



Non-Violence: Preached by Gandhi

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Abstract: *Non-Violence, the synonymous expression of Ahimsa, Hindu-Muslim unity and the removal of untouchability had the highest priority for Gandhi. Mr. Gandhi, who was addressed as the Mahatma by Tagore in one of his letters, was considered to be one of the greatest leaders of humankind. He was a great mass communicator. No other individual in History had reached and influenced more people than Gandhi. Ahimsa was one of the major projects of Mr. Gandhi. The theme of Ahimsa is found in Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism, the three major religions of the land. The purpose of the paper is to examine the theme of Non-Violence (Ahimsa) as it was preached by Gandhi, the Mahatma.*

Key words: *Non-Violence, Ahimsa, Religion, Practice, Preaching.*

Analysis:

Ahimsa, translated into English as 'non-violence' is the first of the five precepts of Buddhism : *Panatipata veramani sikkha padam samadhiyami*. (I under take the precept to refrain from destroying living creatures.) *Ahimsa* means 'non-injury' or 'non-killing'. It is the basic attribute of '*Bhikku Sangha*'. It is prescribed even for the lay people, both *Upasakas and Upasikas*, in Buddhist fold. In Jainism *Ahimsa* reaches its apogee. For the Hindus, the most popular maxim known is the injunction of the Mahabharatha: *Ahimsa paramo dharma – Ahimsa is the highest duty*. Gandhi has the habit of picking up traditional religious concepts and then imbuing them with meanings which best served his purpose. In this particular case of *Ahimsa* he said : 'Perfect non-violence whilst you are inhabiting the body is only a theory like Euclid's point or straight line'.¹ Consequently, 'our actions are

undoubtedly in consistent with this belief, but human life is an aspiration, a continual striving after perfection, and the ideal must not be lowered because of our weakness'.²

He wrote, '*Ahimsa* means non-killing. But to me, it has a world of meaning, and takes me into the realms much higher, infinitely higher. It really means that you may not offend anybody, you may not harbour an uncharitable thought even in connection with one who may consider himself to be your enemy'.³

This is only the negative aspect of *Ahimsa*. For Gandhi the positive aspect was no less important. He said, '*Ahimsa* is not the crude thing it has been made to appear. Not to hurt any living things is no doubt a part of *Ahimsa*... (Yet) it is not merely a negative state of harmlessness but it is a positive state of love, of doing good even to the evil – doer'.⁴



Gandhi's belief of *Ahimsa* was not based on deductive logic. His guides to action were rather instinct and intuition. With him, *Ahimsa*, being truth in action, was an article of faith. Jean V Bondurant says: 'If there is dogma in Gandhian philosophy, it centres here: that the only text of truth is action based on the refusal to do harm'.⁵ He accepts the impossibility of attaining the ideal of *Ahimsa* in this life. He said, 'The world is bound in the chain of destruction. In other words, *himsa* is an inherent necessity for life in the body. This is why a votary of *Ahimsa* always prays for ultimate deliverance from the bondage of flesh'.⁶

Very clearly he identified the impossibility of attaining the ideal of *Ahimsa*. In spite of this, on several occasions he behaved as an absolutist in this matter and allowed no deviation from the ideal. He suspended the entire Non-Cooperation Movement just because of a single incident of violence at, Chouri-Choura, a remote place. During the Civil Disobedience Movement he said, 'I would welcome even utter failure with non-violence unimpaired, rather than depart from it by a hair's breadth to achieve a doubtful success'.⁷

Going far away from reality he thought that truth and non-violence as absolute forces. When he launched the Non-Cooperation Movement and promised *Swaraj* in twelve months, he claimed, 'if we get one single person before 31st December (1921), who would practice truth to such perfection, *Swaraj* would be ours this very day'.⁸

During the Second World War millions of German Jews were killed in gas chambers. Despite the fact, Gandhi advised them to offer non-violent

resistance and challenge the Nazis to shoot them or caste them in the dungeon. He gave similar advice to the Poles, the Czechs and the Abyssinians, and assured them that this 'must ultimately melt' the aggressor 'and his solidarity'. In May, 1940 he wrote a letter to Viceroy from Jail, offering to go to Germany to plead with Hitler with peace. He also advised Britain to lay down arms and oppose Hitler with non-violence. In 1942, when Japan was knocking the at the door of India, he wrote, 'If we were a free country, things would be done non-violently to prevent the Japanese from entering the country... suppose the Japanese compel to resisters to give them water, the resisters must die in the act of resistance. It is conceivable that they will exterminate all resisters'.⁹

To the threat of atom bomb Gandhi thought, 'I would meet it by prayerful action ... the pilot will not see my face at such a height, I know. But the longing in our heart that he will not come to harm and his eyes would be opened'.¹⁰

The dogma of Gandhi was non-violence. All the suggested remedies were wholly impractical and woefully inadequate, to meet the crisis, was as much Gandhi's failure as human kinds tragedy.

One of the instruments in Gandhi's practice of non-violence was his observance of 'fasts'. 'The only language they (the masses) understand is the language of heart' he wrote, 'and fasting, when utterly unselfish, is the language of the heart'.¹¹

His fast unto death after the announcement of the Communal Award amounted to virtual coercion of Dr. Ambedkar to agree to a compromise solution to save Gandhi's life. On several



occasions Gandhi went on long fasts in jail, and the government was forced to release him on grounds of health.

In his letter to Gandhi, Tagore, who was called Gurudev by Gandhi, raised a very basic point regarding his fasts. Tagore wrote, 'you have no right to say that this process of penance can only be efficacious through your own individual endeavour and for others it has no meaning. If that were true, you ought to have performed it in absolute secrecy as a mystic rite which only claims its own significance beginning and ending in yourself'.¹²

Nehru repeatedly criticised Gandhi in this respect. He wrote, 'Can anything be greater coercion than the psychic coercion of Gandhiji which reduces many of his intimate followers and colleagues to a state of mental pulp?'¹³

Once Motilal Nehru said, 'There may be some who take the extreme non-violence that Mahatma Gandhi does in theory, but I do not know a single follower of the Mahatma who accepts upon it'.¹⁴

In June, 1940 in the Congress Working Committee meeting at Wardha C. Rajagopalachari observed: 'Ours is a political organization, not working for non-violence but for the political ideal.' When the matter passed on to the AICC meeting held at Poona on 27-28 July, 1940 Moulana Azad, the congress president said in his presidential address, 'We had not the courage to declare that we shall organize a state in this country without an armed force. If we did, it would be wrong on our part. Mahatma Gandhi has to give the message of non-violence to the world ... but we have to consider our position as the

representatives of Indian nation... The Indian National Congress is a political organization pledged to win political independence of the country. It is not an institution for organizing world peace'.

But Gandhi gradually adopted quiet a flexible approach to *Ahimsa* in view of its lack of acceptance by most of his colleagues. He observed that, 'With the Congress, non-violence was a policy. It was open to it to reject it if it failed ... for me it is a creed. I must act up to it whether I am alone or have companions'.¹⁵

In a private letter which he wrote twenty-nine days before his assassination Gandhi wrote, 'What I had mistaken for *Ahimsa* was not *Ahimsa*, but passive resistance of the weak, which can never be called *Ahimsa* even in the remotest sense... Hence the proper way to the present outburst of violence... is to recognize that the technique of unconquerable non-violence of the strong has not been discovered yet'.¹⁶

In the final observation of Gandhi regarding non-violence went like this, 'May I not been living in a fool's paradise? Why should I ask people to follow me in the fruitless search? These are persistent questions. My answer is quite simple. I ask nobody to follow me. Everyone should follow his or her own inner voice'.¹⁷

The undisputed Mahatma of the nation, the great mass communicator of the by-gone days who met and inspired millions of people, finally says that instead of following him the people have to go their own way and his non-violence had been found wanting and he might have been living in a fool's paradise.



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