

GANDHIAN CONCEPT OF AHIMSA: INDIVIDUAL, DEMOCRACY AND STATE

Nasimul Hoque

Junior Research Fellow

IIT Guwahati

NON-VIOLENCE

The concept of ahimsa or non-violence literally means non-injury or non-killing and it has been one of the most dominant features of the Indian code of conduct since the Vedic age down to our present days. In Indian schools of philosophy we find three main interpretations of Ahimsa. Jainism interprets Ahimsa as the ideal of not killing any form of life for any purpose whatsoever. Manu made Ahimsa elastic. He allowed the killing of animals for sacrifice and food. According to him even the killing of men is justified, if it is in self-defence. The third interpretation of non-violence is a mid-way between these two extremes. In *Bhagavadgita* Lord Krishna, on the one hand, advises Arjuna to practice the ideal of '*atmavat sarva bhuteshu*' and '*sarva bhuta hite ratah*' and on the other hand Lord Krishna exhorts Arjuna to fight and kill his own kith and kin. Moreover virtue like non-violence, non-anger, peace, forgiveness, amity and compassion to beings are enumerated as essential possessions of a righteous man.

Gandhian concept of non-violence is more or less similar to that of the *Gita*. Mahatma Gandhi firmly believes that all living beings are essentially one. Gandhi realized that non-violence is the only law of life. For him Ahimsa is not a purely negative doctrine, but is essentially a positive and dynamic force. In its positive aspect non-violence means pure love for the entire creation of god, because of realization of the essential unity of all living beings. Gandhi wrote in Harijan that "the real love is to love them that hate you, to love your neighbour even so long as I trust my friend? Even thieves do that". For Gandhi the scope of Ahimsa covers the whole creation, and not only human. A person who can express Ahimsa in life exercises a force superior to all the force of brutality. For Gandhi Ahimsa can be used as a basis for solving every problem. Gandhi vision was that Ahimsa's strength in every walk of life is still going to be slowly unfolded. He said "things undreamt of are daily being seen, the impossible is becoming possible. We are constantly being astonished these days at the amazing discoveries in the field of violence. But I maintain that far more undreamt of and seemingly, impossible discoveries will be made in the field of non-violence". On the account of Ahimsa it has been manifested Ahimsa must possess humility. If someone has pride and egoism, there is no non-

violence. Gandhi in his *Harijan* on 28th January 1939 point out that “Non-violence is impossible without humanity. My own experience is that whenever I have acted non-violently, I have been led to it and been sustained in it by the higher promptings of an unseen power. Through my own will I should have miserably failed”.

Non-violence works very subtly yet very deeply. According to Gandhi “Non-violence is like radium in its action. An infinitesimal quality of it embedded in a malignant growth acts continuously, silently, and ceaselessly till it has transformed the whole mass of the diseased tissue into a healthy one. Similarly, even a little of true non-violence acts in a silent, subtle, unseen way and leavens the whole society”(Harijan,12th November, 1938).Indeed, the running thread in life is not violence but it is non-violence. Superficially we are surrounding in life by strife and bloodshed, life living upon life. But some of the great seer who ages ago penetrated the centre of truth said: it is not through strife and violence, but through non-violence that man can fulfil his destiny and his duty to his fellow creatures. It is a force which is more positive than electricity and more powerful than even other. At the centre of non-violence is a force which is self-acting. Basically took the concept of non-violence as law of creation and not of destruction. He said in Harijan on 20th July 1943 that “non-violence is greatest force at the disposal of mankind. It is mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction devised by the ingenuity of man. Destruction is not the law of the human”. Gandhi’s non-violence is not the doctrine of inaction, but of the highest action. He preached the Ahimsa of brave and not of the cowards. To have a living faith in non-violence requires a living faith in God. He himself had such unshakable faith in God. Ahimsa was his Dharma. He held non-violence as the soul-force, the manifestation of the God within man. However Gandhi’s goal was truth, but he looked upon Ahimsa as the only means of realizing truth in human relationships.

INDIVIDUAL, DEMOCRACY AND STATE:

Non-violence, to be a potent force, must begin with the mind. Non-violence of the mere body without the co-operation of the mind is non-violence of the weak, of the cowardly, and has, therefore, no potency. If Ahimsa should resign Supreme in the life of an individual, it must all the more be supreme in societies. Ahimsa magnifies one’s own defects and minimizes those of the opponent. It regards the mote in one’s own eye as a beam, and the beam, and the beam in the opponent’s eye as a mote. Ahimsa should be practiced both at the individual and society levels. Gandhi believed in the individual liberty of unit of society through truth and non-violence. He said “complete independence through truth and non-violence means the independence of every unit, be it the humblest of the notion, without distinction of race, colour or creed. This independence is never exclusive. It is, therefore, wholly compatible with inter-dependence within or without. Practice

will always fall short of the theory, even as the drawn line falls short of the theoretical line of Euclid. Therefore, complete independence will be complete only to the extent of our approach in practice to truth and non-violence". (Constructive Programme, 1941, p.7)

Basically in our form of life we are acting non-violently towards one another in daily life. All well-constructed societies are based on the law of non-violence. Gandhi said in Young India on 1st October 1931 that "I have found that life persists in the midst of destruction and, therefore, there must be a higher law than that of destruction. Only under that law would a well-ordered society be intelligible and life worth living. And, if that is the law of life we have to work it out in daily life. Whenever you are confronted with an opponent, conquer him with love. In this crude manner, I have worked it out in my life. That does not mean that all my difficulties are solved. Only I have found that the law of love has answered as the law of destruction has never done".

Gandhi had clearly realized the vast possibility of Ahimsa and undoubtedly accepted it as the basis of all life. "It claims that ever now; though the social structure is not based on a conscious acceptance of non-violence, the entire world over mankind lives and men retain their possessions on the sufferance of one another. If they had not done so, only the fewest and the most ferocious would have survived, but such is not the case. Families are bound together by ties of love and so are groups in the so-called civilized society called nations. Only they do not recognize the supremacy of the law of non-violence. It follows, therefore, that they have not investigated its vast possibilities". (Harijan, 22nd February, 1942) However the question remains whether the government can be completely non-violent. Regarding this Gandhi thought: "A Government cannot succeed in becoming entirely non-violent, because it represents all the people, I do not today conceive of such a golden age. But I believe in the possibility of a predominantly non-violent society. And I am working for it" (Harijan, 9th March, 1940). Other questions about the existence of the Government itself. Whether in an ideal society, there should be any or no Government; Gandhi replied that "I do not think we need worry ourselves about this at the moment. If we continue to work for such a society it will slowly come into being to an extent, such that the people can benefit by it. Euclid's line is one without breadth, but no one has so far been able to draw it and never will. All the same, it is only by keeping the ideal line in mind that we have made progress in geometry. This is true of every ideal (Harijan, 15th Sept 1946).

By its very nature, non-violence cannot seize power nor can that be its goal. But non-violence can do more; it can effectively control and guide power without capturing the machinery of government. That is its beauty. Gandhi's idea on democracy and non-violence, are marvellously clear and bold; there all are treated equally and same custody that has been traced out in his words "my notion of democracy is that under it the weakest should have the same opportunity as the strongest. That can

never happen except through non-violence. The science of non-violence can alone leads one to pure democracy” (Young India, 30th June, 1927). True democracy or the Swaraj of the masses can never come though untruthful and violent means, for the simple reason that the natural corollary to their use would be to remove all opposition through the suppression or extermination of the antagonists. That does not make for individual freedom. Individual freedom can have the fullest play only under a regime of unadulterated Ahimsa.

Democracy and violence can I’ll go together. The states that are today nominally democratic have either to become frankly totalitarian or, if they are to become truly democratic, they must become courageously non-violent. It is a blasphemy to say that non-violence can only be practiced by individuals and never by nations which are composed of individuals. Difference of opinion is bound with life and hence should be comfortably lived with. Gandhi said “differences of opinion should never mean hostility. If they did, my wife and I should be sworn enemies of one another. I do not know two persons in the world who had no difference of opinion, and as I am a follower of the *Gita*, I have always attempted to regard those who differ from me with the same affection as I have for my nearest and dearest” (Young India, 17th March 1927). About rights and responsibilities in Ahimsa-based independence, Gandhi said “in Swaraj based on Ahimsa, people need not know their duties. There is no duty but creates a corresponding right, and those only are true rights of true citizenship accrue only to those who serve the state to which they belong” (ibid, 25th March 1939). Indeed, centralization as a system is inconsistent with non-violent structure of society. Talking about police and Ahimsa Gandhi said, Nevertheless, I have conceded that even in a non-violent state a police force may be necessary .This, “I admit is a sign of my imperfect Ahimsa. I have not the courage to declare that we can carry on without police force as I have in respect of any army. Of course, I can and do envisage a state where the police will not be necessary. But whether we shall succeed in realizing it, the future alone will show” (Harijan, 1st Sept 1940).

Indeed, Gandhi believed that the state is based upon violence due to its compulsive nature exhibited through a vast network of bureaucratic organization equipped with instruments of oppression and suppression. He thought that the state killed individuality and thus hindered progress. Later on he made some concession by mentioning that if the state was to be there it should be non-violent. Gandhi’s belief that the state is based upon violence cannot be supported wholly. Without an organized state no individual can develop his personality. Gandhi like Tolstoy believes that a new civilization is needed from where greed, hatred and lust for power are removed for ever.

Gandhi held that the non-violent society should be decentralized economically and politically. Centralization of functions and non-violence cannot go together. Centralization involves the use of

force and imposition of restrictions on individual liberty. Under a decentralized system, the village communities should be independent possessing economic and political power. Gandhi wanted to encourage cottage industries by the abolition of large –scale industries. He thought that the centralized industrial system was responsible for great deal of violence in society. Colonialism, imperialism and international rivalry are the results of the centralized system. He felt that to introduce the principles of non-violence and truth in the economic sphere and to do away with exploitation, decentralization of state functions was very necessary.

It is doubtful whether in the present times of advanced science and technology where large-scale production and division of labour are the basic features, cottage industries can be introduced on a large scale. But this is a fact that Gandhi gave an answer to the baffling problems of the modern world. Gandhi tried to make the use of non-violence universal. He has shown to humanity that non-violence is the strongest and the most refined weapon, which can be used by anybody. Gandhi in his concept of non-violence propounded one of the world’s great political principles. He wrote in Harijan on 19th May 1946 that “Ahimsa is one of the world’s great principles which no power on earth can wipe out. Thousands like me may die to vindicate the ideal but ahimsa will never die. And the gospels of Ahimsa can be spread only through believers dying for the cause”.

REFERENCES

The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, 1958-84, Publications Division of the Government of India, Navajivan, New Delhi.

Gandhi, M.K., 1941, Constructive Programme its Meaning and Place, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad

Gandhi, M.K., 1988, an Autobiography or the Story of My Experiments with Truth, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad

Indian Opinion, 1903-14, Natal, South Africa

Young India, 1919-32, Ahmedabad, India

Navajivan, 1919-31, Ahmedabad, India

Harijan, 1933-48, Ahmedabad, India