

THE CONCEPT OF AHIMSA IN INDIAN MYTHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

From the ancient Sanskrit world and originally Ahimsa meant non-killing. The five great vows as they are described for Ahimsa, Satya, Asteya, Brahmacharya and Aparigraha. It is hardly necessary to point out that there is a basic identity in the broad conception of ascetic life among the Buddhist, the Jainas and the Brahmanical Dharma Sutra. The total avoidance of violence is not possible without self-control, giving up of egoistic claims and ambitions, recognitions of the similarity of self and another and the cultivation of wantlessness. The doctrine of Ahimsa starts from a perception of the sameness of life, the equality of all souls. What makes Gandhi so widely known and respected today is his emphasis on Ahimsa (Non-violence) as a way to secure social and political justice without the use of physical force. The destructive forces are anti-life and to help them is obviously suicidal and against the interest of man. This is the raisin doctrine of Ahimsa-culture.

KEY WORDS: Ahimsa, Indian Mythology, Sraman, Ascetic life, Sameness of life

In spite of death life persists in spite of hatred love persists and in spite of darkness light persists: Anon (Ishavasayam I dam-Sarvam) Isha Upanishad).

Ahimsa is an ancient Sanskrit word and originally meant only 'non- killing'. It must have come into existence as are action to 'killing' and as a response to a feeling of aversion, distaste, repugnance to the act of 'killing' fellow human beings. Perhaps this was a first step in Ahimsa culture. The five great vows (Panca-maha-vratas) as they are described for example in the yoga-sutras one Ahimsa, Satya, Asteya, Brahmacharya and Apanigraha. The Chaturyama Samvara of parva included non-injury truth non-stealing and non-possession. It may be noted that the Buddhist account of Caturyama Samvara appears confused as it speaks of restraint in the use of cold water, evil, sin and ease on account of purification of sin.

Mahavira added celibacy as the fifth vow and thus the Panca-maha-vratas of the Jains come to be identical with those mentioned by Patanjali. Among the Buddhists the Pancasila it one adds to it not eating unseasonable food at nights, not wearing garland or use of perfumes and sleeping on a mat spread on the ground. The Brahmanical mendicant was similarly required to abstain from causing injury to living beings, lying, misappropriation, in continence and niggardliness.¹

It is hardly necessary to point out that there is a basic identity in the broad conception of ascetic life among the Buddhists, the Jainas and the Brahmanical Dharma sutras. This Ideal consists in the training of the attitude of the ascetic also involves regulation of his relations with society. Vyasa in his commentary on the Yoga-sutras say that Ahimsa is the chief vow and quotes an ancient Sankhya tradition to the effect that it is for the perfection Ahimsa that the other vows are under taken.²

A similar view of the matter may be easily discerned in Buddhist and Jaina literature. For example Aryadeva declares that the Buddhas describe dharma compendiously as Ahimsa. Akalanka say's Ahimsayah pradhana tvadadau tadvacanam.³ Respect for life and the total avoidance of violence is fundamental to ascetic life. Violence presupposes egoism, cupidity, intolerance, lack of self-restraint, ignorance of the nature of living beings and often fraud and treachery. On the other hand, the total avoidance of violence is not possible without self-control, giving up of egoistic claims and ambitions, recognitions of the similarity of self and another and the cultivation of wantlessness.

This emphasis on non-violence distinguishes, the Sramanic from the old Vedic tradition where animal sacrifices and meat eating were common. Similarly victory in war was one of those things which the Vedic Aryans frequently prayed for. Their gods although generally wise and beneficent, were not un-often gods of might and power. Yajna-dharma and Ksattra-dharma both legitimized violence and were part of the system of varnasrama dharma. The emergence of emphasis on non-violence in sramanism and its gradual adoption in Indian culture meant a profound revolution in Indian ethos by accenting the feminine virtues.

The doctrine of Ahimsa starts from a perception of the sameness of life, the equality of all souls. This was accepted in the Vedic tradition also but as part of the ultimate metaphysical realization which had its truth at a level other than that of common social life which rests on the co-operation of differences rather than on an abstract sameness. Thus it is that the inequalities of varnasrama dharma remain valid at the empirical level while the absolute and faultless sameness of Brahman ('Nindosam hi samam brahma') is a matter for inward realization. What made the doctrine of Ahimsa imperative for the sramans was the belief in the transmigration of the soul which linked the lowliest forms of life with the highest in one interacting chain of being.

The Jainas indeed held that even the four material elements are inhabited by the souls which are thus ubiquitous and turn any careless action into a form of violence.⁴ The Jaina view is in such marked contrast to the western view where even the animals were not held to have souls. Since pleasure and pain do not depend on reason, the lack of a rational faculty in the animals is not really a sufficient reason for regarding them as different from men in respect of being the objects of human actions. Indeed the modern realization of the need for 'avoiding cruelty to animals' is a vindication of the principle of non-violence. It is welcome indeed that the new changes in our constitution give due importance to respect for life and compassion.

The practice of Ahimsa or non-violence develops other qualities life compassion, feeling, friendship etc. He realized that Ahimsa is the rest of shifting the moral from them moral, which is regarded as the guiding principle in social life. Through truth and non-violence morality is achieved and this is the back bone of social development. Non-violence hates the sin but not the sinner. He gave importance on fundamental human situation.

What makes Gandhi so widely known and respected today is his emphasis on Ahimsa (non-violence) as a way to secure social and political justice without the use of physical force. But in so regarding him we are likely to forget that Ahimsa is for him but a form, though pre-eminent, of Godward living. His own words are here unmistakable: "I am impatient to realize the presence of my maker, who to me embodies truth _ _ _ (but) in the early part of my career I discovered that, if I was to realize truth, I must obey, even at the cost of my life, the law of Love."⁵

Gandhi's chosen way to God is Ahimsa (or non-violence).⁶ Now in respect of self-suffering and its relation to Ahimsa, Gandhi's view is clear. He says; 'Suffering injury is one's own person is the essence of non-violence and is the chosen substitute for violence to others.'⁷ As we shall see a little later Gandhi regards Ahimsa as love that is completely other-regarding. But how can be sure that a man loves his fellow beings selflessly. So self-suffering may be taken as essential for Ahimsa.

Faith, however, would be blind faith if it is not tasted by reason and experience. Man finds himself in the midst of constructive and destructive energy cum force nature or the cosmos. Life and death, health and disease, love and hatred, peace and war, calmness and anger face us every moment in life. The question before a rational human being is with which force should be apply himself. The plain simple, direct reply these question is that man ought to strength then the force of harmonious, integrated, happy life, both as an individual and as a community. The destructive forces are anti-life and to help them is obviously suicidal and against the interest of man. The evolutionary urge in man to dictates to him to shine to live and promote the potentialities inherent in man. This is the raising doctrine of Ahimsa-culture.⁸

No other name is greater than that of Einstein is the modern world of science. He was a man of peace and admired Gandhi to the extent of saying that; scarcely would people believe that a man called Gandhi in flesh and blood walked on this earth. He regretted that his own discoveries in science were utilized for forging atomic weapons of mass destruction. It is said he wept when he learnt that such weapons were being manufactured. But he is gone leaving his message of peace and good-will to be distracted world.

Dr. Robert Oppenheimer who was responsible for making the first fusion able atomic bomb in USA wrote relentlessly in his diary about the bomb, that it was born for the annihilation of the world. Being an admirer of the Gita he quoted it in his diary saying "Kalosmiloka rshayakrit pravridhdah."

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