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PHILOSOPHY OF NON-VIOLENCE OF MAHATAMA GANDHI

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ABSTRACT

In this research paper, I have treated nonviolence and Satyagraha as normative, empirical and practice oriented concepts. I am also going to analyse whether there is any trace of violence of any sort) in Gandhian Ahimsa. In other words, is Ahimsa, for Gandhi, of the nature of Categorical Imperative which admits of absolutely no exceptions, or only an expedient?

INTRODUCTION

Non-violence or Ahimsa, as already mentioned, is not the same thing as 'not violence'. It has a positive connotation, a concept that is an alternative to violence. By violence, we do not mean only physical injury but also exploitation – that leads to the depletion of physico-spiritual resources of people, institutions, and society. Exploitation does not cover merely man's inhumanity to man, but also of the unreplenishable natural resources of the earth, through indiscriminate deforestation, etc. Violence is, in short, a systematic and dreadful aberration of human nature.

Violence as exploitation, can be classified as follows :-

VIOLENCE

FIRST CATEGORY	SECOND CATEGORY	THIRD CATEGORY
VIOLENCE	VIOLENCE	VIOLENCE

First category violence is exemplified in crass exploitation (of one individual or nation by another) and its attendant evils of loss of peace and increase in impoverishment. It has been contended that rapid development is (especially after the Second World War) and the transfer of obsolete technology coupled with attempts at neo-colonialism in the Third World has intensified poverty and built power blocs, which threatening to blow the universe to smithereens. Affluence and its fringe benefits are not per se bad or evil, but it has been noticed that the yawning gap between the affluent and the poor, creates aspirations in the hearts of the latter, to try and reach a level they never can. This failure to do so severely traumatises them, leading to loss of peace and a burning desire to wreak vengeance.

This thirst for revenge due to exploitation gives rise to the second category violence of protest, an expression of dissent. While the first category violence is due to some wrong actually done to a group or individual, the second category violence is an expression of hatred, an agenda for repaying the tormentor in the same coin. This collective dissent when fueled by power blocs often escalates into large scale wars most of which, since the 1950s have been fought in the killing fields of the Third World, in pockets - like West Asia, (Iran-Iraq, Israel - Palestine-Egypt) South Africa, Vietnam - which are designated as "areas of influence" of superpowers. Not all violence, dissent or protest is directed towards or inflicted upon some external adversary. Not all violence leads to active participation in a process for bringing about societal change. Some forms of dissent against exploitation or perceived injustice might result in a total "withdrawal" from the exploitative society. Non-violent forms of withdrawals are aplenty in Hindu civilization where sanyasis renounce the world and go in search of non-societal situations and peace. People were advised to leave that city which was ruled by an unrighteous monarch because death was felt to be more welcome an option than putting up with unrighteousness. Withdrawal from the world can be self-induced as a symbol of protest as in the case of drug addicts, alcoholics and people with suicidal tendencies. All these (drug addiction, alcoholism etc.) are instances of third category violence, in so far as these people inflict violence on their own person with their own hands. They too feel stifled or piqued about some believed injustice, but instead of participating actively in protest, they float away from the world of reality to a world of gossamer dreams, in the process wreaking tremendous havoc on their own psyche as well as that of society on which they are a burden as long as they live. Thus, the violence of exploitation, the violence of protest and the violence of withdrawal, broadly form the different types of violence. Each of these dehumanising

forms of violence turn on the problem of exploitation, and must be tackled with a potent and meaningful non-exploitative civilizational force called non-violence. Not only must Ahimsa an alternative to violence as a method of negotiation, it must also provide the superstructure of an alternative society, polity and economy. Thus, institutionalising nonviolence. This is exactly what Gandhiji is trying to do by regarding nonviolence as not only a method but also an end in itself, or intrinsically good.

It has been claimed that the purpose of Satyagraha is conversion, never coercion. It aims at winning over an individual by gentle persuasion and enkindling in them a sense of justice in place of fear. This is where I wish to analyse the difference between conversion and coercion, and also Gandhi's own statements, as well as the typology of violence to note how nonviolent Gandhi really was? [Does he fall under First, Second or Third category violence or is he totally ahimsaic?]

For this purpose, I would like to examine Gandhi's experiment with Satyagraha in at least one instance The Ahmedabad Labour Satyagraha of February March 1918, which dealt with the dispute which arose between textile labourers and mills owners of Ahmedabad in Bombay Presidency. The dispute turned on the amount of dearness allowance to be paid to textile workers and withdrawal of a special 'plague bonus' (often as high as 70-80% of the worker's wages) paid long after danger from the plague had died out. When in January 1918 millowners announced their intention of withdrawing the bonus, the workers were averse to this move because they were aware of the sharp rise in prices, almost 2 to 4 times the old price. Both parties were willing to submit the dispute to an arbitration board consist of three representatives from each side. Before the Ahmedabad court could pronounce its verdict, labourers in some of the mills struck work. The millowners reacted by emphatically declaring that all workers not willing to accept a 20% increase in D.A. (dearness allowance) would have their services terminated.

Gandhiji, upon studying the situation in detail, advised the workers to demand not more nor less than what was reasonable-353. A conflict situation evolved which threatened to end in a lose-lose position, owners losing profits, the workers their means of livelihood. Gandhi assuming leadership of the workers, used Satyagraha as a technique to achieve a constructive solution. To make sure that no labourer would betray the common cause, Gandhi insisted that during the strike period, labourers earned their livelihood through other labour. He instructed labourers on sanitation, provided medical assistance and other welfare activities. He thus instilled in the psyche

of workers the injunction of never depending upon alms, but self-support through labour, no violence and no surrender, however long the strike. A primary characteristic of the Ahmedabad labour Satyagraha was the use of fast (for the first time) as an instrument of nonviolent force. He sought to use this technique in order to strengthen the workers' resolve to keep their no-work pledge till either a settlement was reached or till they left the mills altogether. Another significant event connected with this particular Satyagraha campaign is reflected in the birth of the Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association, which has since 1937, trained its members in supplementary occupations so that in the case of lockout, strike, etc, they could be self-sustaining. Bondurant writes "Peculiar to the Ahmedabad Satyagraha was the close personal relationship between the leaders on opposing sides. Gandhi was a close friend both of the strikers and of the mill owners. Anasuya Sarabhai, an effective labour organiser, was in the vanguard of the Satyagraha strikers. Her brother, Ambalal Sarabhai, led the struggle on behalf of the management. 46 Before actually embarking on the Satyagraha programme, Gandhi chalked up strict code of conduct. "No violence, no molestation of 'blacklegs', no dependence upon alms, but self-support through other labour, and no surrender, however long the strike... Not to indulge in mischief, quarrelling, robbing, plundering, or abusive language or cause damage to mill-owners property, but to behave peacefully during the period of lockout. Gandhi put forth the following formula:

"(a) Workers were to resume work the following day (20 March), and on that day they would get a 35 percent increase; on the second day of work (21 March) they would receive a 20 percent increase.

(b) From the third day (22 March) they would receive an increase in the amount decided by the arbitrator (but not to exceed 35 percent).

C) Professor Anandshankar Dhruva, Vice-Principal of Gujarat College was to be the Arbitrator.

(d) During the period before the announcement of the award, workers were to be paid an increase of twenty seven and half percent. (e) The amount of increase decided upon by the Arbitrator was to be adjusted against the twenty seven and half percent, i.e, if the arbitration award was in excess of twenty seven and half, then employees would pay the additional amount, retroactively, if the award was less than twenty seven and half percent, the workers would refund the difference.

The arbitrator's decision went in favour of the workers i.e, a full 35 percent increase on July pay granted to all mill hands, together with seven and half percent additional increase for the period elapsed between the time of resumption of work and the announcement of the award. That this case was one of Satyagraha can be gleaned from the fact that the 'truth/satya' factor is the social justice underlying the demand for increased allowance. The element of self-suffering was present both for the workers for forfeiting pay and Gandhi for going on fast. This movement graphically portrays the role of arbitration in Satyagraha. Satyagrahis in this situation had precious little to lose, submitting the dispute to a third party in so far as a Satyagrahi sooner or later had to seek a solution through some form of negotiation or arbitration before resorting to direct action. The only reason that I quote this instance of Satyagraha is to examine dispassionately whether non-cooperation and civil disobedience does not involve an element of coercion, or exploitation, - First Category and Second Category violence.

Vinit Haksar in an article defends Gandhi by saying "Civil disobedience and non-cooperation when conducted according to Gandhian principles, do not constitute a threat or coercion in any evil sense. Rather they involve a refusal to cooperate with or assist an evil policy, and an offer to cooperate on honourable and just terms.... The gist of Haksar's defense appears to be that a coercive threat implies taking advantage of the vulnerability of the opponent or recipient of the threat. Gandhi contends that although there may be an element of compulsion in his civil disobedience it differs from coercion in so far as it is aimed at securing mutual cooperation and understanding in accordance with a quest for truth. The discussion boils down whether compulsion and coercion mean the same thing exploiting an occasion, or taking advantage of the adversary's vulnerability. I wish to show that although Gandhi did not resort to physical violence or "Coercion in any evil sense", through his 'fasts' he regularly bamboozled and forced mill owners of Ahmedabad, the Congress and Britain into negotiation. Granted, that it may not have been Gandhiji's intention when he originally decided to fast to exert moral coercion on his adversaries and compatriots, since by definition coercion of any kind was antithetical to the aims of Satyagraha, but the realisation that nobody would let him become a martyr did not prevent him from using these techniques on many similar occasions.

It would be extremely naive to believe that Satyagraha alone wrested India her long-cherished independence. If Satyagraha alone was the cause then India ought to have become independent in the 1920's when Gandhi' launched the first non-cooperation movement.

But that was not to be. Why did no congressman think of the Quit India Movement before 1942, say in 1930, when the call for Purna Swaraj was given? The 1940's Britain in a deplorable state. Hitler's armies having annexed Europe where bombarding England, and had more or less saw pinned them to the wall. Britain needed all the manpower she could master. This was the ideal time to make an offer she could not refuse-dominion status in exchange for war assistance. Britain agreed.

After the war, the Labour government under Clement Attlee was averse to the policy of colonisation, and anyway Britain's crippled and war-torn economy could no longer sustain its colonies. The disintegration of the vast British Empire was imminent. Amidst such a turbulent scenario, Gandhiji launched the Quit India movement, aimed at finally routing the British. In this did he not take advantage of their vulnerability, did he coerce or convince a crippled Britain to grant India (and subsequently other colonies) independence?

Coming back to the Ahmedabad Labour Strike, Gandhi was well aware of the fact that the mill owners (who were his acquaintances) would never really let him starve to death (no matter what they said) - and become a martyr. They eventually would and usually always did give in to his demands, howsoever rational or irrational they be. Similarly, when communal riots broke out during partition, Gandhi again used the weapon of fast unto death ostensibly as penance but actually to force the Congress and Muslim League to do his bidding. The Congress leaders were too devoted to him to let him die, and also petrified by the prospect of facing the masses should he die of starvation. To date, very few Indians were convinced that they should bear no ill will or hatred to their brethren in Pakistan. The spectre of distrust, the yawning credibility gap created in 1947 has not been bridged even forty-three years after the holocaust. There is really no difference of meaning of the terms 'compulsion "and" coercion'. They both "mean making an individual act against his or her will". To do so is to wreak mental violence. Thus, Gandhi's Satyagraha to a certain extent does involve First Order violence.

So far as Second Order violence is concerned, we may exonerate only Gandhi himself from the charge, for he as an individual could have been free from all hatred for the British, but not his followers. They blindly followed the Mahatma, adhering to Satyagraha et al only as an expedient - an efficacious means to a particular end. Nehru, Gandhiji's trusted lieutenant, after considering non-violence from practical angles said in his Autobiography (XII, 81) "We are moved by these arguments (Gandhiji's arguments), but for us and for the National Congress as a whole the non-

violent method was not, and could not be, a religion or an unchallengeable creed or dogma. It could only be a policy and a method promising certain results, and by those results it would have to be finally judged". "Thus, while Gandhi regarded Ahimsa as a religious principle, Nehru accepted it as a practical instrument to fight the British. "The great majority of us, I take it judge the issue not on moral but on practical grounds, and if we reject the way of violence it is because it promises no substantial results". Another passage states, "... if this Congress or the nation at any future time comes to the conclusion that methods of violence will rid us of slavery, then I have no doubt that it will adopt them. Violence is bad, but slavery is far worse... Thus, we see that almost all other Satyagrahis were fueled by a burning desire to seek revenge, and nothing else. They were tired of being slaves, and would have done anything to break the shackles. They had nothing to lose but their chains. It was providential that Gandhi happened to show them the path of Ahimsa, they could quite well have repeated the bloodbath of 1857, or inspired by the Soviets launched another Bolshevik type revolution where many more millions would have perished.

A number of biographers of Gandhi have noted that towards the end of his life he faced a serious moral crisis. After partition, the Mahatma was a totally disillusioned and broken man. Everything that could go wrong had gone wrong. Communal riots had claimed innumerable lives. The Congress party, the erstwhile champion of freedom instead of becoming a harbinger of prosperity had assumed the role of the inheritor of the British Raj, lock, stock and barrel. The India of his dreams lay in shambles and he himself was brushed aside. He no longer dreamt of living a hundred years but lamented that he was still alive to see his efforts reduced to nought. He was gradually withdrawing into a shell, insulating himself from the harsh reality outside. It is quite possible that at this stage his erstwhile Satyagraha and fasts which were tools of social regeneration, were becoming instruments of a death wish', the mahatma now having lost the will to fight any more. His self-remonstrations could be construed as a case of Third Category violence, i.e., convincing himself that he was a failure, solely responsible for the ruination of the India of his dreams, he wished to fade away.

Thus if coercion and compulsion mean forcing people to act against their own will then Satyagraha and 'fasts' so far as they forced compliance were not entirely non violent in form although in spirit they were, because the primary motive behind each was never to make the adversary abandon his viewpoint but only bring him to the negotiating table, show him that there an alternative, and hope that the two parties could arrive at a solution acceptable to both.

Satyagraha as Gandhi envisaged it, never sought to create enemies, but was a technique of how to win friends and influence people.

As I have already mentioned, Gandhi advanced two definitions for ahimsa - a negative definition and a positive definition. Negatively Ahimsa consists of non-injury to another living being in thought, word and deed, and positively Ahimsa connotes love for, charity towards everyone, even those one may consider to be enemies. Satyagraha thus boils down to (i) being nonviolent in thought word and deed towards other people, and (ii) willingly undergoing suffering oneself to attain one's cause of justice. The question I wish to raise here is whether Satyagraha to the extent it is described as undergoing suffering oneself, is really a nonviolent method of action? Why does Gandhi define Ahimsa as noninjury and charity towards others, what is there to prevent him from applying these attitudes to ourselves too?

I wish to state that Gandhi's conception of Ahimsa (Negative and positive) is too narrow in scope in so far as he excludes injury to oneself and goodwill towards oneself from its ambit.

Violence consists in harming somebody. It could take the form of injury, (physical and mental) and even death. When I injure or kill somebody else, or even bear him illwill I have been violent to him. When I refrain from doing so, I am nonviolent. When as part of Satyagraha I undergo suffering myself, I injure myself, when I let the police beat me to death, I kill myself by proxy, by allowing others to kill me.

Whether I perform the actions of killing someone else or refrain from doing so, or of injuring or killing myself or not doing so, the actions per se are the same, only the person at the receiving end is different in each case. Thus, if as a part of Satyagraha, I am inflicting, suffering on myself, I am performing a violent action vis-a-vis myself. Satyagraha thus becomes a form of Third Category violence, insofar as it is completely nonviolent so far as an adversary is concerned, but violent to a certain extent, with respect to ourselves.

CONCLUSION

Gandhi's Satyagraha was not always entirely nonviolent in practice (albiet in spirit) need not alarm staunch Gandhians. It is, as I have already acknowledged, an extremely practical technique of conflict resolution, which involves a large amount of mutual give and take. It is to the credit of this practical principle that it was not rigid, but highly flexible in nature. The problem lies in the basic assumption that all moral principles are absolute rules which admit of no exceptions. But then in the field of human intercourse there is no general kind of behaviour of which we can say that it is good without qualification. There are certain occasions of moral dilemma where it would be prudent to act in a manner which is known to contradict our moral assumption. This does not mean that the person who has act in such a manner has abandoned his commitment to the principle. He does what he has to do because not doing so, would also be wrong in a given situation. Thus, it is wrong to kill a human being, but killing in battle and self defence is never equated with cold blooded murder. That nonviolence was not a fetish or unreasoned dogma for Gandhi, is evidenced from the fact that he too acknowledged exceptions to the rule i.e., situations where one is compelled to commit acts of violence without compromising on the actual principle of nonviolence. "Should my child be attacked with rabies and there was no helpful remedy to relieve his agony, I should consider it my duty to take his life.⁵³ (Young India - 18.11.1926).

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