



Gandhian Non-Violence: Theory and Practice

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Abstract: Apart from his practical idealism and rational humanism, Gandhijian Ahimsa involves a high degree of morality because to Gandhiji, non-violence is not merely abstaining from external injury, it must be from the bottom of our heart, for there is nothing unqualifiedly good but the good will". Our goodness is to be judged by the goodness of our will or intention, for success or result depends upon many circumstances beyond our control. Hence, good will and struggling for the ideal is all that is given to man

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Analysis

Gandhijian non-violence has many aspects in meaning and its perspective. The whole scenario and its utility can be best understood by its classification to the extent possible and elaboration of what Gandhiji preached and practiced to be the model for generations to come.

1. *Progressive Non-violence:* If non-violence implies *non-killing* or even non

-injury "perfect non-violence is impossible so long we exist physically".¹ We cannot live even for moment without consciously or unconsciously committing outward *himsa*. Perfect non-violence, therefore, is only a theory like Euclid's *point* or *straight line*. Violence in some form or other is unavoidable to some extent and therefore one has to put up with it. We shall have to destroy some life for either self-existence or for protecting those under our care or for those whose life is taken. In the first two cases, violence is necessarily involved to a greater or lesser extent

but the last propositions do not involve *himsa* at all. What we can do is to do our best to minimize violence. Hence, perfect non-violence can only mean progressive non-violence.²

2. *Practical Non-violence:* The concept of progressive non-violence involves

both realism and idealism. For instance, Gandhiji was not rigid enough in his attitude to non-violence that he would not allow pests and vermin to thrive at the cost of men in the name of non-violence. On the other hand, he would not allow anyone to pluck the green leaves of a *neem* tree more than the bare necessity. All this means that he recognizes the *grades* of life and *scope* for progressive non-violence, or in his own words his "practical idealism,"³ which involves a fair degree of rationality as well as humanism. For example, Gandhiji was against all norms of accepted orthodox Ahimsa, did not hesitate, to ask the attending doctor to end the life of the mortally sick calf who had been groaning under



unbearable pain and whose malady was declared as incurable.

In the context of Indian tradition, Gandhiji's Ahimsa is a midway between the rigid and rigorous non-violence of the Jainas and a little more elastic non-violence of Manu and other orthodox Hindus who would allow even the killing of animals for the sacrifice of food and killing of men in self-defence.

Apart from his *practical idealism* and rational *humanism*, Gandhijan Ahimsa involves a high degree of morality because to Gandhiji, non-violence is not merely abstaining from external injury, it must be from the bottom of our heart, for there is nothing unqualifiedly good but the good will". Our goodness is to be judged by the goodness of our will or intention, for success or result depends upon many circumstances beyond our control. Hence, good will and struggling for the ideal is all that is given to man. Therefore, Gandhiji always said, "one step is enough for me" or "full effort is full victory".⁴

3. *The Content of Good Will*: If non-violence is not only non-killing or non-injury

but an inner feeling of the mind and heart, it means "the largest love and greatest charity" as Roman Rolland said. Thus anger, hatred and the spirit of revenge are incompatible with Ahimsa, since they are the subtlest forms of violence. "We cannot be really non-violent and yet have hate in us".⁵

In short, *Ahimsa*, apart from a moral and spiritual principle becomes the *basic social ethic*, which is based

on the concept of sociality of man. This is the "logical presupposition of all other duties towards living beings, since we cannot do any duty towards fellow-being unless he is alive".⁶ Ahimsa as love is also the parent of other virtues. So Gandhiji said "without Ahimsa, Truth cannot be realized." For Gandhiji, Truth was God that pervaded all beings, and preserved and unified them through love." "The love God is to love the beings in whom He is incarnate."

4. *Psychology of Non-violence*: In most cases, violence is the expression of

Fear.⁷ It is due to fear-complex that man arms himself or attacks others. Left to himself, he likes to live and let others live in peace. Thus at bottom, violence is really the expression of an inner sense of weakness. One who is strong in heart has no fear and therefore he naturally loves all and hates none. And when he develops the love-attitude, he "cannot deceive the loved one, he does not *fear* or *frighten* him or her." He has then no fear, suspicion or hostility. He must, therefore, become *fearless*. Gift of life is the greatest of all gifts, and when he is prepared to give it, the hardest heart and the grossest ignorance are bound to disappear before his self-suffering which is without any malice and anger.⁸ Love begets love, not hatred. So enmity is never appeased by enmity.

5. *Non-violent Heroism*: Thus Ahimsa is impossible without a high degree of



Moral heroism and fearlessness.⁹ It does not involve vengeance but forgiveness. Vengeance too is weakness, while forgiveness is the extreme limit of bravery. This is the "heroic blood"¹⁰ that Gandhiji has transfused into the traditional concept of Ahimsa. Here we do not fight violence so much as weakness, for nothing is worthwhile unless it is strong, neither good nor evil. Absolute evil is better than emasculated goodness. Moaning pacifism is death-knell of peace, it is cowardice and lack of faith.¹¹ Thus non-violence is not a resignation from all fighting against wickedness — it is the most active, militant and powerful fight against it. Gandhiji was and had been an activist all through his life. He always "contemplated a mental and therefore a moral opposition to immoralities."¹² His *Satyagraha* is not a meek submission to the will of evil-doer, but it means the putting of one's whole soul against the will of the tyrant.¹³ It is not a "passive spirituality" or "passive resistance" but extremely active force. Therefore, Gandhiji always said "non-violence and cowardice go ill together."¹⁴ To him, violence is better than cowardice. So he says "where there is a choice between cowardice and violence, He would advise violence,¹⁵ and therefore he would "risk violence a thousand times than the emasculation of the whole race." We perhaps know that he liked "India resort to arms in order to defend her honor than that she should in a cowardly manner become or remain a helpless witness to her own disonours." In one word, the weak cannot claim to practice non-violence.

Non-violence is thus virtue of the brave and not the cult of passive, effeminate and helpless submission. So he exhorted the people that "self-defence is the only honorable course where there is unreadiness for self-immolation.¹⁶ In other words there is no room for surrender in non-violence. "When a woman is assaulted, she may not stop to think of *himsa* or *ahimsa*. Her primary duty is self-protection. She is at liberty to employ every method or means that come to her mind in order to defend her honor. God has given her nails, and teeth. She must use them with all her strength and if need be, die in the effort."¹⁷ This amply proves that non-violence is not at all cowardice or weakness in face of criminal assaults and riots etc.

6. *Ahimsa in the midst of war:*

What is applicable in face of civil and

criminal acts of violence, can also be stretched in case of war-violence. It is indeed cowardly for any country to submit to any external military aggression. In that case, we should stoutly and most resolutely refuse passage to the invading army by refusing all supplies or we should not mind re-enacting completely successful Scortchearth policy of the type of Moscow(at the time of Napoleon's invasion in the year 1812). We can go even ahead and present all of us as a living wall of men, women and children and invite the invaders to walk over our corpses. This may be an unknown experience but during freedom movement it is a fact that thousands stood *lathis* and bullets without resorting to violence. Suppose, if the army dares to pass over the corpses if the innocent men and



women, they would not be able to repeat that experiment. No aggressor can rule over any other nation without some sort of cooperation from the subjects, moreover if the subject nation becomes determined to refuse any cooperation, the rulers will have to withdraw.¹⁸ But it requires preparation.

7. *Anekanta—The Essence of Ahimsa:*

So non-violence to be a potent force

must begin with the mind of man. Non-violence of the mere body without the cooperation of the mind is non-violence of the weak or of the coward. True non-violence must be non-violence in *word, deed* and *thought*. There is no room for hypocrisy in the realm of non-violence. Action has its roots in the minds of men, speech is its next outer manifestation and actual bodily activity is its final consummation. So the perfect practice of non-violence in speech and action, we must discard all aggressiveness and imperialism in thought. We must have the outlook of an Anekantvadi or Syadvadi. Really, this is cognitive basis of non-violence in action. This is *anekantvada* and Gandhiji says "my *anekantvada* is the result of the twin doctrine of *Satya* and *Ahimsa*."¹⁹

8. *Sociology of Non-violence:*

Non-violence to Gandhiji was not a

conceptual conundrum but the law of our species, as violence is the law of the brute. Non-violence must serve as the panacea for our ills — social and economic, political and moral.

However, the credit of Gandhiji lies in extending the principle of non-violence

to the social and political field. He developed a method of non-violence for attaining social and political justice apart from religious and moral perfection. For example, if *Ahimsa* means love, it can never be compatible with *possession* or *exploitation* in any shape or form. "Love and exclusive possession can never go together." Similarly, frightfulness, exploitation of the weak, immoral gains, insatiable pursuit after enjoyments of the flesh are utterly inconsistent."²⁰

9. *The Non-violent Revolution:* Apart from giving violence the new meaning

of exploitation, Gandhiji's greatest contribution to the concept of non-violence is his theory of social change. He brought a change in the very method of revolution. If social revolution means a fundamental change in our values and ethos, ideas and ideologies, it is sheer nonsense to think that we can change any body's ideas by external physical force. Hence, we can conclude that the *the more of violence, the less of real revolution*.²¹

Lastly, if social revolution means power at the working places, take it for granted that in violent revolution; the political power never comes to the people²² and instead it goes either to a single powerful individual like Napoleon after the French Revolution, Stalin after the Russian Revolution and most probably to Lin-Piao after Mao in China or to a self-perpetuating junta of powerful politicians. Hence, the non-violent revolution is not only the 'nobler way'



but also the 'swifter way', because it is also the surest.²³

In short, nothing permanent, nothing good can come out of violence. Hence, we must strive to change the man along with his social set up. All this history, Gandhiji struggle and his ways were witnessed by Albert Einstein and hence remarked, "Generations to come, it may be, scarcely will believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth".

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