

Summary

The theoretical arguments that Gandhi forwards in support of the doctrine of Ahimsa are mainly two. The first is practical, the second ethical. On the practical plane Gandhi argued that the coercive methods or the method of force could never achieve lasting results, because that which is got by force can only be retained so long as the superior force lasts. If therefore, one desired a permanent change, whether in the economic, political or social field, one should resort only to the peaceful means of persuasion and conversion. In other words, vested interests must be won over. To forcibly subdue them is either to make them go underground or to foment discontent at the future date when, it for some reason or other state-power declines, the vested interests will again raise their ugly head. A continuous display of a show of strength will thus become necessary. Sometimes the use of force to curb a sector of society or a 'class' only tends to make matters worse by alienating good men and tending to make neutrals go over to the support of that sector or class. History has several such instances on its record. It was because of these implications of the use of force that Gandhi advocated the non-violent method.

Ethically, violent and forcible means had to be ruled out because once one admit that in all human beings there is a spark of the same divinity called God, to seek to harm any man or destroy human life is to seek to injure the Divine Itself. Gandhi fully agreed with the Gita dictum, "How can he who believes that God resides in all commit violence unto another?" After all God is goodness personified. Therefore to admit that God resides in all is at the same time to admit that a spark of goodness resides in every breast. And if this is so, the possibility of reform even in the case of the meanest of creatures cannot be denied. "The soul is one in all. Its possibilities are therefore the same for everyone", wrote Gandhi in 1940;¹ he repeated the idea in 1946: "Given the opportunity every human being has the same possibility for spiritual growth".² To destroy human life was thus to deny the existence of God and thus the capability of reform in others.

When however one moves from the realm of theory to practice one is immediately confronted with the questions: Is Ahimsa universal? Must everyone practice it? And must it be practiced against everyone and under any and all circumstances? To the first poser Gandhi's answer is clear and categorical. Non-violence is not "a cloistered virtue confined only to the Rishi and the cave dweller". It was to be practiced by each and all. It was the Law of Life the only thing that distinguished man from the brute. Man, unless he happened to be perverted or a sadist, enjoyed peace and abhorred violence. In this sense non-violent behaviour was the law of our species although at times one may not even be conscious of it. At the same time Gandhi was also aware of the brute in man. Hence his constant exhortation that man must ever strive to curb the beast in him and try to live up to what his true self

¹ Harijan, 18May,1940,p.129.

² Ibid., 15 September,1946.p.309.

demanding and with striking logical clarity Gandhi adds, "This striving applies to the practice of non-violence, not to the belief in a principle. I either believe in it or I do not. And if I believe in it, I must bravely strive to practise it."³

The second question is: should non-violence be practiced in respect of all forms of life? Even towards beasts and animals? As far as our attitude towards the animal world is concerned, Gandhi was against wanton cruelty; but where the question is one of choice between animals and humans, Gandhi had no objection to the destruction of animal life for the protection of human life. When a friend once enquired what behaviour non-violence dictated towards the monkeys which regularly ruined crops, spoilt fruits, removed articles and at times even kidnapped children, Gandhi replied to his Harijansevak of May 1946: "My Ahimsa is my own I am not able to accept in its entirety the doctrine; of non-killing of animals. I have no feeling in me to save the life of those animals who devour or cause hurt to man. I consider it wrong to help in the increase of their progeny. Therefore I will not feed ants, monkeys or dogs. I will never sacrifice a man's life in order to save theirs."⁴ And in the June issue of the same year Gandhi restated his attitude towards the animal world in no unambiguous terms- "The sacredness of sub-human life in Jainism is understandable, But that can never mean that one is to be kind to this life in preference to human life. While writing about the sacredness of such life, I take it; that the sacredness of human life has been taken for granted. The former has been over-emphasised. And while putting it into practice the idea has undergone distortion."⁵

The only other circumstance under which Gandhi permitted the taking of animal life was when the latter was in unbearable pain or suffered from some insurable disease. Once Gandhi happened to see a cow writhing in pain. His sensitive heart revolted and he opined that it would be kinder and more humane to shoot it rather than to let it so suffer.

In all other cases one was to treat animals and even plants with gentleness. On one occasion Gandhiji took to task some of his Ashram inmates for having cruelly torn down the branches of a medicinal plant while trying to break a few leaves, leaves possessing medicinal qualities were necessary for human health ; their breaking was therefore permissible violence. But to break down branches in the process or to pull the leaves with a rougher hand than required was unwanted cruelty. Similarly Gandhi advised the destruction of stray and harmful dogs. But when a Mysore resident informed him that the dogs in the Bangalore city pounds were being tortured, were not being properly fed and that often the crude and cruel method of poisoning was resorted to, Gandhi immediately clarified his position thus: But my advice can never include impounding such dogs and torturing them as those mentioned by the correspondent seem to have been. Humanitarian instinct demands destruction of such

³ Ibid., 4 November, 1939.p.325.

⁴ Gandhi, M.K., Non- Violence in Peace & War Vol-II, Ahmedabad, Navjivan Publishing House, 1942.p.65.

⁵ Ibid. p.66.

animals in an instantaneous and painless manner.”⁶

*Gandhi gave a reply on like lines when another correspondent objected to “innocent honey”, i.e. honey obtained without harming, hurting or killing the bee. “But can you call it absolutely non-violent? You deprive the bee of its honey as you deprive the calf of its milk,” the correspondent inquired. And Gandhi replied: “You are right, but the world is not governed entirely by logic life itself involves some kind of violence and we have to choose the path of least violence. There is violence even in vegetarianism, is there not? Similarly if I must have honey, I must be friendly to the bee and get it to yield as much honey as it will. Moreover, in the scientific bee-culture the bee is never deprived of its honey altogether.”*⁷

*Gandhi thus admitted that some himsa or violence was implicit in life. But where it was thus implicit it should be reduced to the minimum and should never be allowed to degenerate to cruelty. The type of unnecessary violence indulged in by priests in the name of religion Gandhi could never tolerate. In fact he refused to make Calcutta with its Kali Temple renowned for animal sacrifices the centre of all his activities, because, “I cannot bear the sight of it. My soul rises in rebellion against the coldblooded inhumanity that goes on there in the name of religion.”*⁸

With regard to human life, however, Gandhi was in favour of Ahimsa being practised as an absolute creed. None of the rules which apply to the taking of animal life can apply to the human. “The question may arise as to why this rule should not apply to the human beings. It cannot because, however bad, they are as we are. Unlike the animal, God has given man the faculty of reason,” The many statements and utterances of Gandhi testify to the view that, “in the background of all his thoughts and actions there had always been the cult of Ahimsa as an absolute value.” In 1939, replying to a friend who wanted, to know whether fighting with love of the enemy in one’s heart was permissible, Gandhi wrote: “We do often have mixed motives. But that would not be non-violence. The constant effort of the votary of non-violence is to purge himself of hatred towards the so called enemy. There is no such thing as shooting out of love in the way you suggest.”⁹ Non-violence as the supreme law

of our being could not admit of any exceptions, not even in the interest of a so-called higher interest or higher good. In the Yerwada Mandir it is written: “It will not therefore be a ‘Yajna’ (sacrifice), much less a ‘Mahayajna’, to wish or to do ill to anyone even in order to serve a so-called higher interest”.¹⁰

An attempt can also be made to bring out the absolute character of Gandhian doctrine of Ahimsa by examining the behaviour Gandhi advocated towards crime,

⁶ Harijan, 10 November, 1946, p. 392.

⁷ Prabhu R.K. This was Bapu, Ahmedabad, Navjivan Publishing House 1959 p. 57.

⁸ Ibid. pp. 57-58.

⁹ Gandhi, M.K. Non-violence in Peace & War, Vol-I, Op.cit. p. 190.

¹⁰ Gandhi M.K., Hindu Dharma op. cit. p. 44.

viz., murder, theft and the like. Take the case of murder, first. Suppose a murderer with the clear intent to kill attacks one; what should be one's duty in terms of non-violence? The Gandhian answer is direct and simple. "Let your blood be spilt but do not spill that of the assailant. When it is a question of choice between killing oneself and the assailant, I have no doubt in my mind that the first should be the choice." Gandhi informed a correspondent who had sought his advice on this issue. Getting oneself killed without bearing any anger against the murderer but instead praying to God to forgive him, is the true test of Ahimsa. Some sixty I. N. A. officers, who once told the, Mahatma, "Surely it is no breach of Ahimsa to use the sword in self-defense?" met with the same categorical reply. "Even Wavell Auchinleck, or Hitler does not use the sword without necessity. But that does not make it ahimsa. It is himsa whatever its justification."¹¹

What holds true for the murderer is equally true for the thief. What should you do if one fine night you suddenly find a robber in your room? If you have the ability you may knock him down. If you do not you may allow yourself to be robbed and then subsequently call in the aid of the law and the police. But Gandhi disapproved of both these for, to meet violence by counter-violence was only to feed the fire of violence, while those who died unhesitatingly were likely to still the fury of violence by their wholly innocent sacrifice. Self-sufferance may even bring the thief to his senses and make us realise that thieves are after all no different from ourselves; they are our own brethren, our friends and may not be punished.

In the forties when 'goondaism' was rampant almost all over the country and women were in constant danger of being molested by bad characters, several women appealed to Gandhi for guidance. And his message was that the ideal would be to resist the miscreant non-violently. Gandhiji had faith that if a woman stood up bravely against the ruffian her sparkling purity and courage would succeed in dissuading him. "I believe implicitly in the proposition that perfect purity is its own defence. The veriest ruffian becomes for the time being tame in the presence of resplendent purity."¹² When Gandhi was pressed with the question, "But what if the hooligan does not realise his senses", he responded with a "they ought to learn to die before a hair of their head could be injured" and by way of a helping hand suggested that the woman could put an end to herself by choking or biting the tongue. Dr. Sushila, then present, protested that no woman could thus kill herself and that the only effective way for instant self-immolation would be a strong dose of poison. To this protest Gandhi's rejoinder was that in that case every woman running the danger of molestation should carry a small bottle of poison and gulp its contents rather than submit to dishonour. What if the woman's relatives are present ? Should they just stand and watch? Of course not. Non-violence is no synonym for impotency or cowardice. Hence the evil must be fought though not the evil-doer. "The brother or father or friend thus will stand between his protege and her assailant. He will then either dissuade the assailant from his wicked purpose or allow himself to be killed by him in preventing him. In so laying his life he will not only have done his duty, but given a new accession of

¹¹ Gandhi M.K., Non-Violence in Peace & War, op. cit. Vol-II p.39.

¹² Young India, 8 October, 1925.p.452.

strength to his protege who will now know how to protect her honour.”¹³

Finally, says Gandhi, we must even resist foreign aggression non-violently. If a non-violent country was invaded there were two courses open to it. It could firstly send its unarmed non-violent army to face with bare chests the aggressors' bullets. No doubt this would be inviting death. But then it would have its effects on the opposite ranks to. In an interesting interview with a New York Times correspondent, Gandhi suggested that the Allies should instantly disarm, and added; “I am certain as I am sitting here that this would open Hitler's eyes and disarm him”.¹⁴ Even if this did not happen, “an army that dares to pass over the corpses of innocent men and women would not be able to repeat that experiment”.¹⁵ But is not inviting the enemy to walk over corpses something beyond human experience and endurance? Gandhi did not think so. You may if you wish refuse to believe in such courage on the part of the masses of men and women, but then you would have to admit that non-violence is made of sterner stuff. It was never conceived as a weapon of the weak, but of the stoutest hearts. But admitting that such non-violence is capable of practice, of what avail is it if it entails the defender losing his life? In replying to such queries Gandhi would fall back on the example of Christ and other saints. Did Jesus by losing his life allow the Roman Pilate to win? Not at all! On the contrary Jesus won, for, by his death he released in society the forces of good. Like Jesus we must learn to gain life by losing it.¹⁶

The other course would be to let the army invade but subsequently refuse all co-operation. “Thus suppose a modern Nero descended upon India, the representatives of the State will let him in but tell him that he will get no assistance from the people.” After all an invasion or conquest is planned for a particular purpose, say for exploiting either the land and other natural resources of a country or its man power. If therefore by a complete and effective non-cooperative programme this very purpose of the invaders was defeated they would have little recourse left but to retreat. It was this second method that Gandhi himself employed against the British in India. It was the same that he recommended to China. “If the Chinese had the non-violence of my conception, there would be no use left for the latest machinery of destruction which Japan possesses. The Chinese would say to Japan, Bring all your machinery, we present half our population to you. But the remaining two hundred millions won't bend the knee to you, If the Chinese did that, Japan would become China's slave.”

One Mrs. White once put an intriguing question to Gandhi. How would you use non-violence against the atom bomb? Fantastic, but in keeping with the general tenor of all his replies, Gandhi said, “I would run into the open field and looking up towards God pray with folded hands that God flay make the pilot see reason; and seeing me in this prayerful posture the pilot would not have the heart to drop the

¹³ Gandhi, M.K. Non-violence in Peace & War Op.cit., p.329.

¹⁴ S. Radhakrishnan S. (ed.) Essays & Reflections, Op.cit. p. 38.

¹⁵ Gandhi M.K., Non-Violence in Peace & War, Vol-I Op.cit. P. 109.

¹⁶ Ibid.

bomb.” But high up in the sky the pilot would not. even be able to see you retorted Mrs White. In that case, said the Mahatma, my prayer will not fail to reach him and move him.

It was Gandhi's firm belief that if non-violence was genuinely and sincerely applied against an agressor, it would yield the desirable results. In 1933 when Gandhi was in Peshawar, a Professor frankly asked him whether he sincerely believed that if Abyssinia had simply non-resisted and said to Italy. Do your worst the Italians would have been ashamed and desisted from the design. “I can answer to your question” replied Gandhi, “only in terms of active, resistant nonviolence,-Now non-violence is the activist force on earth and it is my conviction that it never fails. But if the Abyssinians had adopted the attitude of the non-violence of the strong, that is, the non-violence which breaks to pieces but never bends, Mussolini would have had no interest in Abyssinia. Thus if they had simply said, you are welcome to reduce us to dust or ashes, but you will not find one Abyssinian ready to cooperate with you what could Mussolini have done? He did not want a desert. Mussolini wanted submission and not defiance and if he had met the quite dignified and non-violent defiance that I have described, he would certainly have been obliged to retire”.¹⁷

But critics were not to be so easily silenced. They pointed out to the Jews, who, they said, had been practicing nonviolence for the last two thousand years. *They* received a rather harsh retort in the Harijan issue of 17-12-1938; “The Jews so far as I know have never practiced non-violence as an article of faith or even as a deliberate policy. *Indeed it is* a stigma against them that their ancestors crucified Jesus. Are they not supposed to believe in eye for eye and tooth for tooth? Have they no violence in their hearts for their oppressors? Do they not want the so called democratic powers to punish Germany for her persecution and to deliver them room oppression? If they do, there is no more nonviolence in their hearts. Their non-violence if it may be so called is of the helpless and the weak”.¹⁸

To be truly non-violent one must bear neither ill-will to the aggressor nor desire to defeat him or see him defeated. In this respect even China's role in the war, according to Gandhi, was hardly non-violent. “Her putting up a valiant defence against Japan is .proof enough that China was never intentionally non-violent.” Only the pure and unalloyed nonviolence which implies-self-invited self-suffering will succeed in converting the aggressor’s heart, however hard-hearted like Hitler or Mussolini he may be Before the heat of nonviolence the hardest metal must melt and there is no limit, to the capacity of one violence to generate heat.

The Mahatma was of the definite opinion all society is held together by non-violence, even as the earth is held in her position by gravitation. But when the law of gravitation was discovered, the discovery yielded results of which our ancestors had no knowledge. Even so when society is deliberately constructed in accordance with the law of non-violence, its structure will be different in material particulars from

¹⁷ Harijan, 13May,1939.p.121.

¹⁸ Gandhi M.K., Non-Violence in Peace & War Vol-Iopcit p. 167.

what it is today. Two pertinent questions are posed here: First, society is held together by non-violence. In other words, it functions through non-violence, though it may not be conscious of its non-violent functioning. Secondly, the pattern of society will change, if it is constructed on the law of non-violence. This means ultimately a new pattern of human culture.

Five simple axioms of non-violence as known to be laid down as follows:

- i. Non-violence implies as complete a self-purification as is humanly possible.
- ii. Man for man the strength of non-violence is in exact proportion to the ability, not the will, of the non-violent person to inflict violence.
- iii. Non-violence is without exception superior to violence, i.e., the power at the disposal of a non-violent person is always greater than he would have if he was violent.
- iv. There is no such thing as defeat in nonviolence. The end of violence is surest defeat.
- v. The ultimate end of non-violence is surest victory if such a term may be used of non-violence. In reality, where there is no sense of defeat, there is no sense of victory.