

SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

The Concept of Ahimsa in Gandhian Thought

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Abstract

Conventional meaning of the term “Ahimsa” is the avoidance of violence or abstaining from killing or injuring living beings. The concept of *ahimsa* is one of the important tenets of Ancient India’s religious thought. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, known as Gandhiji, was influenced by that religious thought. The concept of non-violence in Ancient India’s religious thought was regarded as the way of spiritual development and liberation of human beings and social reformation. But due credit should go to Gandhi, who is the first to apply it in the political field on a large scale. According to Gandhi, non-violence is an inseparable ingredient of truthfulness. The positive aspect of non-violence is love. Moreover, self-sacrifice and suffering are indispensable parts of love that comprehend such novel feelings as benevolence, compassion, forgiveness, tolerance, generosity, kindness etc. Non-violence is not a shield against cowardice but it is the virtue of the brave. According to Gandhi, non-violence is the natural law of human beings. If society is followed and constituted in accordance with this law, it will be turned into a peaceful society.

Keywords: Gandhi, ahimsa, non-violence, truthfulness, Indian philosophy.

An important concept in India's thought and religion for thousands of years is *Ahimsa*. Its literal translation in English would be the reverse of violence or non-violence. The ordinary meaning of the term 'non-violence' carries a negative aspect and seems to suggest that only means avoidance of violence but in the practice of the people of Indian Civilization down the millennia non-violence has been an affirmative concept which carried several positive aspects.¹ The Concept of Non-Violence first appeared as a reaction to the widespread slaughter of animals in Vedic sacrifice. It is said that the doctrine of non-violence first finds expression in a mystical passage in the Chandogya Upanishad. Non-Violence, in Chandogya Upanishad, is considered as a part of sacrifices of which the whole life of a man is made an epitome.² Ahimsa is imperative for practitioners of Patanjali's yoga sutra. It is one of the five *yamas* or restraints which purified the mind of evil passions and indicates the absolute absence of any form of injury to any living being.³ The central teaching of the *Gita* is *anasakti* which refers to the way to self-realization. Gandhiji says "Anasakti transcends Ahimsa. He who would be Anasakta has necessarily to practice non-violence in order to attend the state of selflessness".⁴ It is also noted that the concept of non-violence is the fundamental tenet of Buddhism and Jainism. The understanding and implication of non-violence, in Jainism, are more scrupulous and comprehensive than in any other religion. In Jainism, the concept of Non-violence is carried to an extreme limit in the concept of *Jivadaya* which refers to respect for all living forms, whereby a Jain, apart from indulging in killing or harming any living creature. In Buddhism, There are five *Sila* or precepts which refer to the principles of ethical behaviour. These Principles are positively involved and enjoined the sentiment of Benevolence, Love, and Compassion towards living things and prohibit the killing of living creatures.⁵ Gandhiji is influenced by these thoughts and religion. He says "I simply and humbly follow in the footsteps of the great teachers."⁶ But the meaning of the term non-violence is developed further in hands of Gandhi. According to

Gandhi, it is a wholly positive philosophy of life based on Love and the Inner experience of the oneness of all life. It is Gandhi's inner realization of the oneness of life and consciousness.⁷ But Gandhiji is the first to apply it in the political field on large scale. This paper will discuss the actual meaning of non-violence in Gandhian Philosophy. Although Gandhi's Concept of non-violence is influenced by Ancient India's thought and religion he used this idea not merely as the sense of spiritual development of human beings but it is an important weapon of his political movement. According to Gandhi, Non-violence is not merely the avoidance of Himsa or abstaining from killing but also the non-violence of the brave and the courageous implemented not out of weakness or fear but out of courage conviction, moral superiority and expediency. Gandhiji applies this concept to all sphere of life, especially in politics as a form of Satyagraha. In his Philosophy nonviolence prohibits not all the acts of inflicting physical injury but also mental states like evil thoughts and hearted unkind behaviour, harsh words, dishonesty and lying, all of which he thinks are the manifestation of violence. The concept of non-violence is associated with the concept of truth. According to Gandhi, Truth is the sovereign principle or the idea of a god that combined truth, knowledge and bliss.⁸ Gandhi Says, "Ahimsa and Truth are so intertwined that it was practically impossible to detangle and separate them. Who can say, which is obverse and which is the reverse? Ahimsa is the means, truth is the end. Means to be means must always be within our reach and so, Ahimsa is our supreme duty".⁹ it is noted that the idea of non-violence and truth is not Gandhi's inborn virtue. Gandhiji says, 'In the journey searching for truth I find Ahimsa. I have only retrieved it, never discovered a new'.¹⁰ so truth and Ahimsa or nonviolence are closely connected with Gandhian Philosophy. According to Gandhi a man who has not overcome all kinds of fear, Cannot practice non-violence to perfection. Non-violence is the extreme limit of forgiveness. But forgiveness is the quality of a brave man. Gandhij said "I believe that non-violence is superior to violence, forgiveness is more manly than punishment. Forgiveness adorns a soldier."¹¹ So non-violence

is impossible to practice in our life without fearlessness. Sometimes violence may have the appearance of strength, but it is born out of fear and a sign of weakness. A man, therefore, can be non-violent and has conquered fear.¹²

The concept of Non-violence in Gandhian thought is not the same as the concept of non-killing. It is noted that violence is an act which is motivated under certain conditions such as anger, pride, hatred, selfish consideration, bad intention and similar other conditions. Non-violence, in the negative sense, is the non-killing act which is free from hatred, anger, malice, motives and the like.¹³ But it does not mean that there is no place for violence in human life. Gandhiji considers that any type of killing is not regarded as Himsa or violence. According to Gandhi, For the Biological needs of human beings, for sustaining their bodies, for protecting those under their care, and sometimes for the sake of those whose life is taking-are the cases when killing one form of life or another would be a duty.¹⁴ So, We can say that the Gandhian Concept of Non-violence is not the same as non-killing. Self-realization, Self-suffering and Self scarifies are the most significant feature of the Gandhian Concept of Non-violence. To Gandhiji, Self-sacrifice is an indispensable companion of love. Gandhiji says, “Love never Claims, It ever gives. Love ever suffers, never resents, and never revenges itself.”¹⁵ The positive aspect of non-violence is love which cleans one’s inner life and creates such noble feelings as benevolence compassion forgiveness, tolerance and like. According to Gandhi, non-violence is a dynamic process involving continues deliberation, efforts, strains and action and it is an expression of the conscious and inner effort to force the opponent to realize their mistake.¹⁶

Perfect non-violence is indeed quite impossible in our practical life. Gandhiji also considers it. He says, “perfect non-violence is impossible solong we exit physically, forwe would want some space at least to occupy. Perfect non-violence whilst you are inhabiting the body is only a theory like Euclid’s point or straight line, but we have to endeavor every moment

of our lives.”¹⁷ It means if we practice with fearless, active passion in our daily life, thought etc. That may prevent the violent situation of our present society which is full of narrow selfish interests, struggles for gaining power, a worldwide competition for weapons of mass destruction, and a struggle for establishing hegemony. Gandhian concept of Non-violence transcends all regional, radical religions and cultural barriers. It is global and it comprehends not only Humanity but the whole of the living world. He says, “Non-violence is a power which can be wielded equally by all –children, young man and women or grown up people..”¹⁸ According to Gandhi, the fundamental law of human beings is love, cooperation and co-existence. So, living and helping others to live their own life will be the royal road of universal harmony.

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