

## Gandhi on Non-Violence (*Ahimsa*)

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*There is no other God than Truth ... and the only means for the realization of Truth is Ahimsa ... a perfect vision of Truth can only follow a complete realization of Ahimsa.*

(Gandhi, 1969: 565.)

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi is universally recognized as the glorious symbol of “Truth” and “Non-violence”. The philosophy of Truth (*Satya*) and non-violence (*Ahimsa*) was anchored in his deep faith in the reality of God whom he defined as Truth. “*Satya* is the perfect name for God” (Gandhi, 1968–1969, IV: 314)<sup>1</sup>. Since the entire humanity is a sublime expression of God, it was ordained by Gandhi’s faith that those who aspire to worship God as devotees must dedicate themselves for the active service of humanity. He considered God and Truth as one and at the same time, in consonance with his belief and conviction, he accepted Truth and non-violence as one and the same thing “as one includes the other” (IV: 316). As such, God or Truth can be realized only through non-violence (*Ahimsa*). In fact non-violence (*Ahimsa*) is the basis of the search for Truth. Therefore, search shall be futile if not founded on *Ahimsa* as its basis.

The notion of *Satyagraha* emerged after a lot of search for a name for the movement which sought the liberation of a toiling humanity suffering under the yoke of a foreign rule. The term *Satya* (Truth) *Agraha* (firmness) was coined to designate the struggle for the independence of the country in the name of Truth and God:

*Satyagraha* is essentially a weapon of the Truthful. A *Satyagraha* is pledged to Non-violence and unless people observe it in thought, word and deed, I cannot offer mass *Satyagraha*. (Gandhi, 1968–1969, I: 524)

Gandhi’s main concern was to evolve higher values for the establishment of a new world order “... which, activated by moral principles, may take decisions not because they are expedient but because they are right” as he declared in *Harijan*, the newspaper he had founded in 1933 (October 16, 1934).

This miracle of liberation from the foreign rule and establishment of *Swaraj* could be achieved by Gandhi as a consequence of his deep conviction that democracy, inspired by the inner purification of the soul through Truth and Non-violence (*Ahimsa*), may be the best option for establishing self-rule (*Swaraj*):

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The philosopher's stone which could effect this transformation is a little word of two syllables – *Satya* (Truth). If every Indian sticks to Truth, Swaraj will come to us of its own accord (Gandhi, 1968–1969, VI: 131).

However, Gandhi's thought sprung from his deep immersion in the scholarship of Indian tradition which sanctified the basic principles of democracy. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and Manu's *Smriti* are the earliest works which attempt formulations of precepts concerning the establishment of the noble institutions of society including ideal kingship which may pave the way for an ideal and conflict free society.

In Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, which unmistakably marks the culmination of a long process of thought on matters of an ideal society, a perfect oneness of interests of the ruled and the ruler is visualized. Referring to rules to be obeyed by the king it is stated that in the happiness of the subjects lies the happiness of the king as the well-being of the king lies in what is beneficial to the subjects. Kautilya ordains further that the king should allow unrestricted entrance to those wishing to see him in connection with their affairs. A king difficult of access is made to do the reverse of what ought to be done and what ought not to be done, by those near to him. In consequence of that, he may have to face a rebellion by his subjects or subjugation by the enemy. Kautilya says in this context (1.2.2–12):

Philosophy is ever thought as the lamp of all sciences, as the means of all action and as the support of all laws and duties... With [its] help one can learn what is spiritual good and material well-being (Kangle, 1969).

This unity of spiritual good and material well-being constitutes the essence of the Indian theory of values.

*Ahimsa* or non-violence has been accepted by Indian traditions as the ultimate value, i.e. *param-dharma*. Though *Ahimsa* is the highest virtue in Indian ethics, the use of violence was justified in certain circumstances because the warrior class (*Ksatriyas*) was expected to protect the inmates of hermitages from non-Aryan tribes. It is observed in *Rig Veda*:

I string the bow of Rudra for the destruction of all who molest the Brahmins. I fight for the protection of the pure and I pervade the heaven and earth (*Rig Veda* x.125; see Chandel, 1980: 817).

The ideal of *Ahimsa* was cherished by Indian seers as a precious goal, but departures from it were accepted with regret, because society had to recognize the relative justification of institutions and laws as well as the hardness of men's hearts. In the recent times, emergence of Gandhi proclaimed the undiluted supremacy of non-violence (*Ahimsa*) with a vigour never seen before.

## *Ahimsa*

The philosophy of Gandhi rests on his faith in Truth (*Satya*) and non-violence (*Ahimsa*). He wrote in this context: "*Ahimsa* (non-violence) and *Truth* (*Satya*) are so intertwined that it is practically impossible to disentangle and separate them. They are like the two sides of a coin; *Ahimsa* is the means, Truth is the end" (Gandhi, 1968–1969, IV: 219). Gandhi proclaimed a meaningful pursuit of truth and envisaged truth as the ultimate ideal of life which can be attained through *Ahimsa* only. According to him, life embedded in Truth (*Satya*) ought to be preferred to the life of pleasures.

Commenting on the World War and the destruction caused by it, Martin Luther King had observed: "New weapons of terrifying dimensions have made it more clear than ever that war

and civilization cannot both continue into man's future. New ways of solving conflicts, without violence, must be discovered and put into operation" (Gregg, 1960: VII). The concept of *Ahimsa* or non-violence was one such idea which was looked at as befittingly responding to the above challenge. It had apparently emerged from the fertile imagination of the forest sages of antiquity and thereafter it was handed down to us from the ancient Vedic, Buddhist, and Jaina traditions of Indian Philosophy. The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* depicts *dharma* as the sovereign power ruling even the weak and it can overcome the strong with the help of truth or *Satya*, which is *dharma*. And again the epic *Mahabharata* pronounces:

Whatever is performed with non-violence (*Ahimsa*), that is *dharma*. ... (it) involves abstention from injury to creatures. ... that it is the highest good by means of which one drives away evil. Therefore *Satya* and *Ahimsa* are traditionally identified with *dharma*, the cosmic law which governs and determines human conduct (Iyer, 1973: 225–226).

For wisdom and knowledge, the Indian mind has gone back to fourteen sources of knowledge of *dharma* (*dharma sutras*) which include four Vedas and two Epics of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* – Bhagavat Gita, being the essence of the latter. Gandhi often invoked *Mahabharata* in support of his views that *dharma* signifies the way of truth and non-violence. In his autobiography Gandhi also accepted that Leo Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is Within You* had converted him into a thoroughly non-violent man.

Gandhi made a distinction between the negative and positive aspects of *Ahimsa*. In its negative form, it implies not injuring any living being, nor bearing any ill will towards anyone or being the cause of any mental suffering:

In its positive form *Ahimsa* means the largest love, the greatest charity. If I am a follower of *Ahimsa*, I must love my enemy, I must apply the same rules to the wrong doer who is my enemy or a stranger to me, as I would do to my wrong doing father or son. The active *Ahimsa* necessarily included truth and fearlessness (Bose, 1968: 157–158).

According to Gandhi, "*Ahimsa* binds us to one another and to God. *Ahimsa* and love are one and the same thing" (1968: 17). Love implies the sense of self-sacrifice. Gandhi believed that love is possible with all beings since man or living creatures are the manifestations of an immanent God. We cannot see the absolute God, only manifestations of God can be seen and loved in the world in the form of living beings. Thus it is clear that to be a follower of *Ahimsa* is a sublime act. It is like the pursuit of divine meditation and penance, i.e. *sadhana* or *tapasaya*.

*Ahimsa* for Gandhi was not only a desirable moral virtue but also the most fundamental way in which one could express one's respect for the innate worth and value of all human beings. The creed of *Ahimsa* presupposes the existence of an immortal essence in the human personality that gives man the courage to die without any intention to kill. Non-violence is possible only by the strength of inner self as true non-violence resides in the mind and has an inner disposition of fearlessness.

Gandhi stressed the socio-economic and political implications of non-violence. He wanted a social order based on the principles of cooperation, where people will serve each other with whatever gifts they have been given. Gandhi's ideal of a non-violent society is a state without political power. But he says that the ideal is never fully realized in life. Hence, Thoreau is right when he says that government is the best which governs the least. Gandhi advocated the doctrine of trusteeship as he feared that the state may use too much violence against those who differ from it. He wanted to establish a non-violent society which is regulated by self-rule or *Swaraj* where the ruling principle will be non-violence, in all fields social, political, and economic.

Gandhi's concept of non-violence seems to have been derived from the famous Indian Vedantic doctrine of God being immanent as well as transcendent at the same time (Balasubramanian, 1996: 90–110). The implications of the doctrine are that all human beings, animals, and the rest of nature are divine. If nothing is possible outside God, then there is no scope for inflicting violence, in thought, word, or deed on any one. Buddhism and Jainism do not accept the existence of God as essential for religion and morality. Nevertheless, they do believe in the unity and sanctity of all life. Consequently, Gandhi was constrained to believe that non-violence is the essence of all religions in Indian tradition.

### *Satyagraha*

Gandhi believed that there is a close connection between Non-violence and *Satyagraha*. Non-violence is the first and foremost salient feature of *Satyagraha*. Without being a believer in non-violent thought, word, and action, it is not possible to think of *Satyagraha*. In seeking justice one has to open the eyes of others towards the prevailing injustice through self-suffering. He writes in *Young India* on 8 November 1920:

I have therefore ventured to place before India the ancient law of self suffering. For *Satyagraha* and its off-shoots, non-cooperation and civil resistance, are nothing but two names for the law of suffering. Non-violence in its dynamic condition means conscious suffering. It does not mean meek submission to the will of the evil doer, but it means the putting of one's soul against the will of the tyrant (Gandhi, 1950: 183).

Commenting on Truth and non-violence, he further writes:

The world rests upon the bedrock of *Satya* or truth. *ASatya* meaning untruth, also means non-existent and *Satya* or Truth also means that which is ... And Truth being that which can never be destroyed. This is the doctrine of *Satyagraha* in a nutshell (Gandhi, 1968–1969, III: 389).

Gandhi says that *Satyagraha* is the relentless search for truth and a determination to reach the truth. *Satyagraha* also implies an assertion and vindication of the power of the human soul against political and economic domination, a non-violent battle for the victory of truth, initiated not by the human body but by the human soul.

About the nature of the human soul, the *Samkhya* school in Indian tradition makes a threefold distinction between *tamas*, *rajas*, and *sattva* which have a hierarchical gradation in the sense that tamasic refers to passive and dark aspects, *rajas* to the active aspect, and *sattva* to the virtuous aspect. By following *sattva* and by renouncing *tamas* and *rajas* an individual can follow the path of *Ahimsa*, perfection, and virtue.

The insights of *Samkhya* philosophy provided to Gandhi great lessons on truth, non-violence, and universal peace. It seems that on the basis of this insight Gandhi's entire critique of modern western civilization emerged which had, according to him, made India forget its own culture and tradition of simplicity, non-possession, and non-violence.

The antidote Gandhi suggested to come out of this human predicament was *Satyagraha*. He believed that by practicing *Satyagraha* and non-violence, man can redeem himself. He believed that all the evils arise out of man's attraction to sensuous pleasures and the focus of *Satyagraha* is to change man's mind from sensuous to spiritual. We must, therefore, pull out of material attractions and bodily pleasures and move towards spirituality and non-violence.

Gandhi took Jesus Christ as an "apostle" of *Satyagraha*. His ungrudging suffering on the cross combined with the words of love and sympathy even for those who were responsible for his

crucifixion is the most befitting example of *Satyagraha*. The Sermon on the Mount was a great source of inspiration for Gandhi on *satya* and *Ahimsa*, i.e. *Satyagraha*. Jesus and his teachings remained at the core of his philosophy of *Satyagraha*. While Indian wisdom from the Bhagavat Gita gave depth to his vision of *Satyagraha*, Tolstoy's *Kingdom of God is Within You* gave it a permanent form as he claimed later on.

Gandhi also found the spirit of *Satyagraha* alive in Islam. The sufferings of Ali, the son-in-law of Mohammed, and Socrates' fearlessness and his calmness while he took the poison for the victory of truth had a great impact on Gandhi. Regarding Socrates, he wrote: "Greece stand in high esteem because of him. We must learn to live and die like Socrates. He was moreover a great *Satyagrahi*. He adopted *Satyagraha* against his own people. As a result the Greeks became a great people" (Gandhi, 1999, viii: 173).

Gandhi called *Satyagraha* a firm adherence to justice and truth, a categorical choice for truth, soul, justice, and God. The human body is only a means for attaining truth and realization of God immanent in the form of humanity. He had faith in the traditional Indian maxim, *Satyameva Jayate*, i.e. Truth always triumphs. It was his belief that the pursuit of justice must be done in a non-violent spirit.

*Satyagraha* is based on the fundamental truth that the soul remains unconquered. Gandhi had faith in the conversion of the heart of the opponent however powerful he may be. Every human being, however degraded, has in him the divine spark and is capable of responding to kind and generous treatment. Gandhi succeeded in converting the hearts of many of his opponents in his lifetime.

Initially, Gandhi in his Hind Swaraj used the word passive resistance in place of *Satyagraha*. But he was soon disillusioned with this word as he found that the term "passive resistance" was too narrowly constructed and that it could be misconstrued to be a weapon of the weak or characterized by hatred and could finally manifest itself as violence. He felt that the term passive resistance failed to express adequately the nature of non-violent resistance in the active form as developed by him. His ideal was active non-violent resistance to injustice. Hatred and violence were incompatible with the principle of *Ahimsa*. It was clear to Gandhi that a new word must be coined to designate their specific struggle. It was only after he returned to India and assumed the leadership of the national movement that he started using the term *Satyagraha* to denote his kind of non-violent resistance:

In *Satyagraha* there is always unflinching adherence to truth. It is never to be forsaken even for Swaraj. Swaraj is useless if Truth has to be sacrificed (Gandhi, 1969: 25).

Such a Swaraj will ultimately ruin the people. Gandhi's appeal to *Ahimsa* was ultimately an appeal to the reason of the individual. It was an affirmation of purity of means in the pursuit of any social and political goal.

For the discipline and training of *Satyagrahis*, Gandhi established *Satyagraha* ashrams first in South Africa and later in India. The life in a *Satyagraha* ashram was a different and a difficult one. Ashram inmates were to lead disciplined lives following the fulfillment of certain vows listed below:

1. *Satya*, or Truth
2. *Ahimsa*, or non-violence
3. Brahmacharya, or chastity
4. Aparigraha, or non-possessiveness
5. Fearlessness
6. Control of senses

7. Non-stealing
8. Bread Labour
9. Equality of religions
10. Anti untouchability
11. Swadeshi, or use of one's own land's goods.

According to Gandhi these vows are required for moral and physical discipline of *Satyagrahis*; body and flesh have to be subdued for the progress of soul and the self. Explaining the meaning of vows Gandhi said that to do at any cost something that one ought to do constitutes a vow. We cannot do anything that is pure and important without making a true resolution. "We should therefore, never doubt the necessity of vows for the purpose of self-purification and self-realization" (Gandhi, 1951: 37).

The First vow to be observed by all the *Satyagrahi*'s is having faith in God. The word *Satyagraha* itself is nothing but holding firmly to truth. Sat means "being". "Nothing is or exists in reality except God or Truth" (Gandhi, 1951: 38). So Truth is considered as ultimate in Gandhian thought, it is equivalent to being and reality. *Satyagraha* is clinging to Truth, God, or reality. A true *Satyagrahi* is a man of God. God is Sat Chit and Ananda. Gandhi believed that devotion to this truth is the sole justification for our existence: "Truth should be the very breath of our life ... There should be Truth in thought, truth in speech and truth in action" (Gandhi, 1951: 39).

For the realization of Truth Gandhi believed in the path advocated in the Bhagavat Gita. He writes:

[B]y single minded devotion (abhyasa) and indifference to all other interests in life (vairagya) one can realize the truth. The quest of truth involves tapa, self suffering, sometimes, even up to death. There can be no place in it for self interest. There is no place for cowardice, no place for defeat. It is the talisman by which death itself becomes the portal of life eternal ... (Gandhi, 1951: 40).

Faith in God is a precondition for *Satyagraha*. It was Gandhi's belief that only that man can bear self-suffering who has faith in God.

The second vow to be taken and preserved is *Ahimsa*, for all the *Satyagrahis*. Truth and *Ahimsa* are inseparable for Gandhi. *Ahimsa* enables us to seek and find truth:

*Ahimsa* and Truth are so intertwined that it is practically impossible to disentangle and separate them ... Nevertheless, *Ahimsa* is the means: Truth is the end (Gandhi, 1951: 42).

The third vow is the vow of *brahmacharya* that literally means the conduct of a seeker of Brahma – the Creator. Gandhi believed we cannot realize God and meditate if we don't have control over our senses. A *Satyagrahi* has to develop universal love. Control of animal passion is the first stage in the observance of *brahmacharya*.

The ideal of non-possession is the next vow. A seeker of truth will not hold or desire to possess beyond what is needed for sustenance. Gandhian ideal of non-possession means leading a life of simplicity. Gandhi has laid stress on our traditional civilization where we are asked to reduce our needs and not to covet the objects of sense. He believed that civilization in the real sense of the term consists not in the multiplication, but in the deliberate and voluntary reduction of wants. This alone promotes real happiness and contentment and increases the capacity for service. According to Gandhi, it is the desire alone which creates bondage. However, service of humanity is the purpose of our birth. We need to examine ourselves from this point of view.

The next vow is the vow of non-stealing and non-thieving. Gandhi states that “if I take anything I do not need for my own immediate use and keep it, I thief it from somebody else” (Prabhu and Rao, 1967: 307) and adds: “You and I must adjust our wants, and even undergo voluntary privation in order that the others be nursed, fed and clothed” (Prabhu and Rao, 1967: 307).

Besides, control of senses is very necessary for a *Satyagrahi*. The next vow is the vow of fearlessness which is the sign of spirituality. A man who lives under fear cannot become a *Satyagrahi*. If one wants to follow the vow of truth, then fearlessness is absolutely necessary (Prabhu and Rao, 1967: 198).

Bread labour is yet another vow to be taken by the *Satyagrahis*. It is a pre-requisite of a non-violent life. It is the basic principle of life. Man should not live on the labour of others; rather he should himself earn his bread by his own labour. Regarding this he wrote:

The law, that to live man must work, first came home to me upon reading Tolstoy's writings on bread labour. But even before that I had begun to pay homage to it after reading Ruskin's *Unto this Last*. The divine law, that man must earn his bread by labouring with his own hands, was first stressed by a Russian writer T.M. Bondaref. Tolstoy gave it wider publicity.

In my view, the same principle has been set forth in the third chapter of the Gita where we are told that he who eats without offering sacrifice eats stolen food. Sacrifice here can only mean bread labour (Prabhu and Rao, 1967: 198).

Gandhi wanted every *Satyagrahi* to have respect for all religions. He was against communalism and advocated sacrifice of life in saving the lives of men of other religions in the fire of communal disharmony. Self-purification and self-sacrifice are necessary attributes of a *Satyagrahi*.

Yet another important issue of Social life in India is untouchability. Gandhi was of the view that a *Satyagrahi* must refuse it. He considered it to be a blot on the Hindu religion. Being a devout upholder of Indian tradition, he was equally keen to revitalize the Hindu Society from within by removing grievous injustice like untouchability. He gave a clarion call to all truth loving people to oppose untouchability (see Mathews, 2004: 73–117).

Before the conceptualization of *Satyagraha* Gandhi had envisaged civil disobedience and non-cooperation as the non-violent methods of resolving conflicts as well as peaceful devices for producing positive changes in social and political life. But later he substituted *Satyagraha* in place of the above as a method of resolving conflicts through non-violent means (Varma, 2001: 84).

Gandhi laid emphasis on public opinion that plays a crucial role in *Satyagraha*. In fact, through public opinion the evils of an autocratic state are brought to the notice of people, which paves the way for the fall of tyrannical political regimes.

Gandhi spoke of fasting as a form of *Satyagraha* but he cautioned against it saying that a *Satyagrahi* should fast only as a last resort when all other avenues of redress have been explored and failed. For this kind of *Satyagraha* inner strength and long penance (*sadhna*) are mandatory. To Gandhi *Satyagraha* is a matter of do or die. It is one of the most powerful methods of direct action. A *Satyagrahi* exhausts all other means, before he resorts to *Satyagraha*. It is his obligation to constantly approach the constituted authority, appeal to public opinion, and state his cause calmly. *Satyagraha* comes last once all these means have been in vain.

We can conclude that *Satyagraha* and *Ahimsa* are conjointly intermingled aspects of possible socio-political action having the force of spirituality. *Satyagraha* aims at the victory of Truth, and aims at the conversion of the hearts of opponents, thereby killing the enmity for ever. Through the realization of Truth, *Satyagraha* aims at the attainment of *Swaraj* which was our cherished dream at the time of seeking freedom from the yoke of foreign rule.

*Satyagraha* is a novel method given by Gandhi to solve the social, economic, and political problems of a state, country, or the world at large. The greatest contribution of Gandhi is presenting *Satyagraha* as the only reliable means of disabling injustice and as a facilitator for peaceful change and transformation of relationships through suffering. The strength and potency of *Satyagraha* is described by his followers in these words, “It is not Gandhiji who has made *Satyagraha*, but *Satyagraha* which had made Gandhiji” (Ramachandran and Mahadevan, 1964: 1).

He had great faith in the divinity of human nature and the power of love; the synthesis of the two goes into the making of *Ahimsa*. He envisaged a world free from the evils of conflict and war if *Ahimsa* is accepted as an ideal for guiding the lives of individuals and nations and accepted as a matrix of values for action. He said in his Lecture on the Voice of Truth:

God has vouchsafed to me a priceless gift in the weapon of *Ahimsa*. I and my *Ahimsa* are on our trial today. If in the present crisis, when the earth is being scorched by the flames of Himsa and crying for deliverance, I failed to make use of the God given talent, God will not forgive me (Gandhi, 1968–1969, V: 43).

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