

Mahatma Gandhi and Ahimsa - A Historical Study

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Introduction

An attempt has been made to trace out the principles of Gandhiji especially Ahimsa or Non-Violence. The peer reviewed journals and standard books which are collected from Manonmaniam Sundaranar University and District libraries in Tirunelveli and Kanniyakumari are referred for writing this study. The aim of this research paper is to make the readers, teachers, students and the general public to make aware of the evil consequences of violence or terrorism and to make all people non-violent, so that all countries in the world can live in amity peace and harmony as peace which is the key to development and progress of the world.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi popularly known as the “Father of the Nation” who was one of the greatest nationalist leaders of modern India. He was born on 2nd October 1869 at Porbandar in Gujarat. His father Karamchand Kaba Gandhi was a Dewan of the state Rajkot and his mother Putlibai was a pious and devout lady. Her gentleness left a deep impression on Mohandas’ mind.

Mohandas belonged to a middle-class family of Vaishya caste. Initially he was sent to an elementary school in Porbandar. He found it difficult to master the multiplication tables. When he was seven, his family moved to Rajkot. There he attended a primary school and later joined a high school. After matriculating from the high school, he joined the Samaldas College in Bhavnagar. Meanwhile in 1885 his father expired. As suggested by one of his close friends, Mohandas went to England for higher studies at the age of nineteen. His mother was apprehensive about young men going astray in Western society. But her fears were allayed when Mohandas swore not to touch meat, wine and woman. He qualified for the bar from England and came back to India in 1891. He started his practice at Bombay and Rajkot, but he was not a big success at the bar. However, he received an offer from Dada Abdulla & Co to join them as a “Legal Advisor”. He was to be posted in Durban, South Africa. Mohandas did not want to lose this opportunity. So, in April 1893, he sailed for South Africa unaided and alone.

In those days the non - whites were given discriminated treatment in Durban. Indians and blacks were treated as inferior races. When Mohandas reached there, he had to face this oppressive atmosphere of racial snobbishness. He could not tolerate the policy of racial discrimination and decided to fight against it. In 1906 when the Asiatic Registration Act was passed which required all Asians to register themselves and give their thumb impressions, he

could not reconcile with the humiliating enactment and strongly protested against this act. He even led a deputation against this law to England but failed to get it nullified.

Thereafter Gandhiji thought of taking direct action. He asked the Indians living in South Africa neither to register themselves nor give their thumb impression. The government put Gandhiji and thousands of other Indians into prison. Ultimately a compromise was found whereby the Indians were to voluntarily register themselves and the element of compulsion which smacked of discrimination was eliminated. Subsequently when the Transvaal authorities violated the agreement, Gandhiji led a procession of two thousand Indians for getting the wrong redressed. This method of putting the evil practices to an end through the methods of disobedience and non - cooperation was a novel one.

After his return to India from South Africa in 1914, Gandhi met both Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Gopal Krishna Gokhale. It was the latter whom he elected to be his political mentor. Gokhale advised him to acquaint himself with the Indians by visiting rural India. Accordingly, he toured the entire country side for full one year listening more than speaking to the people. In the beginning he was loyal to the British Empire. But with the passage of time and with the change in circumstances his attitude to the British Empire underwent a change. He launched three main movements against the empire in a non-violent manner.

Non-Violence or Ahimsa

During the Champaran Satyagraha - Gandhi insisted on truth and non - violence¹. In the words of Gandhiji, "I have nothing new to teach the world, Truth and Non - Violence were as old as the hills". It was necessary for Gandhi's inquiry that the government should remain neutral. But the inquiry did not need support from press reporters or leading articles in the press. Indeed, the situation in Champaran was so delicate and difficult that over energetic criticism or highly coloured reports might easily damage the cause which Gandhi was seeking to espouse. So, he wrote to the editors of the principal papers requesting them not to trouble to send any reporters as Gandhi should send them whatever might be necessary for publication and keep them informed.

In spite of those precautions, the planters engineered against Gandhi a poisonous agitation. All sorts of falsehoods appeared in the press and Gandhi's insistence on truth, even to the minutest detail, turned the edge of their sword. The Champaran struggle was a proof of the fact that disinterested service of the people in any sphere ultimately helped the country politically. Thus, the Champaran inquiry was a bold experiment with Truth and Ahimsa.²

To describe truth, as it had appeared to Gandhi and in the exact manner in which he had arrived at, had been his ceaseless effort. The exercise had given him ineffable mental peace because it had been his fond hope that it might bring faith in truth and Ahimsa to waverers.

His uniform experience had convinced him that there was no other God than truth and that the only means for the realization of Truth was Ahimsa. In the words of Gandhiji "Realization of Truth is not at all possible without Ahimsa" Ahimsa means non - injury to any living being in word, thought and deed.

To see the universal and all - pervading Spirit of Truth face to face, one must be able to love the meanest of creation as oneself. In the words of Gandhiji, "I am a staunch Hindu because I love not only all human beings but all living things". But the path of self-purification is hard and steep. As all people know that God alone is perfect, so man is imperfect. But he knew that he had still before him a difficult path to traverse. He must reduce himself to zero. So long as a man doesn't, of his own free will, put himself last among his fellow creatures, there is no salvation for him. Ahimsa is the farthest limit of humility. 3

Non-violence and cowardice go together just as light and darkness go together.

"Non - violence should never be used as a shield for cowardice. It is a weapon for the brave", "I see neither bravery nor sacrifice in destroying life or property for offence or defense."

"It is no non-violence if we merely love those that love us. It is non-violence only when we love those that hate us. Love of the hater is the most difficult of all. But by the grace of God even this most difficult thing becomes easy to accomplish if people want to do".

"It is the acid-test of non-violence that in a non - violent conflict, there is no rancour left behind and in the end, enemies are converted into friends. That was Gandhi's experience in South Africa with General Smuts (1870 - 1950) who is South African Boer General, Gandhi's principal adversary during his time there. He started with being my bitterest opponent and critic. Today he is my warmest friend".

"Truth (Satya) implies love and firmness (Agraha) engenders and therefore serves as a synonym for force. Gandhi thus began to call the Indian movement "Sayagraha, that is to say, the force which is born of truth and love or non-violence. 4

Gandhi's Philosophy of Satyagraha is based on four fundamental pillars, namely, Absolute truth, Absolute love, Absolute discipline and Absolute justice.

"Ahimsa is the attribute of the soul and therefore to be practised by everybody in all the affairs of life. if it cannot be practised in all departments, it has no practical value".

"Ahimsa is not the crude thing it has been made to appear. Not to hurt any living thing is no doubt a part of ahimsa but is its least expression. The principle of ahimsa is hurt by every evil thought, by undue haste, by lying, by hatred, by wishing ill to anybody. It is also violated by one's holding on to what the world needs".

"Ahimsa and Truth are so inter-twined, and it is practically impossible to disentangle or separate them. They are like two sides of a coin, or rather a smooth unstamped metallic disc. Who can say which is the obverse and which the reverse? Nevertheless, Ahimsa is the means, Truth is the end".

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 whole soul against the will of the tyrant. Working under this law of our being, it is possible for a single individual to

defy the whole might of an unjust empire to save his honour, his religion, his soul and lay the foundation for that empire's fall or its regeneration.

“The force of non -violence is more wonderful and subtle than the material forces of nature, like electricity.”

“Strength of numbers is the delight of the timid. The valiant in spirit glory is in fighting alone.”

Experience convinces Gandhi that permanent good can never be the outcome of untruth and violence as lying is the mother of violence or terrorism.

“Non - violence succeeds only when we have a real living faith in God” 5

The best punishment of violent harm is to put the doer in pain of shame in good turns (Kural - 314).

Nemesis is always alert to repay you promptly in the afternoon, a harm done to others in forenoon 6 - Kural 319.

From the above ideas, we note that Mahatma Gandhi followed in the footsteps (couplets) of Thiruvalluvar to a greater extent.

India has produced many great men in the past like Lord Mahavira, Lord Buddha, Guru Nanak, Kabirdas, Swami Dayananda who changed the course of human history by their teachings.⁷ Gandhi made a great contribution towards the struggle for India's independence. He organized a novel method of fighting against the greatest imperialist British power on this earth with the weapon of non - violence and ‘Satyagraha.’

Truth, Guandhiji believed, can be realized only by means of ahimsa or non - violence 8. Violence or terrorism which has its roots in divisive propensities like anger, selfishness, lust etc cannot take us to the goal.

The weapon of moral power (courage) has been used and for uncounted time 9. This weapon depended for its strength on several factors. There were men themselves. People felt in some that which they did not feel in most men i.e. terrorists. They could sense and see in the lives of men of moral influence the virtues these men were talking about integrity, honesty, wholeness, love, truthfulness, and unconquerable courage. The satyagrahi acts in accordance with the song of Purananooru by Kaniyan Poonguntranar “The world is one, all its people are relatives” A Satyagrahi's aim is to build a universal brotherhood on this earth. But a terrorist's aim is to kill innocent people mercilessly like a butcher.

Cowardice and Satyagraha, fear and love are contradictory terms. Gandhi declared that cowardice and love do not go together any more than water and fire.

Gandhi's mission was not merely freedom of India, though it undoubtedly engrossed practically the whole of his life and the whole of his time¹⁰. As Gandhiji dreamt of establishing

a universal brotherhood of man, so there is no likelihood of the rise and growth of terrorism in the present-day world if people follow Gandhism in letter and spirit.

It is pertinent to note Dr. Zakir Hussain's foreword given in the book, the 3rd President of India here "Gandhiji lived for peace, harmony and reconciliation and he laid down his precious life for the vindication of these ideals. The core of his teaching (Gandhism) has relevance for all ages and perhaps because it transcends time and space. We have often strayed from the path he showed us. But I have no doubt that if we are to survive as a strong, united, self-reliant, self-sufficient nation, we will have to heed his sage counsel. But terrorists are not paying any heed to his teaching, so terrorism is sprouting and growing, and terrorists are killing innocent people of the world daily. Thus, Gandhism is relevant to the terror-stricken world of today.

During the early period of his political career, Gandhi had faith in the good sense of the British.¹¹ He observes, "I discovered that the British Empire had certain ideals with which I have fallen in love and one of those ideals is that every subject of the British empire has the freest scope of his energies and however and whatever he thinks is due to his conscience".

Conclusion

Gandhi laid great emphasis on the ethical side of politics and placed immense value on morality in the pursuit of political objectives. Unlike other politicians he attached great importance to the means and held that ends must be justified by means. It may be noted that the methods advocated by Gandhiji were not the methods of the weak and cowards. They involved great moral courage and deliberate self-sacrifice. Gandhism for a terror-free world as suggested and practiced by Gandhiji, the apostle of peace. It is remarkable to note that the U.N.O. observes 2nd October the birthday of Gandhiji every year as the International Day of Non-violence.

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