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The relevance of Gandhi in modern society the concept of non-violence

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Abstract

Non-violence is the personal practice of being harmless to self and others under every condition. It comes from the belief that hurting people, animals or the environment is unnecessary to achieve an outcome and refers to a general philosophy of abstention from violence based on moral, religious or spiritual principles. Nonviolence also has 'active' or 'activist' elements, in that believers accept the need for nonviolence as a means to achieve political and social change. In modern times, nonviolent methods of action have been a powerful tool for social protest and revolutionary social and political change. There are many examples of their use. Fuller surveys may be found in the entries on civil resistance, nonviolent resistance and nonviolent revolution. Here certain movements particularly influenced by a philosophy of nonviolence should be mentioned, including Mahatma Gandhi leading a successful decades-long nonviolent struggle against British rule in India, Martin Luther King's and James Bevel's adoption of Gandhi's nonviolent methods in their campaigns to win civil rights for African Americans, and César Chávez's campaigns of nonviolence in the 1960s to protest the treatment of farm workers in California. The 1989 "Velvet Revolution" in Czechoslovakia that saw the overthrow of the Communist government is considered one of the most important of the largely nonviolent Revolutions of 1989. The term "nonviolence" is often linked with or used as a synonym for peace, and despite being frequently equated with passivity and pacifism, this is rejected by nonviolent advocates and activists. Nonviolence refers specifically to the absence of violence and is always the choice to do no harm or the least harm, and passivity is the choice to do nothing. This paper try to explain the concept and non-violence and the relevance of Gandhi in modern society.

Keywords: Non-violence, Advaita, Truth, Destruction, Conflict, Untouchability, Inconsistent, Satyagraha

Introduction

The moment we talk of Mahatma Gandhi, the questions with which we are faced are: What is the relevance of Gandhi in modern times? What inspiration can we draw from his life and actions? How does Gandhiji's way of life affect our course of actions? etc. The relevance of a man and his message can be said to have different aspects. The relevance can be immediate or remote, it can be local, regional or general and it can be relevant to some or universally for all. In the case of Mahatma Gandhi we can study all these different aspects of relevance. Dr. Martin Luther king, the Nobel Prize winner of U.S.A. came to India in 1959. On the eve of his departure from the land of Gandhi, he was asked a cynical question at a press conference in Delhi; where is Gandhi today?; We see him nowhere. Dr. King replied; Gandhi is inevitable. If humanity is to progress, Gandhi is inescapable, we may ignore him only at our own risk. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru said soon after he got the news of the death of Mahatma Gandhi. The light is gone and yet it will shine for a hundred years."

Man, according to Gandhi is the measure. Gandhiji himself confessed that he was a seeker of truth and an advocate of non-violence. Gandhi believed that man had a great future and that he is evolving towards a higher and nobler destiny. Gandhiji sought for a law of life which would promote the common welfare and help man reach the higher level of consciousness.

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He ultimately came to the conclusion that non-violence in thought, word and deed was the only way to human progress both individual and social. Gandhi described Ahimsa or non-violence as a means to Truth which is the end. To quote Gandhiji, "They are like the two sides of a coin, or rather a smooth unstamped metallic disc. Who can say which the obverse is and which is the reverse? If we ask why Gandhi laid so much stress on the relation between Truth and non-violence we have to look at Gandhi's view of self or Atman. Mahatma Gandhi makes no distinction between the self or Atman and Truth or God. Self realization, therefore, according to Gandhi, is Truth Realisation or the realisation of God. He maintains the Advaita or non-dualist position when he says that the self within man is at one with the essence of reality which is Truth or God. So if the self of an individual or the Atman is at one with Truth or God, then to inflict violence on another is to injure God or undermine Truth. This is evident from Gandhi's saying as "I believe in Advaita, I believe in the essential unity of man and for that matter, of all that lives"?

In his concept of ahimsa or non-violence Gandhiji was greatly influenced by Tolstoy according to whom non-violence involved not only the negative attitude of freedom from anger or hate but also the positive attitude of love for all men. According to Gandhi, Ahimsa in its negative aspect involves doing no injury to any being either physically or mentally. This means that I must not only refrain from doing any bodily harm to a person, but I must also refrain from bearing any towards him. It also means that I must do no injury in any form to any sub-human species.' Ahimsa in its positive aspect means love.

But the concept of non-violence which seems to be so simple an ideal poses real problems for Gandhi. The fact that Ahimsa is regarded as the law of the human species does not mean that it is very easy to practise it. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi "Man may have distinguished from the animal by his capacity of non-violence, but it does not mean that he has shed all vestiges of the animal in him. He is still a child of nature as well as being a child of the spirit, and the practice of non-violence required a great deal of discipline and courage. It is an activity of the brave and strong and not of the cowardly, for cowardice and ahimsa do not go together any more than fire and water.

But the question that often arises, particularly in modern times is that "Is it not necessary sometimes to inflict violence and is not killing the only course open to a man in certain circumstances? In this age of conflict, tyranny, oppression and anarchy in personal, social and political, life, is not violence the only answer? Gandhi himself gives some answers to such problems which may be applied successfully in the present society also. According to Gandhiji, if non-violence implies non-killing or non-injury, perfect non-violence is impossible so long as we exist physically? It is impossible to sustain one's body without the destruction of other bodies to some extent. We destroy plant and animal life for food and we destroy pests for the sake of health and as Gandhi admits, we do not regard this as irreligious in any way. So there is no question of being absolutely non-violent, which is, according to Gandhi, a theory like Euclid's point or straight line. Again there may be instances in social life that seems to require some form of himsa or violence. Gandhi has cited the example of a man who in a fit of madness goes about with a sword in his hand killing indiscriminately. To destroy such a man may be

necessary and unavoidable in order to protect other members of society. Killing in such circumstances might be regarded as a moral duty. What emerges from this example is that there may arise situations or moral dilemma which may necessitate the use of violence in certain circumstances. For example again, Gandhi against all norms of accepted orthodox Ahimsa, did not hesitate, to ask the attending doctor to end the life of the sick calf who had been groaning under unbearable pain and whose disease was declared as incurable. Therefore we can say without any hesitation that such rational and humanistic attitude which Gandhi takes into consideration in modifying his concept of Ahimsa makes Gandhian non-violence more acceptable and practical in the modern society.

Another important aspect of non-violence that should be noted is that though Gandhiji was against warfare it does not mean a resignation of all fighting against wickedness — it is the most active, militant and powerful fighting against it. His Satyagraha is not a weak submission to the will of the evil doer. Therefore Gandhiji always said that violence is better than cowardice. So Gandhi said that "where there is a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence".¹ Again Gandhiji said that he would like "India resort to arms in order to defend her honour than that she should in a cowardly manner become or remain a helpless witness to her own dishonour"⁸. Thus the doubts expressed by the critics regarding the probabilities of experimentation in non-violence can be answered from different standpoints. The opposite of non-violence is violence. To judge which is superior we have to observe the result of an action. The result of any action can consist of two aspects individual and social, upon the object. If the result of an action benefits the individual but harms the society or if the result of an activity is favourable for the present but detrimental for the future then that action cannot be said to be good. The result of an activity must be good for the individual and society, at present and in future. Judging violence from this criterion we see that it can benefit either the individual or the society, not the two together. For example a wealthy person exploits the poor and lives in luxury but he causes misery to innumerable people who live in misery. Besides only the immediate results of violence can be good. Violence gives rise to further violence. On the contrary non-violence may take a long time to win but its results are permanent. Sometimes a man who pursues non-violence may even die without being rewarded but his sacrifices produce an effect that endures in the hearts of men.

The most important aspect of Gandhian thought; which can be made more practicable today is his insistence on the resolution of all conflicts by peaceful means. According to Gandhi war and violence never solve any problems. They create new ones and sow the seeds of hatred and consequently future wars. The present situation of our country particularly Assam has rendered the Gandhian ideal of non-violence more relevant than anything else. The time has come when we should sincerely discard violence and try to solve problems and conflicts through negotiation. To him, it is a misconception to think of any social change through violence or force. According to Gandhi it is sheer nonsense to think that we can change anybody's ideas by external physical force. Hence the conclusion follows that the more of violence, the less of real revolution." Gandhiji's teaching of non-violence is relevant even in the social and economic field. Gandhi developed his method of non-violence for

attaining social and economic justice also. Ahimsa in its positive aspect means love and therefore it is totally incompatible with possession or exploitation. To use Gandhi's words "Love and exclusive possession can never go together".w "Similarly, frightfulness, exploitation of the weak, immoral gains, insatiable pursuit after enjoyments of the flesh are utterly inconsistent"" with it, Thus violence has become almost synonymous with exploitation.

To speak of the relevance of Gandhi's thoughts the emphasis should be on the individuals who form the society. For successful implementation of Gandhiji's ideal of non-violence a total moral transformation of the people is necessary. In the economic field non-violence can be achieved by the practice of trusteeship but to secure it the honesty of the trustee is an indispensable condition. If untouchability is to be eradicated and social equality is to be established, everyone should have faith in the maxim "All men are brothers". Mahatma Gandhi's ideal of non-violence is relevant not only for the present but for all times to come not only for Assam but for India, nay the whole world. It is relevant to us, Indians as well as for the entire humanity but the success of non-violence would depend on how much the people have progressed ethically. It is useless to preach non-violence before animals. It would be like trying to convince the nature of colour to a born blind man.

The success achieved by the student community In the Assam movement of 1985 on the foreign national's issue which was a peaceful, non-violent struggle is a glaring proof of the success of non-violence even in the present age. If that could succeed there is no reason why the present state of violence and anarchy in the same land with the same people cannot be eradicated. There is no reason why the present problems cannot be solved by non-violent means.

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