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Mahatma Gandhi and Truth and Non-Violence

Mahatma Gandhi is often remembered within the public imagination as a prophet of non-violence. This identification can be strongly anchored and rightly qualified as reviving a fundamental ethical principle of Jainism (along with Samkhya), one of the heterodox schools of Indian philosophy. Jainism provides philosophical justification to the ethical principle of nonviolence. According to Jainism, ahimsa, or non-violence entails strict refraining in thought, word and action from any kind of injury to any form of life. The rational, according canonical texts of Jainism says, Jayendra Soni, behind the rule of non-violence is based on self-reflection and selfexperience that is further extended to other living beings. Soni quotes a Jaina text, Suyogada, where it is said,

> ... exactly as it is not nice to me if I am wounded, struck, threatened, beaten, hurt, hit hard or killed with a stick, a bone, first, a clod of earth or a potsherd - (yes) even if just a hair of mine is pulled out I feel vividly the injury which causes me suffering and fear of it - so too, know this, all higher beings, all plants, all lower animals, all other living beings if wounded ... or killed with a stick ..., indeed even if just a hair of theirs is pulled out, feel vividly the injury which causes them suffering and fear of it. If one has recognized this, then (it is certain that) no higher being, no plant, no lower animal, no other living
>
> being may be beaten, commanded, subdued, strained (or) killed. Truly I say: the venerable saints who were, who are and who will be they all say, they speak, proclaim, explain the following: no lower animal, no plant, no other

living being may be beaten, commanded, subdued, strained or killed. This is the pure, constant, eternal teaching proclaimed by those who know, because they understand the world. In this way a monk renounces violence against living beings .... (in Soni 2014: 30-31

So we have in Jainism in the form of universalizing one's personal experience, of acceptance or rejection, through the principle of equality to the experiences of others, to provide justification to establish ethical principle of non-violence.

This philosophical school not only advocated non-violence but also provided a metaphysical foundation for this ethical principle. Gandhi becomes a modern icon by reviving this classical philosophical idea and ingenuously presenting it in a modern idiom accessible even to common people. He, thus, skilfully expands the terrain of availability of this classical concept to include not only those that practice Jainism or are trained in philosophy, religion, and theology, but also the common people. This move of making philosophical ideas available to the public is an important contribution of Gandhi.

In addition to this democratic gesture, there is something adventurous about his attempt. He embarks on this project against the backdrop of India's freedom struggle, growing Hindu-Muslim polarization in the 1930s and 1940s culminating in Partition, and with a pervading acceptance of the inevitability of violence in social and political life in the world. Not many believed that the British would leave India though they desired it in varying degrees.

The other thing that was considered impossible was non-violence as a political instrument to achieve independence. This is a common belief held by many. Non-violence as a political instrument and India's freedom were not

considered a possibility together. Against such a jarring backdrop of impossibility, Gandhi brings non-violence to the centre stage of Indian politics. At a theoretical level Gandhi seems to ask those who found the indispensability of violence in politics the question: what is the purpose of politics? Is it to bring people together or make them fall apart? If the former then non-violence discharges this task and not violence. Similar to that of making a case for non-violence, Gandhi introduces radical move in moving from God is truth to Truth is God. This chapter will discuss some important interventions that are ingenuously introduced by Gandhi.

3. Gita and Gandhi: Gandhi advocated non-violence and in Gita Lord Krishna induces the reluctant Arjuna to fight war that involved violence. This second position that is in direct conflict with the first one becomes clear as all who interpreted Gita accepted it as a text that endorses war. Those like Tilak *(CWMG* vol. 37: 175) and Savarkar *(CWMG* vol. 37: 82) accepted this conventional reading and recommended the use of violence in their fight against the British. The violent dimension of the Gita was used to incite the weak slavish natives to become strong and fight against the British. This underlying association of the text with violence attracted many towards it, making it a text to rally around.

There are many who rallied around it along with Gandhi, which makes Gandhi's relation with the Gita more contested and complex. What distinguishes other interpretations of the Gita during this period from Gandhi's interpretation is that in most other thinkers, while recalling this classical text in addition to spiritualism, the social aspect, namely, combating colonialism, and making a case for India's independence looms large. Gandhi, however, did not

accept the conventional reading of the Gita as endorsing violence. It is against this formidable background that Gandhi embarks on an unprecedented hermeneutical adventure to claim, with concrete textual evidence, that the Gita actually decries violence, not endorse it. This move has both hermeneutical importance as well as political relevance. Gandhi's interpretation of the Gita is not merely an academic exercise though his interpretation is radical even by rigid academic standards. This text is not merely one amongst other texts in his life and career. It is a major influence on his life. There are two additional aspects that distinguished Gandhi's engagement with this text: (i) the impact of the text on his personal life and (ii) his different, even radical, way of interpreting the text that is different from both conventional and contemporary interpretations.

4. Violence to Non-Violence: There are two apparently conflicting positions in Gandhi. One he is the strong votary of non-violence and Bhagavad Gita had an enormous impact on him. In Gita Lord Krishna induces Arjuna who was reluctant to fight war to fight. War involved violence. So there is a conflict between Gandhi's adherence to nonviolence and his acceptance of Gita. Gandhi resolved this conflict through a long hermeneutical exercise. This exercise that eluded the attention of many scholars on Gandhi offers a radical interpretation of Gita that reject the all existing interpretations of this sacred text. He embarks on this task by bringing two important variables in to the discussion. One is internal to the text and the other external to it. The internal one is trigunas typology in Gita, namely, Satva, Rajas and Tamas. The three gunas are internally related to each other but they are organised in a

hierarchical order where Satva is at the top, Tamas is at the bottom and Rajas is in between these two. If Satva is the privileged guna and war belongs either to Rajas or Tamas then Gita cannot be advocating the Satva on the one hand and war and through war violence on the other hand. This is not acceptable. Gandhi solves this problem by retaining the first claim that Gita privileges Satva while rejecting the second claim that it endorses violence.

He maintains that the Gita advocates Satva hence it cannot accept violence. Having made this larger claim, Gandhi consolidates his interpretation that the Gita does not endorse violence. On the contrary, it advocates the practice of Satva, which is closer to non-violence. He tries framing a response to Krishna's advice to Arjuna to fight the war and not abstain from it. This is perhaps the most contentious issue influencing those who interpret the text as advocating violence. Here too Gandhi takes recourse to other cardinal virtues such as non-attachment or *nishkamakarma*. Krishna asked Arjuna to fight in the war to move him from the tamasic to the rajasic state. Arjuna's reluctance is not because of his satvic nature as he had fought often enough in the past *(CWMG* vol. 37: 13). The reason for his reluctance is not non-violence but attachment towards his kinsmen. When Arjuna is reluctant to kill, Krishna reminds him that he has already committed violence. Having started on this course, he needs to see it through till the end. Here let us note that Gandhi distinguishes inaction from non-violent action.

Gandhi clearly prefers violence or rajas if the choice is between rajas and tamas, though he is clear and consistent in advocating the doctrine of non-violence. Given this standpoint, Gandhi sees in Krishna an attempt to save Arjuna from relapsing into tamas or inaction. It was this, he says, that made

Krishna ask Arjuna to take to violence. So Arjuna has already committed violence, and he is now relapsing into inaction by refraining from fighting. Gandhi says, he is 'clouded by ignorant attachment' *(CWMG* vol. 33: 87). Instead of this regression, given the circumstances, despite non-violence being the best option, Krishna persuades Arjuna to fight to save him from this regression. In an effort to circumvent regression Krishna persuades Arjuna to at least maintain the status quo. This is clearly evident when Gandhi says:

> If a passenger travelling in a train which is running at a speed of forty miles an hour suddenly feels an aversion to travelling and jumps out of the train, he will have but committed suicide. He has not in truth realized the futility of travelling as such or of travelling by train. Arjuna was in a similar condition. Krishna, who believed in non-violence, could not have given Arjuna any advice other than what he did. *(CWMG* vol. 33: 87-8)

While this contextual necessity made Krishna advice Arjuna, this however, says Gandhi, cannot be universalized and cannot be taken as Krishna endorsing violence. Making this clarification Gandhi says, 'But to conclude from this that the Gita teaches violence or justify war is as unwarranted as to argue that, since violence in some form or other is inescapable for maintaining the body in existence, *dharma* lies only in violence.' On the contrary, clarifies Gandhi, 'The man of discriminating intellect ... teaches the duty of striving for deliverance from this body which exists through violence, the duty, that is, of striving for *moksha' (CWMG* vol. 33: 88).

Non-violence is generally contrasted with violence. However, Gandhi's idea of non-violence is in a triangular relation with violence and inaction. This is

reminiscent of three gunas — tamas, rajas, and sattva — in Samkhya. Thus, the concept of non-violence is not only contrasted from violence, but equally, if not more, from inaction. This is important because while the contrast between violence and non-violence is evident, what is not emphasized is Gandhi's further contrasting of violent action from inaction. He says in *Young India* on 11 August 1920 that if 'there is a choice only between cowardice and violence' he would advise 'violence' *(CWMG,* vol. 21: 133)

Thus Gandhi clarifies his stand, depicting the Gita as advocating non-violence and explaining the reason and the context behind Krishna's advice to Arjuna to fight. He does this by pointing out that violence is to be preferred to inaction, though non-violence is the first preference. Having made this claim where we turned away from the earlier situation of inconsistence between Gandhi's endorsement of non-violence and following the ideals of Gita that endorsed war and violence to the stage where Gandhi made Gita as endorsing not violence but non-violence as it privileged Satva that does not endorse violence but non-violence. Having used this internal variable in changing the interpretation of Gita, Gandhi turns to an external variable that falls outside the text, namely, the context of narrating the epic The Mahabharata that contains Gita as a part. Let me discuss this in the following.

Referring to the context of the epic Mahabharata, Gandhi says, 'Vyasa wrote his supremely beautiful epic to depict the futility of war' *(CWMG* vol. 33: 87). Because the context of narrating the epic, which is originally called as Jaya, meaning victory, is to dissuade the successors of Arjuna, who are threatening to kill all serpents, about the futility of war, particularly, the Kurushetra where there were no winnings except killing of people. Taking on

those who interpret the Gita as endorsing violence, he says:

> When I was in London, I had talks with many revolutionaries. Shyamji Krishnavarma, Savarkar, and others used to tell me that the *Gita* and the *Ramayana* taught quite the opposite of what I said they did. I felt then how much better it would have been if the sage Vyasa had not used this illustration of fighting for inculcating spiritual knowledge. For when even highly learned and thoughtful men read this meaning into *Gita... (CWMG* vol. 37: 82)

Gandhi asks 'what can we expect of ordinary people?' *(CWMG* vol. 37: 82). Let me point out here that though Tilak, his political guru, believed, like Krishnavarma and Savarkar, that the Gita preached violence, Gandhi does not include him along with them. He however does refer to Tilak later and declares his differences with him. Referring to the verse in Gita, 'Everyone follow a path which leads to Me', he says:

> This verse has a history behind it. When Tilak Maharaj was alive, he had cited this verse in the course of a discussion about violence and non-violence. I had argued that we should bear with a person who might have slapped us. In reply, he cites this verse to prove that the *Gita* upheld the principle of 'tit for tat'. That is, we should act towards a person as he acts towards us. I cling to the reply which I gave to him then. *(CWMG* vol. 37: 175)

Gandhi thus makes his stand clear on the issue of the Gita's stand on nonviolence, with those like Krishnavarma and Savarkar and even his revered

guru, Tilak. He adds,

If what we describe as the very quintessence of all Shastras — as one of the Upanishads, can be interpreted to yield such a wrong meaning, it would have been better, for the holy Vyasa to have taken another, more effective, illustration to teach sacred truths
(CWMG vol. 37: 82).

Tracing the reason behind the readers' firm conviction in Arjuna and Shri Krishna to Vyasa's 'vivid' portrayal of them, he adds, 'The historian- author, moreover, gives histories of cities, communities, and individual characters, and claims that he is describing a battle in which the best men of his age took part'." *(CWMG,* Vol. 37: p. 82). Reproaching this creative
and astonishingly original feat of Vyasa for giving the reader a deceptive feeling of historical realism, he laments, 'how much better it would have been if the revered Vyasa had not adopted the method which he did'." *(CWMG,* Vol. 37: p.82). While admitting that reproaching the great sage is impertinent of him, he says, 'But what should one seeking to serve truth do? What must one do if one sees an error? It is not wrong to draw attention, in all humility, to what one feels to be an error. This thought remained in my mind for many years' *(CWMG* vol. 37: 82).

With this at the back of his mind, the worried Gandhi thought of reading the epic Mahabharata to get a better understanding of the 'atmosphere of the age in which the *Gita* was written and the good and the evil influences at work at that age' *(CWMG* vol. 37: 82). He read the Gujarati version of the epic while

in jail. This became a turning point in his understanding of this great epic. It was then that he understood the allegorical sense of the epic, beyond the historical sense that it evokes, which is due to the ingenuity of Vyasa's depiction of characters. Referring to his realization that the illustrations that Vyasa used are very beautiful, he says:

> Just as in Aesop's *Fables,* and in *Tales from the Panchtantra,* the authors have created conversations among birds and animals to impart moral teaching, so in the *Mahabharata* virtues and vices are personified, and great moral truths conveyed through those figures. The description of the battle serves only as a pretext. (*CWMG* vol. 37: 82)

Earlier in his work too he had held the view that 'physical battle is only an occasion for describing the battle-field of the human body. In this view the names mentioned are not of persons but of the qualities which they represent' *(CWMG* vol. 37: 76). If we take this into consideration, then says Gandhi, we will realize that 'The *Mahabharata* was not composed with the aim of describing a battle.' Rather, the 'author has cleverly made use of the event to teach great truths' *(CWMG* vol. 37: 82). Given the tricky nature of the plot and the literary style if the reader is not on 'his guard, he may be misled. The very nature of dharma is such that one may easily fall into error if one is not vigilant' *(CWMG* vol. 37: 82).

In support of this adventurous interpretation, he says that the subject of the Gita is neither a 'description of the battle' nor a 'justification of violence' *(CWMG* vol. 33: 87). He then gets into debating mode by saying that 'it is

difficult to reconcile a few of the verses with the idea that the *Gita* advocates non-violence, it is still more difficult to reconcile the teaching of the work as a whole with the advocacy of violence' *(CWMG* vol. 33: 87).

In this context Gandhi makes yet another radical move when he says that the characters in the Gita cannot be taken as 'historical persons'. Rather, he says:

> I believe that Dhuryodhana and his supporters stand for the Satanic impulses in us, and Arjuna and others stand for Godly impulses in us. The battle-field is our body. The poet-seer, who knows from experience the problems of life, has given a faithful account of the conflict which is eternally going on within us. Shri Krishna is the Lord dwelling in everyone's heart who is ever murmuring. His prompting in a pure *chitta,* like a clock ticking in a room. If the clock of the *chitta* is not wound up with the key of self-purification, the indwelling Lord no doubt remains where He is, but the ticking is heard no more. *(CWMG* vol. 33: 88)

He extends this further when he says:

> I do not wish to suggest that violence has no place at all in the teaching of the *Gita.* The dharma which it teaches does not mean that a person who has not yet awakened to the truth of non-violence may act like a coward. Anyone who fears others, accumulates possessions, and indulges in sense-pleasures, will certainly fight with violent means, but violence does not, for that reason, become justified as his dharma. There is only one dharma. Non-violence means *moksha.* And *moksha*

> means realizing Satyanarayana. But this dharma does not under any circumstances countenance running away in fear. In this world which baffles our reason, violence there will then always be. The *Gita* shows the way which will lead us out of it, but it also says that we cannot escape it simply by running away from it like cowards. Anyone who prepares to run away would do better, instead, to kill and be killed. *(CWMG* vol. 33: 88-9)

Further, Gandhi disaggregates the composer of the text from the text itself by pointing out the overlaps between them. He claims that the text — in this case the poem — should be considered 'greater than its author'. The differences are: (i) the author may not 'necessarily have closer conceptions of all its possible implications' (ii) the author may not follow 'in his own life the truth which he utters in his moment of inspiration'. This discrepancy accounts for the 'lives of many poets' being 'at variance with the teaching contained in their poems' *(CWMG* vol. 33: 87). Having made this crucial distinction, Gandhi claims:

> That the overall teaching of the *Gita* is not violence but non-violence is evident from the argument which begins in Chapter II and ends in Chapter XVIII. The intervening chapters propound the same theme. Violence is simply not possible unless one is driven by anger, by ignorant love, or by hatred. The *Gita,* on the other hand, wants us to be incapable of anger, and to attain to a state unaffected by the three *gunas.* Such a person can never feel anger. *(CWMG* vol. 33: 87)

What is important here is that Gandhi takes on the colossal task of

undermining the endorsement of war, thus violence, and ventures, or one might say adventures, into claiming that Gita endorses satva amongst the three gunas, the other two being rajas and tamas. A satvic person does not get angry and cannot commit violence. Gita advocates satva, hence it cannot accept violence. Gandhi therefore concluded that not only does the Gita not endorse violence, it, on the contrary, advocates the practice of satva which is closer to non-violence. Gandhi undertakes this long and arduous journey, makes several exegetical moves, interprets differently both by using internal resources within the text and outside it, also offers reasons for rejecting the conventional interpretations that associated Gita with violence. So there is this long journey where a weak Gandhi tries to overcome this state through his reading of Gita. At the beginning of this long journey, he himself admits that he was mentally weak. If this is so then Basham's claim that tradition influenced Gandhi does not tally with this state of Gandhi. Even if he was influenced by tradition the intensity of this influence was not strong rather it was weak. So, Basham's claim that Gandhi was influenced by tradition is not completely tenable for the reasons he gives. Moving further, one of the important influence that enabled Gandhi to overcome this state was his reading of Gita. Here he was induced by two outsiders to read this text. Though he was induced by an outsider to read Gita he makes active intervention into the reading of the text. There are two points here that need to be mentioned. The relation between Gita and Gandhi that was enabled by these two outsiders falls outside the relations that is highlighted by Hacker. Hacker highlights Gandhi's relation with the West. This relation between Gita and Gandhi that falls outside Hacker's account enables Gandhi to have a local access with Indian society. This

access that is not factored by Hacker enables Gandhi to bolster his relation with non-state society in India. This form of relation eluded the attention of Hacker as he sought to exhaust Gandhi in his relation with the West. Gandhi's relation reveals a complex graph. He moves from the state of weakness to be enabled by an outside other; he then uses this resource to actively negotiate modernity, West and premodern India. This sociological fact needs to be factored before we make moral assessment of this intervention. Otherwise our moral conclusions will acquire discounted form not because of the deficiency at the moral level but because the social axioms from which moral conclusions are drawn are not properly factored.

5. *Truth*: I will now leave this long discussion on non-violence and move on to another important idea, which has not become as prominent in the public imagination. This is the idea of Truth. Between Truth and nonviolence Gandhi gave more importance to the former. He himself admits this in a letter to Ranchhodlal Patwari:

> By instinct I have been truthful, but not non-violent ... I put the former in the first place and the latter in the second place. For, as he [a Jain muni] puts it, I was capable of sacrificing non-violence for the sake of truth. In fact, it was in the course of my pursuit of truth that I discovered non-violence. (1950: 3)

Given the primacy Gandhi accorded to Truth, there is a need to retrieve the importance of the idea of Truth and install it at the centre of public discourse. Truth in Gandhi's hands undergoes a radical and fundamental transformation. First, he makes a massive move when he swaps the relation between God and Truth, reversing 'God is Truth' to 'Truth is God'. These

statements need not be read as establishing identity but as consisting of part and whole. Let us identify the underlying algorithm in these statements. In the earlier formula Truth becomes a subset of a whole that is God. Strictly speaking, this makes Truth available only to those who believe in God. Truth thereby becomes a part, an instrument in the hands of religion and theology. It remains inaccessible to those who do not believe in God. So non-believers are outsiders to Truth. Therefore, for someone who wants to embrace Truth, it becomes mandatory to believe in God. This prerequisite may discourage, if not become an impediment to, many who want to access Truth. For instance, there are atheists like Gora who are followers of non-violence. Thus, nonbelievers are not admitted into the domain of Truth.

Moreover, there is another problem with this formulation as rendering truth within the domain of religion, one may have to face the possibility of different claims of truth, different contested and conflicting claims of truth. Resolving these will be not only difficult but also unviable as each claim to their own version of truth. The change that Gandhi embarks on, the swapping that he initiates, removes this obstacle. With this move God becomes either identical with, or a part of the Truth. This makes Truth accessible both to those who believe and those who do not, thus enormously extending the purview of the domain of Truth and accomplishing extensive inclusions. There is a need to recognize the radicalness of this move by Gandhi. While his idea of non-violence has its roots in classical Indian philosophy, he in a way neutralizes this relation and brings the concept into the centre stage of modern society in an unusual way, at a remarkable time. But what he does with regard to Truth is very radical and that tremendously enlarges the domain of Truth.