitude of love for all men. According to Gandhiji, 'Ahimsa in its negative aspect involves doing no injury to any being either physically or mentally. I also mean I must do no

injury in any form to any sub human species. ⁵ Ahimsa in its positive aspect means love. Ahimsa is regarded as the law of the human species does not mean it is very easy to practise it. The practice of non-violence required a great deal of discipline and courage. It is an activity of the brave and strong but not of the cowardly, for cowardice and ahimsa do not go together any more than fire and water. Gandhiji believed in the inherent goodness of human beings. He held that all human beings had the capacity to develop their full potential of non-violence. He believed that all human beings belonged to God. Since, God and human beings were interdependent and interrelated; non-violence was the inseparable quality of the later. According to Gandhiji the universal human value of non-violence ought to be cultivated not only at the individual level, but also at village, national and global levels. This was the effective approach to bring sustainable peace in the world. Non-violence in thought, word and deed was the only way to human progress both individual and society. He makes no distinction between the self or Atman and truth or God. Therefore according to him, self realisation is truth realisation or the realisation of God. If the self of an individual is at one with truth or God then to inflict violence on another is to injure God or undermine truth.

The relevance of a man and his message can be said to have different aspects. The relevance can be immediate or remote, it can be local, regional or general and it can be relevant to some or universally for all. In case of Mahatma Gandhi we can study all these different aspects of relevance. Dr. Martin Luther King, the Nobel Prize winner of USA came to India in 1959. On the eve of his departure from the land of Gandhi, he was asked a cynical avertion at a press conference in Delhi, where is Gandhi today? We see him now where. Dr. King replied, Gandhiji is inevitable. If humanity is to progress, Gandhiji is inescapable, we may ignore him only at our own risk. In words of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the light is gone and yet it will shine for a hundred years.

In spite of all the impressive advance of modern science and technology, religion still excercises a powerful influence on the minds of millions of human beings. It will be unwise for anyone to ignore religious values and their influence in finding solutions to national and world problems.

Selfishness, hatred and the greed for wealth, power and prestige are at the root of almost all conflicts and violence. There is the illusion among the minds of some people that conflict and violence alone can solve our problem. We are deeply concerned with the violent conflicts in today's world and the constant threat of their extension.

The contribution of Mahatma Gandhi to the tradition of non-violence has no parallel in history in so far as he converted the religious-ethical value of non-violence into the practical-ethics of a nation. His doctrine of non-violence had a great impact on the contemporary social and cultural life of humanity. Probably, each one of us had to confess that there is a big gap between the ideal of non-violence and the actual behaviour of a large majority of people. Gandhiji demonstrated in his life and work that it is possible for human beings to close the gap between the ideal and the practical. He insisted that religion must be lived and just preached. He discovered the potency of collective non-violent action as a moral weapon for the physically weak to fight against the strong and powerful. Actually violence degrades and corrupts us, to meet force with force and hatred with hatred, only leads to our moral deterioration. But, on the contrary, non-violence heals and restores noble elements of our human nature. It is a mean to restore social order, freedom, justice and peace. Non-violence is not a garment to be put on and put off at will. Its seat is in the heart and it must be an inseparable part of our very being. It is possible to achieve social harmony, economic prosperity, peace and tranquillity among different groups within a nation, and peace and cooperation among the nations of the world, provided we all follow the case values of non-violence as professed by the philosophers. We cannot hope to change human life and society without a change of human nature.

The persons who believe that there is hardly any relevance of teaching of non-violence, they try to understand the non-violence only in its literal sense. Implicit meaning of the concept of non-violence should be understood by heart. The virtue of mercy, non-violence, love and truth in any man can only be truly tested only when they are pulled against ruthlessness, violence, hate and untruth.....It is another matter that our non-violence has not reach such heights. Without true understanding of the

ideal, we can never hope to reach it. Therefore, it is necessary for us, to apply our reason to understand the power of non-violence. ⁶ Dag Hammarskjold once said, "Never, measure the height of a mountain until you have reached the top. Then you will see how low it was."

A question may arise particularly in modern times is that "is it necessary sometimes to inflict violence and is not killing the only course open to a man in certain circumstances?" Gandhiji himself gives some answers to such problems which may be applied successfully in the present society also. According to Gandhiji, if non-violence implies non-killing or non-injury, perfect non-violence is impossible, so long as we exist physically? It is impossible to sustain one's body without the destruction of other bodies to some extent. We destroy plant and animal life for food and we destroy pests for the sake of health and as Gandhiji admits, we do not regard this as irreligious in any way. So there is no question of being absolutely non-violent, which is according to Gandhi, a theory like Euclid's point or straight line. Again, there may be instances in social life that seem to require some form of himsa or violence. Gandhiji has cited the example of a man who in a fit of madness goes about with a sword in his hand killing indiscriminately. To destroy such a man may be necessary and unavoidable in order to protect other members of society. "If a man fights with his sword single handed against a horde of dacoits armed to the teeth, I should say that he is fighting almost non-violently. Have I not said to our women that if in defence of their honour they used their nails and teeth and even a dagger, I should regard their conduct non-violent? Killing in such circumstances might be regarded as a moral duty. There may arise situation or moral dilemma which may necessitate the use of violence in certain circumstances. For example, again, Gandhiji against all norms of accepted orthodox Ahimsa did not hesitate to ask the attending doctor to end the life of the sick calf who had been groaning under unbearable pain and whose disease was declared as incurable. Therefore, we may say that such rational and humanistic attitude which Gandhiji takes into consideration in modifying his concept of Ahimsa makes Gandhian non-violence more acceptable and practical in the modern society.

Another important aspect of non-violence that should be noted is that though Gandhiji was against warfare it does not mean a resignation of all fighting against wickedness- it is the most active, militant and powerful fighting against it. His Satyagraha is not a weak submission to the will of the evil doer. Therefore Gandhiji always said that violence is better than cowardice. So, Gandhiji said that, "Where there is choice between cowardice and violence, I would advice violence." Again Gandhiji said that he would like, "India resort to arms in order to defend her honour than that she would in a cowardly manner become or remain a helpless witness to her own dishonours." If the result of an action benefits the individual but harms the society or if the result of an activity is favourable for the present but detrimental for the future then that action cannot be said to be good. The result of an activity must be good for the individual and society, at present and in future. Judging violence from this criterion we see that it can benefit either the individual or the society, not the two together. The immediate result of violence can be good. But non-violence may take a long time to win but its results are permanent. Sometimes, a man who pursues non-violence may even die without being rewarded but his sacrifice produces an effect that endures in the heart of men.

The most important aspect of Gandhian thought which can be made more practicable today is his insistence on the resolution of all conflicts by peaceful means. According to Gandhiji, war and violence never solve any problems. They create new ones and sow the seeds of hatred and consequently future wars. Gandhiji's teaching of non-violence is relevant even in the social and economic field. Ahimsa in its positive aspect means love and therefore it is totally incompatible with possession or exploitation. In Gandhiji's words we can say love and exclusive possession can never go together. For successful implementation of Gandhiji's ideal of non-violence a total moral transformation of the people is necessary. In economic field non-violence can be achieved by the practice of trusteeship but to secure it the honesty of the trustee is an indispensable condition. If untouchability is to be eradicated and social equality is to be established, everyone should have faith in the maxim, "All men

are brother.” The success of non-violence would depend on how much the people have progressed ethically.

Currently, mankind is facing serious environmental crisis and it is on the verge of destruction of their habitat. The main reason for environmental crisis is the selfish attitude of human beings. They use the nature’s natural and material resources without understanding how to live with nature. Industrial development in the West did not take into account the incurable damage that it may cause to nature. These problems have been created because we have valued the present gains without thinking of the future.” His ideas on simple living, a just society, reverence for nature and non-exploitation not only within a country but also in its economic relations with other countries, have bearing on our entire environmental problem.”⁶ Currently, we hear a lot of rhetoric regarding the need for eco-friendly and sustainable development strategies. He criticised industrialisation and the development of consumer oriented society. He was a great believer of simple living and always advocated sustainable development, which has become rhetoric in the contemporary development thinking.

Anna Hazare’s non-violent protest against corruption at government level is the stunning example of the relevance of the concept of non-violence in present time. We have witnessed how the young generation of India came out to the straight and supported Anna Hazare’s non-violent protest against corruption by wearing the “Gandhitoopi “. Gandhiji’s non-violence still offers us as an ideal that may uphold. Gandhiji remains the prophetic voice of the 21st century and his non-violence urges us to continue struggling on behalf of what we view as right and just.

Non-violence is still only the conviction of a few individuals living in a society where the great majority does not share that conviction. In such a condition, in the absence of human surroundings that create an intellectual and spiritual atmosphere favourable to non-violence. We are in great danger of going without fruits that it can yield. Our most urgent task is to create such a human environment that will foster the culture of non-violence.⁸ Martin Luther King (Jr.) said, “If humanity is to progress, Gandhi is inescapable. He lived, thoughts and acted, inspired

by the version of humanity evolving towards a world of peace and harmony. We may ignore him at our own risk. Lastly, we may mention that in life’s battle, there is such a thing as mute submission to many wrong. If it is deliberate, it generates strength which, if the submission is well conceived, may well become irresistible. Here I mention some lines from Young India- “Violence is a exhibition of anger and any such exhibition dissipation of valuable energy. Subduing one’s anger was storing up of national energy, which when set free in an organised manner would produce astounding result.”

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