

## REVISITING GANDHIAN NON-VIOLENCE

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### ABSTRACT

*Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the apostle of non-violence, became victim of violence just after independence. Even after his assassination, he continues to suffer violence despite being treated as an icon of non-violence. Many wrongly think that Gandhi is irrelevant today. But we neither understood Gandhian principle of non-violence correctly, nor communicated it rightly to the post-Gandhi generations. So, the youth wrongly think non-violence as a sign of weakness – contrary to Gandhian conviction that non-violence is the tool of the strongest. Consequentially, the youth are not attracted to Gandhi's non-violence. In projecting Gandhi as an apostle of non-violence, we have missed his advocacy for violence in certain circumstances and his emphasis on being trained to be strong and powerful with humility and rationality which is the foundational principle of Gandhian 'ramrajya'. Gandhi's advocacy of non-violence is not absolute; its relative. He pointed that it is our duty to resort to violence in certain circumstances. But, projecting non-violence as weakness has distanced the youth from Gandhi resulting in growth of intolerance and social disharmony. That is demolishing everything that Gandhi stood for. What should be done to connect the youth with true spirit of non-violence? To answer this, we have sourced 'original writings' of Gandhi on non-violence.*

**KEYWORDS:** Gandhi, Ahimsa, Non-Violence, Peace

### INTRODUCTION

The **central idea** of this paper is that Gandhi was a victim of violence not only when he was alive, but even thereafter, and he continues to be a victim till date. The apostle of non-violence continues to suffer violence in silence by all those who claim to treat Gandhi as their icon and, also, as the Father of the Nation. Many think that the relevance of Gandhi ended with the dawn of independence and, in the present context, Gandhi has lost all his relevance. This approach is floated by all those who have not cared to read Gandhi carefully. Of course, Gandhi was not a divine person, he was an ordinary mortal with extraordinary courage and conviction about the principles and values that he adhered to throughout his life for the collective national cause – the freedom of India.

We **argue** in this paper that, one, as a nation and society, we have failed to imbibe and understand Gandhi and Gandhian values of truth, love, and non-violence in the real sense of the term. Two, whatever our understanding of Gandhian values, we have not communicated them to our children, youth, and the society at large in the right earnest. Three, we have only given lip-service to Gandhism whatever that may mean to us.

The **evidence** in support of our argument is the growing culture of disharmony in society, defiance of law, constitutional values, and social norms, damaging others in thought, words, and action, and adopting a nihilist attitude  
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trying to destroy everything which Gandhi would have liked to protect and preserve.

**What should be done** to reverse that and bring the real Gandhi back to the people especially the youth and present generation of policy makers and leaders?

### METHODOLOGY

This paper tries to understand the essence of Gandhian concept of non-violence or *ahimsa*. That is important because the author strongly feels that the post-Gandhi generations have no clarity on Gandhian non-violence. That may be due to us, the elders, who have perhaps not cared to correctly understand Gandhi and his principles, and communicate them to the successive generations. Hence, in this paper, we have avoided any reference to Gandhian non-violence from external sources and banked on the original writings and speeches of Gandhi on non-violence or *ahimsa*. For that reason, we are using no text on non-violence except that which is written or spoken by Gandhi himself.

It is a great fortune that Gandhian thoughts on non-violence or *ahimsa* are available in the form of a book "Non-Violence in Peace and War" authored by Gandhi himself and published by Navjivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad by Mahadev Desai, a great Gandhian himself. The book is a collection of essays written and speeches delivered by Gandhiji on non-violence in two volumes covering writings and speeches

from 1921 to the last day of his life. It runs into about a thousand pages. To make it a little handy, one Mr Shailesh Kumar Bandyopadhyay - with the help and cooperation of Sri Jeevan Bhai Desai, Managing Trustee of Navjeevan Trust, Ahmedabad – brought a shorter volume “My Non-violence” published by Navjeevan Publishing House, Ahmedabad that carries original writings of Gandhiji in Young India and Harijan and his speeches delivered after his prayers.

So, everything that Gandhi wrote or spoke on non-violence is preserved in the original in these two volumes. Hence, I have used them only to understand Gandhian ideas on non-violence or *ahimsa*.

### GANDHIAN NON-VIOLENCE

It is very interesting that both the books open with the same sentence of Gandhiji that he wrote in Young India dated 11-8-1920 with his advocacy, not of non-violence, but of violence: “I do believe that, where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence”. (Gandhi:1942, p1-4) This is very remarkable opening statement that should be taken into cognizance to put the Gandhian concept of non-violence in the right perspective. In this statement, however, two things are very clear.

One, the choice for violence is conditional and relative. It is advised and advocated against cowardice. Gandhiji was advocating violence over cowardice. In an article in Young India dated 11 August 1942 under the caption ‘The Doctrine of the Sword’, Gandhiji narrated a very interesting incident. His son asked what he, as his son, should have done when he was criminally assaulted in S. Africa – run away and let him be killed or used his physical force to defend him? Gandhiji told his son that it was his duty to use violence to defend his father. (Ibid) This is very revealing disclosure by Gandhiji which, once for all, settles that he was not for absolute non-violence or *ahimsa*. The only rider is that when it a matter of life and death or the honor of the motherland, violence must be used.

Two, Gandhiji is advising that in all other circumstances, except the gravest one involving the question of life and death or the honor of the motherland, one must resort to non-violence only. Hence, according to Gandhiji (1) violence can be resorted only as the last refuge; (2) violence can be used only by the strong, not by the weak. It means that non-violence cannot be practiced by the weak and coward; it is meant only for the strong and the brave. So, Gandhiji is classifying society into cowards and non-cowards and suggesting that it’s only the latter who can practice non-violence. Thus, Gandhi’s non-

violence is only for the powerful, strong and brave, not for the weak and cowards.

Unfortunately, that had never been impressed upon the children and the youth. In fact, there is a tendency to ridicule Gandhian non-violence or *ahimsa* as a refuge of the weak and the fearful, as an act of cowardice. We often hear people quoting Gandhi advising people that ‘if someone slaps on your one cheek, give him the other one too.’ This the youth can never accept; they can never follow that. Similarly, it is also a common practice to use a proverb “*mazboori kaa naam Mahatma Gandhi hai*” (helplessness is the name of Mahatma Gandhi). Surely, our children and youth do not want to feel helpless; they want to feel strong, enterprising, and capable.

These are the two pointers to demonstrate how Gandhi is incorrectly portrayed in the public domain. This inexcusably wrong portrayal of Gandhi has positioned the children and the younger generation against accepting Gandhi and his non-violence in the right earnest. But, how can we reject Gandhi and Gandhian value of non-violence without correctly understanding Gandhi and non-violence. It is fine to reject the ideas of a thinker or philosopher if we correctly understand his or her thought and philosophy; but it is a great injustice to the thinker or philosopher and a great disservice to the humanity and society to reject the thinker or philosopher without correctly understanding, or so to say by incorrectly understanding him or her. So, the challenge today is to impresas upon the youth and children that the traditional portrayal of Gandhi on non-violence is totally incorrect; that was never Gandhian position on non-violence. And we must correctly understand and explain Gandhian concept and his position on non-violence. If, thereafter, someone rejects non-violence, then, that is fine because s/he has that option in our democratic polity. Our constitution permits that freedom. But, before one can accept or reject Gandhi, a correct understanding of non-violence is essential.

We argue in this paper that Gandhi, the apostle of non-violence or *ahimsa*, had been the victim of violence not only because he was violently assassinated, but also because we all are responsible for doing violence to Gandhi, posthumously, by wrongly interpreting his most vital contribution to the humanity – his teachings and practice of non-violence or *ahimsa*. And, that becomes graver and more alarming because we claim to give all respect to him, treat him as a global icon on peace and non-violence and even eulogise him as the *father of the nation*.

Therein lies the contradiction. We love and respect Gandhi; but we do not understand him and his core concepts. We do not follow him in our individual and collective day-to-day life. So, in a way, we have put Gandhi on a social, political,

and cultural ventilator not allowing him to finally depart. And, therein lies the hope that one day Gandhi will rise from that *ventilator* and again come back to us in the right earnest.

It is with that hope and expectation that I write this paper. It is that optimism which gives us an assurance that one day we will read Gandhi carefully and understand his concept of *ahimsa* or non-violence in the spirit in which he propounded it, and communicate it to the present generation so that they and the future generations understand, appreciate, and practice the Gandhian philosophy of *ahimsa* or non-violence to make themselves better humans and this planet a better place to live with love and happiness.

Let us approach the Gandhian philosophy of *ahimsa* from two other vantage points. One, the concept of *ahimsa* or non-violence is part of a larger baggage of Truth, Love and Non-violence (*ahimsa*). Hence, it must be seen holistically. Two, Gandhian philosophy of *ahimsa* or non-violence is linked to the Gandhian vision, to use Francine Fukuyama's phrase, of the '*end of history*' which is the establishment of *ramrajya*. Lord Ram and his Political System both are venerable to Gandhi. Now, let us ponder over both these pointers.

#### **RULING DISPENSATION RESPONSE TO NON-VIOLENCE**

India attained independence against the British Imperialism through a *national movement* of Indian National Congress led by Gandhiji. There were many benchmarks during that movement like *swadeshi* *aandolan*, non-cooperation movement, civil-disobedience movement, and Quit-India movement when many in the Congress and outside thought that British could have been browbeaten to leave India, but Gandhiji put his foot down and let the movement be called off. The *chauri chaura* is just one such example or the hanging of Sardar Bhagat Singh, Sukhdeo and Rajguru in Lahore Jail on 23 March 1931 is another. The one involved some incident of violence near Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh and the other was a consequence of the use of violent methods by the hanged revolutionaries at Lahore, now in Pakistan. These occasions are indicative of Gandhi's complete rejection of violence to achieve even the highest and the noblest goals of the nation's collective consciousness. His commitment to non-violence was absolute.

Gandhiji choose Nehru to be his heir. Even as all the Provincial Congress Committees (PCCs), except Bihar (which suggested the name of Dr Rajendra Prasad), recommended Sardar Patel to lead the country after independence, Gandhiji put his foot down and rejecting the recommendations of all the PCCs – choose Nehru to lead the Independent India. However, Gandhiji had three basic advices for the Congress and Nehru. One, Congress should follow the policy of non-violence; two,

Congress must stick to the purity of means and not to the achievement of ends; and, three, Congress must not behave as a political party in elections in Independent India, but disband, and get converted into a new outfit which Gandhiji called *lok sewak sangh* and work for the establishment of a non-violent society.

Unfortunately, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India rejected all the three advices of Gandhiji. From Nehru started a different culture of politics which is the sad state of evolution of the traditional Indian political culture. He abjured everything that Gandhi cherished, and, glorified **violence** (Singh:1984, p4) by stating in his Autobiography that violence "is the very life-blood of the modern state and **social system.**" (Nehru:1962, p539) That was indicative of the clear and full departure of Nehru from the core Gandhian philosophy of *ahimsa* or non-violence.

The second advice of Gandhiji about 'purity of means' and 'primacy of means over ends' was also given up by Nehru. Delivering the prestigious Puntambekar Memorial Lecture at Jodhpur University, Prof Raghuveer Singh opined about Nehru thus: "*End became more important than the means. Nehru represented a culture of politics in which practice became more important than the principles and where ultimately the good of the people, whatever it may mean, justifies all political action.*" (Singh:1984, p4) Thus, contrary to Gandhian philosophy of purity and primacy of means over ends, Nehru chose to focus on the goals and ends which for him meant the good of the people. And, even if, he had to resort to violence and compromise the purity of means for the good of the people, he would not hesitate.

And, finally, Nehru also refused to accept the very sane third advice given by Gandhiji for disbanding Congress to give a level-playing field to all the political parties in democratic contestation in Independent India. Gandhi ji had prepared a draft constitution for the Congress in this regard that was published in Harijan dated 15 February 1948. Gandhiji was going to announce the same when he was suddenly assassinated on 30 January 1948. It is interesting to see what Gandhiji wrote in Harijan -

*"Though split into two, India having attained political independence through means devised by the Indian National Congress, the Congress in its present shape and form, i.e., as a propaganda vehicle and parliamentary machine, has outlived its use. India has still to attain social, moral, and economic independence in terms of its seven hundred thousand villages as distinguished from its cities and towns. The struggle for the ascendancy of civil over military power is bound to take place in India's progress towards its democratic goal. It must be kept*

*out of unhealthy competition with political parties and communal bodies. For these and other similar reasons, the A.I.C.C. resolves to disband the existing Congress organization and flower into a Lok Sevak Sangh under the following rules with power to alter them as **occasion may demand**.* (Gandhi:1960, p406)

Thus, we see that Nehru as the political heir of Gandhiji and the first prime minister of free India rejected the Gandhian value of non-violence. His clear acceptance of violence as the 'life blood of modern life,' his preference for ends over purity of means, and refusal to disband the Congress and convert it into a *look Sewak Sangh* are clear demonstration of how the young independent India reacted to what Gandhi consistently advocated in his 'Young India' from 1920 till his last day. Thus, not only Gandhi fell to the bullets of Nathuram Godse once, but even thereafter, and till date, we are almost daily killing Gandhi in one or the other ways. India experienced a U-turn in the political culture of her democratic polity as Nehru sharply differed in his approach to Gandhian norms that should have guided our democratic polity.

With that started a culture of violence against Gandhi. But the paradox is that despite all that, we continue to offer our highest regards and reverence to Gandhi and keep him eulogized as the Father of the Nation. We regard him, but we do not follow him; we love him but we do not obey his triple commandments of Truth, Love and Non-violence. That is now an established national culture in India. Everywhere - from individual to organisations and governments - all behave in the same manner. And that is why the Indian society is experiencing the rise of disagreements, mistrust, hatred towards each other leading many to use violence in private and public life.

### CONTEXTUALISING GANDHI

'No political theory of state is ever intelligible save in the context of its time,' said Harold J Laski in his seminal work 'A Grammar of Politics.' So, when we try to understand Gandhi, we must go back to the political ecology of Gandhi's time which was dominated by an imperialist called British Empire. Many a tools like non-cooperation, civil disobedience and satyagraha were successfully used by Gandhi to achieve the goal of self-rule and swarajya against the British. But, using the same tools and methods in independent India and against our own democratically elected governments became incongruous. They were questioned by none other than Dr Ambedkar, Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution while delivering his lecture on 25<sup>th</sup> November 1949, a day before the adoption of the constitution by the constituent Assembly on 26 November, 1949. Dr Ambedkar said,

*"If we wish to maintain democracy not merely in form, but also in fact, what must we do? The first thing in my judgment we must do is to hold fast to constitutional methods of achieving our social and economic objectives. It means we must abandon the bloody methods of revolution. It means that we must abandon the method of civil disobedience, non-cooperation, and satyagraha. When there was no way left for constitutional methods for achieving economic and social objectives, there was a great deal of justification for unconstitutional methods. But where constitutional methods are open, there can be no justification for these unconstitutional methods. These methods are nothing but the Grammar of Anarchy and the sooner they are abandoned, **the better for us.**"* (Ambedkar:1949)

So, even at the beginning of our constitutional journey, Dr Ambedkar tried to contextualise Gandhi by cautioning against the use of Gandhian tools of *satyagraha*, *civil-disobedience*, and *non-cooperation* in free and independent India. That was a pointer that a political theorist and his prescriptions have a timeframe and they cannot be continued unchanged in future. Gandhi needs to be contextualised. His *ahimsa* or non-violence need to be understood in modern times in its correct perspective and not the imperialist perspective. Dr Ambedkar quoted Jefferson, the great constitutional maker of America as **having said** (Ibid),

*"We may consider each generation as a distinct nation, with a right, by the will of the majority, to bind themselves, but none to bind the succeeding generation, more than the inhabitants of another country."*

So, after about 75 years of the departure of Gandhi, not only he needs to be correctly understood and communicated to the present and future generations, but also needs to be contextualized.

Gandhi's ideal goal or as Francis Fukuyama put it - the 'end of history' is the establishment of a *ram Rajya*. That by no stretch of imagination was based on *ahimsa* as our youth has been told. The Bow and Arrows in the armoury of Lord Rama were indicative of two things. One, it demonstrated Lord Rama's perfect marshal abilities and his preparedness through rigorous training of arms and ammunitions that can be used when necessary. Lord Rama had to resort to violence innumerable times to punish the demons, evil doers, and restore order and security during the 14 years of *vanvaas*. That culminated in the fierce battle against Ravana, the king of Lanka, and killings of his massive army and himself by Lord Rama. Two, the marshal abilities of Lord Rama were equally matched by his humility and tolerance that Lord Rama symbolised. Even when he had to use violence, we do not find

in him any annoyance, anger, or ill will against the enemy and the killed. The height of that could be seen after Lord Rama killed Ravana. He sent his younger brother Lakshaman to get some knowledge from Ravana as he was a great scholar. That is a clear demonstration that Lord Rama had the highest respect even for Ravana whom he had to kill to rescue his wife, Sita.

Have we ever educated our younger generation that the apostle of non-violence, Gandhi kept Lord Rama - who throughout his life had to use violence against the evil doers and the demons - as his ideal? Have we told them that Gandhi insisted that you resort to violence to protect the honor of your motherland, your religious institution, and women? If you escape from the responsibility of defending them under the pretext of non-violence, then Gandhi would consider that worse than violence. Narrating an incident during non-cooperation near Bettie where during a looting incident, the menfolk left their wives, women, children, and property at the mercy of looters, Gandhi publicly rebuked them. Gandhi wrote,

*“When I rebuked them for their cowardice in thus neglecting their charge, they shamelessly pleaded non-violence. I publicly denounced their conduct and said that my non-violence fully accommodated violence offered by those who did not feel non-violence and who had in their keeping the honor of their womenfolk and little children. Non-violence is not a cover for cowardice, but it is the supreme virtue of the brave”* (Gandhi:1942, p67-71)

What we have done educating about Gandhi is that we have talked much about his non-violence and *ahimsa* without inculcating ability of keeping and using arms and ammunitions, on one, and instilling the values of humility, tolerance, and respect for the person against whom you must use violence to restore justice and honour, on the other. That is the catch why the youth is not convinced about Gandhian values. The fault is not of the youth and the present generation. The fault lies on the older generation who have neither understood Gandhi nor educated them about his true values.

We have not told the youth that Gandhi was using *ahimsa* or non-violence from the vantage of the power and strength; he was not teaching you to be weak and cowards – not knowing to use arms and ammunitions. Time and again, Gandhi reminded Indians that demonstration of cowardice under cover of non-violence is greater sin and violence than actual resort to violence to preserve, protect and defend the honour of self, one’s dependent women and children, the religious places of worship and the country. But post-Gandhi, the entire communication with the new generation has bracketed Gandhian *ahimsa* or non-violence as equivalent to weak, meek, and helpless. That is why in our individual, organisational, and

social life we have not been able to imbibe Gandhi. That is why many among the youth have contempt for Gandhi and Gandhian values and hence, they eulogise and practice violence.

## POLICY PRESCRIPTIONS

The Indian youth has been misled. They have neither understood Gandhi nor have been correctly educated about the Gandhian values and his philosophy that is for the brave, strong with humility. That has polluted the psychology of the youth and led to the rise of disagreement with others, contempt for fellow citizens and even violence against them. This misperception has completely derailed Gandhi and Gandhian values in India and we have fallen in the trap of the global culture of violence. That is why we find everywhere strife, disharmony and intolerance rising – not only in India but also throughout the world.

What should we do? And that is a very important policy question to ward off the growing culture of violence and bring Gandhi back. The possibility is there because Gandhi still lives in our hearts. The youth and present generation may not correctly know Gandhian values but they have great respect for the man Gandhi.

The first thing that we can do is to make Gandhian writings compulsory text from primary classes to higher studies. Let the children be directly connected to the writings of Gandhi so they can draw their own conclusions about the real intent of Gandhi. Let Young India and Harijan be compulsory text in each class. Gandhi was a prolific writer and his ideas, principles, values, and prescriptions have a context. But we have served them the Gandhian ideas without the context. That has given a distorted view of what Gandhi’s real intent was. By actual reading of the original works of Gandhi from childhood, there would be a perception correction among youth and they may correctly understand and even appreciate and follow the Gandhian principles of truth, love, and non-violence.

Two, India is celebrating 75 years of independence. We have 25 years to go before we reach the century mark in 2047. During this period, especial efforts should be made to popularise Gandhian values and his philosophy of non-violence. For that, each state in India can identify one University or Research Centre as the focal point with that responsibility. Such a centre can draw a roadmap for the next 25 years in consultation with various stakeholders and then form a network of Gandhian centre in each school and college for a regular and proper dissemination of Gandhian thought and values. That shall go a long way in inculcating those values among the present and future generations.

Three, no one should feel weak and docile, especially the girls, females, rural and poor women. They are the soft target for the practitioners of violence. Hence, a very massive and structured programme in instilling a sense of physical and emotional strength, training in martial arts and self-defence be imparted to children, especially girls so that they do not have any sense of weakness, meekness, or cowardice. In addition, they should also be cautioned about the misuse of that strength and empowerment so that they may not become the new perpetrators of *reverse violence*.

These are not exhaustive policy prescriptions, but only preliminary ones. We should try to come out with similar other prescriptions to make Gandhi relevant in the present context. Our *restraint* will live so long as our *ristra* is alive. In fact, we have put our Gandhi on the ventilator. He is neither dead, nor able to communicate. But we are sure that if we correctly understand Gandhi and his principles of non-violence or *ahimsa*, one day he will rise from the ventilator and walk up to us to guide the destiny of our nation and the world through the beautiful and humanitarian principles of Truth, Love and Non-violence.

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