

NON-VIOLENCE AND WAR IN GANDHI'S PHILOSOPHY

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The principle of non-violence is not a new concept. It has been preached from times immemorial. In the history of man we come across many sages like Socrates, Jesus, and Buddha who preached and practiced non-violence. Gandhi had been inspired by their life and teachings and tries to apply the technique of non-violence to every walk of life. Etymologically *ahimsā* is composed of three words: a (not) *hims* (to kill or injure) and a (nominal suffix). So the literal meaning of *ahimsā* would be non-killing of living beings. In ancient times it also means refraining from inflicting physical injury even though mere injury does not cause death except in extreme cases. It's original meaning not to injure. This is more general than the literal meaning of non-killing.

According to Vedic philosophy, neither violence nor personal welfare, but welfare of mankind is the ultimate goal of religion. That is, a *Hindu* (should) pray to providence for the well-being of all man. Nevertheless, non-violence towards non-human creatures is also recommended: "If thou slyest Our cows, horses and man, Will shall kill thee With bullet of lead So that thou shouldst not be Slayer of our heroes." – *Atharveda* 1/16/4

The *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata* have exerted the most paramount influence on the minds of the Hindus in India for centuries and mauled their character. They have common ethical concepts and common philosophical ideas based on the teachings of the *Upaniṣads*. War in the *Rāmāyana* (like battles in other epics or apocalyptic stories and myths) is symbolic of the struggle between the forces of good and evil. Thus striving to satisfy the thirst for rationality and meaning in life. Rama's rivals are less clearly men and then they are mythical titans, demons, or a Jungian collective unconscious. Consequently, the viewpoint of reforming a moral theory about warfare or homicide from the *Rāmāyana* is faint from the start. Individual comments about moral ends and means in war may have no literal meaning apart from their intent to interest or from the general belief or hope that evil is overcome by good. But the comments may be enlightening, just as slips of the tongue or blocked memories can sometimes assist speakers to determine what they really wished to say. In the *Mahābhārata*, *Danadharmaparva* (chapter-117), *ahimsā* described as:

*Ahimsā Paramo Dharmasthaahinsa Paro Dumah /
Ahimsā Paramam Dānam Ahimsā Paramas Tapah //
Ahimsā Paramo Yajñas Tathāhismā Param Balam /
Ahimsā Paramam Mitram Ahimsā Paramam Sukham //*

In the *Anuśāsanaparva* of *Mahābhārata*, non-violence is described in a long chain of superlatives. There appears the well-known statement “*ahimsā paramodharmah*, non-violence is the highest religion. It is also said to be the highest self-control (*dama*), the highest gift (*dāna*) and the highest penance (*tapas*).”¹ In another context this praise is reiterated, with the addition that non-violence is the highest truth from which all *dharma* springs forth. This implies that, in the case of conflict, non-violence (probably in the Vedic sense) has heretically higher value than truth and any form of religion. In *Mahābhārata* Vyāsa mentions non-violence is an important virtue for a self-restrained persons. He proclaims, “*Ahimsā* is the best practice.” *Ahimsā* is the highest *dharma*. *Ahimsā* is the best *tapas*. *Ahimsā* is the greatest gift. *Ahimsā* is the highest self-control. *Ahimsā* is the highest sacrifice. *Ahimsā* is the highest power. *Ahimsā* is the highest friend. *Ahimsā* is the highest truth. *Ahimsā* is the highest teaching.”² In the *Śāntiparva*, too, it is said that “there is no other *dharma* superior to *ahimsā* with respect to living beings. *Ahimsā* towards all living beings is regarded more highly than all other virtues.”

Are both violence and its contrary *ahimsā*, taught in the Epics? If even Gandhian idealism would same day propose both choices at different levels, why not here? An alternate, if less likely, resolution of the dilemma can be built on the assumption that the *Rāmāyana*’s author(s) deliberately chose to demonstrate their oscillation on the issue. Like some would be pacifists on the contemporary scene who have vacillated between non-violent strategies and deployment of demolitions, the *Vālmīkian* contributors could not make up their minds. A less speculative generalization can sum up the quandary: in the measure to which the *Vālmīki Rāmāyana* divulges ancient and popular beliefs; a strong and definite tendency to non-violence was one of them. No straight “just-war theory” here”³ In the *Rāmāyana*, the main offspring of the duel of *Ikṣvāku* are said to be lovers of non-violence

¹ *Anuśāsana Parva* 116.38

² *Mahābhārata* xviii: 116. 37-41

³ *Ibid*, p 119

(*ahimsā-rati*). This seems to refer to *ahimsā* as a preferably virtue rather than as a necessary duty.

Negative aspects of non-violence: The usual meaning of *ahimsā* is non-killing. Most often its meaning is made broader by emphasising that non-killing is merely one example of *ahimsā*. *Ahimsā*, then, is conceived as non-injury. In any case, *ahimsā* is conceived as the opposite of *himsā*. Gandhi accepts this and adds much more to its content. He also accepts that *himsā* means causing pain or killing any life out of anger, or from a selfish purpose, or with the intention of injuring it. Refraining from doing all this is *ahimsā*. Violence, according to Gandhi, was committed not only by actions but by thought also. In this world, all living beings are equal, to hurt anyone of them is violence even a thought of hurting them is an act of violence. Most of the people believe that not harming anyone is *ahimsā* but according to Gandhi, it is only an apparent meaning of it, *ahimsā* is much more comprehensive principle. Malicious thought is violence, hastiness is violence, and false speech is violence and so is hoarding an object request by the majority. The root meaning of violence comes from the Latin word 'violentia', meaning vehemence, a passionate and uncontrolled force, the opposite of a calculated exercise of power. Traditionally the word meant "to prevent some object, natural or human, from its natural cause of development" and "to exceed some limit or norms". Political theories of eighteenth century- like Locke, Rousseau, and Montesquieu--agreed that violence could not regenerate people or society and unlike later political philosophers, set limits to the justifiable province of violence.

Violence can be of many types such as: technological, economic, business, political, radical and police violence. Sexist, racial, ethnic, personal, anomic, and psychogenic, assassination, terrorism and political murder are some of the different kinds of violence. Men committed violence on the basis of some reasons. First of all personal interest: the violence committed in the process of eating etc. has personal interest because it provides strength to our body. And the second is violence committed for the betterment of an individual of if wound is aggravated, then doctor will operate it to cure the infected part. This cannot be termed as violence as the doctor has operated the infected part so that this infection does not spread to other part of the body. Among these mentioned cases, first case is of violence necessitated

by needs. If one leaves eating so that he became non-violent or leaves violent animals alive to move about freely, then it will be problematic situation. But in the last case, there is not violence. As the alleged 'violence' committed has no interest to the person who committed it. On the contrary, violence is committed to provide relief to the individual.

Positive aspects of non-violence: Besides these negative aspects of *ahimsā*, Gandhi describes it as active love and extensive pity. Romain Rolland has described it as infinite patience and unlimited love. From this point of view anger, hatred, revenge etc. are alien with the concept of *ahimsā* because all these are indirect form of violence. Together *ahimsā* and hatred cannot find place in our heart. In this emotional interpretation of *ahimsā* which incorporates Buddha's pity and compassion, Mahāvīra's compassion and happiness and Hinduism's stress on mercy towards creations. Every religion accepts the existence of soul in all living beings, this any type of violence is irreligious. Love in the form of *ahimsā* is genesis of all virtues. The arisen of compassion, sympathy, benevolence, tolerance, pity etc., lies in love only. So *ahimsā* is a positive state of love, of doing well even to the evil-doers. But it does not mean helping the evil-doer to continue the wrong or tolerating it by passive acquiescence. On the contrary, love-the active state of *ahimsā* requires you resist the wrong-doer by dissociating yourself from him, even though it may offend him or injure him physically.

War in Gandhi's philosophy: The origin of Gandhi's thinking on war is deeply related to his general philosophy of peace or non-violence. Curiosity exists in the midst of the scholars that what made Gandhi to understand on the meaning of the term 'war'. Gandhi's view on war was greatly influenced by Hindu text, *Bhagavat Gītā*. To him, "the *Gītā* deals with a person's duty in time of crisis. It is not a historical discourse but it merely uses physical illustration to drive home a spiritual truth."⁴ He keep up that war described in the *Gītā* was "not a war between cousins but between the two natures in us, good and the evil." In this process, good triumphs over the evil. To comment that *Gītā* preaches violence or justifies war, was in Gandhi" He was swayed that the *Gītā* neither advocates war nor condemns violence.

⁴ . *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, New Delhi, Vol. 15, p 312-313

How Gandhi interpreted the *Gītā* becomes important because it gave an opportunity to understand the nature of war and non-violence. Gandhi defined war as "an ancient method of settling vital affairs of mankind through the arbitrament of the sword." Gandhi wrote. "In 1920 I became a rebel. Since then, the conviction has been rising ahead me that things of essential important to the people are not secured by reason unaccompanied but have to be purchased with their anguish. Suffering is the law of human being; war is the law of the jungle. But suffering is infinitely more than the law of the jungle.... suffering is the badge of human race, not the sword."⁵

Again, on the question of war, Gandhi did not accept the distinction between just and unjust war because for him every war was wrong. He supposed that every war resulted in massive violence including the just war. Thus, Gandhian approach appears to be indefensible. For example, Gandhi supported western democracies adjacent to the Fascists and Nazis in World War II. But in doing so, he fervidly opposed the use of violence for the sake of just war. Here emotionalism played a part in Gandhi's life because he believed in the solution of crisis through nonviolent means, whatever the situation would have been. In this way Gandhi rejected the distinction made between "just" and "unjust" wars. Here his methodology was quite different from Thoreau's Civil disobedience. Thoreau's effort is related to his response to the Mexican War of 1848. In the Mexican War, he refused to pay the poll tax and advised the others to do the same. Gandhi opposed this method of boycott. He said "If I have only a choice between paying for the army of soldiers to kill my neighbours, or to be a soldier myself, I would as I must consistently with my creed enlist as a soldier in the hope of controlling of violence and even converting my comrades."⁶

Infect Gandhi's perception towards war fairly different from pacifist thinkers. War, to him, was a natural outcome of his own thinking and experience. So far pacifists were concerned, they accentuated on the "negation of war," while Gandhi war primarily concerned with human dignity in all its aspects. Therefore, Gandhi's stress was on experiments with truth and it was based on non-violence, the relationship of means and ends and self-suffering. It exposed the influence of the Gita on his political and military writings. In Gita, the theme of Krishna's discourse to

⁵ . Ibid, Vol. 16, p. 553, Vol. 48, p 189

⁶ *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, New Delhi, Vol. 42, p 437

Arjuna is “action alone is the province... nor should thou desire to avoid action province.... nor should thou desire to avoid action.”⁷

Non-violence and War: Gandhi view: Gandhi thinks that the growth of the military art and the display of the military liberty by the soldiers is a sign of decadence and not of progress. The cult of armament and preparedness is the indirect testimony to the wide prevalence of fear, distrust and suspicion. Hence, Gandhi wanted freedom to preach non-violence as a 'substitute' for war. He considered war as an absolute evil and would not accept even the plea of defensive war or a just war. He would have absolutely repudiated the notion of an anticipatory war. He feels that there is always some party which is guilty of initiating a war. It is not correct and adequate to state that war is the mechanism of devil or of uncontrollable forces. He said that behind the hand that hurls and sward there is always the brain and the mind that prescribed the use of the sword. Leo Tolstoy also recognized the clamouring contradiction between the profession of Christianity and the simultaneous acknowledgement of the necessity of armaments for national security. Gandhi thought the absoluteness of peace and had even visualizes universal disarmament. His *ahimsā* provides an ultimate vision of universal fraternity and he hoped that in world politics there would be the increasing resort to consultation and arbitration in place of armed conflicts.

Although, according to Gandhi, all war is unjust from the standpoint of *ahimsā*, still the aspiration after freedom would distinguish between the aggressor and the defender and render all moral support to the latter. Sometimes a contradiction has been felt to exist between Gandhi's non-violence and his participation in some forms of war. During the time of Boer War, in 1899, he raised a Volunteer Ambulance Corps. In 1906, he raised a stretcher-bearing party of twenty Indians at the time of Zulu Rebellion. In 1914, he raised a Volunteer Ambulance Corps in London consisting chiefly of Indian students residing in London. In 1918, he nearly killed himself by strenuous activity for the requirement of Indian soldiers for a war on the British side. While Tilak wanted to help the Allies through recruitment only on certain conditions being fulfilled, Gandhi was for unconditional military support. Hence it is asked that if Gandhi was a votary of absolute *ahimsā* why he participated

⁷ Mahadev Desai, *The Gita According to Gandhi*, Ahmedabad, 1956, p 128, 161

in any way in a war. When he was helping recruitment in 1918, was he not aiding in planning the killing of German soldiers? But Gandhi had defended his action on the ground that so long as he was a subject of British Empire it was his duty to help it in times of crisis. He says in his *Autobiography*, "When two nations are fighting, the duty of a votary of *ahimsā* is to support war. He who is not equal to that duty, he who has no power of resisting war, he who is not qualified to resist war, may take part in war. I had hoped to improve my status and that of my people through the British Empire. Whilst in England I was enjoying the protection of the British Fleet, and taking shelter as I did under its armed might, I was directly participating in its potential violence. Therefore, if I desire to retain my connection with the Empire and to live under its banner, one of the three courses was open to me: I could declare open resistance to the war, and in accordance with the law of Satyagraha, boycott the Empire until it changed its military police; or I could seek imprisonment by civil disobedience of such of its laws as were fit to be disobeyed; or I could participate in the war in the side of the Empire and thereby acquire the capacity and fitness for resisting the violence of war. I lacked this capacity and fitness, so I thought there was nothing for it but to serve in the war. I make no distinction, from the point of view of *ahimsā*, between combatants and non-combatants. He, who volunteers to serve a band of dacoits, by working as their carrier, or their watchman while they are about their business or their nurse when they are wounded, is as guilty of dacoity as the dacoits themselves. In the same way those who confine themselves to attending to the wounded in battle cannot be absolved from the guilty of war"⁸ But it may also be pointed out that in the course of Second World War, he categorically refused to adopt a position similar to the one adopted in 1918.

In 1927, when the *Autobiography* was published, Gandhi was 58 years old. There were still many non-violent struggles to be fought e.g., Hindu-Muslim unity, abolition of caste based untouchability, advocacy of home-spun Swadeshi clothing's and above all gaining India's independence from the British rule. His *Autobiography* provides insights into shaping of core beliefs on which his non-violent instrument of political action, *Satyāgraha* or truth force was later founded. On his concept of

⁸ *The Story of My Experiment of Truth*, p 264

ahimsā Gandhi writes: "*Ahimsā* is the comprehensive principle. We are helping morals caught in flagration of *himsā*. The saying that life lives on life has a deep meaning in it. Men cannot for a moment live without consciously or unconsciously committing outward *himsā*. The very fact of his living-eating, drinking and moving about - necessarily involves some *himsā*; destruction of life is it ever so minute. A votary of *ahimsā* therefore remains true to his faith if the spring of all his actions is compassion, if he shun to the best of his ability the destruction of the tiniest creature, tries to save it and thus increasingly strives to be free from the deadly coil of *himsā*."⁹ Such an individual will then constantly grow in self-restraint and love for others.

When two groups are fighting, it is the duty of the worshiper of non-violence to stop the war. He who is not capable for this duty, who has no strength to resist the war, who is not able to do so, can take part in war and try to liberate himself, the nation and the world from war. All efforts to end the war will fail until the causes of the war are understood and its root causes addressed. Isn't the main reason for the modern war the inhumane explanation of the so called weak nation of the world? If there is no courage, no heroism behind the war would have been a very disgusting thing. Speech was not needed to produce war. Whatever happens today is disrespect to the principle of non-violence, the introduction of violence as if it is an eternal law. Today we see an open competition one with another on the issue of weapons. Gandhi thinks that the outcome of World War II will be the same as described in *Mahābhārata*. One of the *trisankubāsi* described the *Mahābhārata* as the eternal history of man. The thing that is mentioned in the epic is happening before our eyes today. The warring nations are destroying themselves with such fury and terror that in the end everyone will get tired. The destiny of the winners will be like that of the *Pandavas*. The great warrior Arjuna was robbed a little in board daylight. And a new system will be born from this horrible massacre. Millions of exploited and hardworking people have been thirsty for so long. The prayers of peace lovers can never fail.

⁹ Balwant Bhaneja, *Understanding Gandhi's Ahimsa (Non-violence), Reflection on an Autobiography: The Story of My Experiment of Truth*, Book Review, Articles, 2006, ISSN- 1886-5860