
UNIT 1 RELEVANCE OF NON-VIOLENCE

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

Terrorism and violence have pervaded every nook and corner of our society. There are reports of widespread violence in different countries of the Third World, including India. Indeed, it is distressing that violent trends in human society should grow at such a fast pace when developmental activities have also been taking rapid strides. All efforts of international and national institutions as also respective governments have not been successful in curbing the violent trends in human society and rooting out the causes for such occurrences.

While materialism and the resultant greed, generated by such values have contributed to the increased violence in society, there is need to think seriously of ways and means to curb such trends. In India, there has long been the legacy of non-violence propagated by Mahatma Gandhi. It was used by Gandhi successfully in mobilizing the masses to fight the British, which ultimately was forced to leave. But what is significant is that in addition to the removal of foreign rule, he wanted to establish a democratic order, free from political, economic and social exploitation. The success of this strategy became the subject of much discussion and analysis and volumes have been written on the Gandhian technique of ahimsa or non-violence. The Unit attempts to understand the relevance of non-violence in today's times.

Thus by the end of this Unit you should be able:

- to have a basic understanding of Gandhian concept of non-violence;
- to comprehend the relevance of non-violence;
- to grasp the limitations of the method of non-violence.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

As is well known, Truth and non-violence were the basic tenets of Gandhian philosophy. Moralization of politics had been the dream of many political thinkers, to make it a reality had been Gandhi's endeavour. As he aptly remarked: "Non-violence is the greatest force at the disposal of mankind." Referring to the problems of humanity created through exploitation of man by man and group by

group, he thought these could be solved through *Satyagraha*, the organized use of truth, non-violence and the purity of means. Gandhi’s *Satyagraha* attempted to guide the individual towards the goal of higher life and also solve political and social problems. He called it the moral equivalent of war and that the ‘soul force’ or ‘love force’ used by the *Satyagrahis* in the form of non-violent resistance and civil disobedience with no hatred for their antagonists is more powerful, effective and creative than the destructive and death-dealing weapons of war.

Ahimsa-the non-violence was a *Dharma*, no matter if, for Gandhi, it was a plant of slow growth; and along with its activities, applicable in day-to-day practices, it was the means to achieve the goal. *Satyagraha*, pursuit of Truth and fully imbibed with *Ahimsa* was the weapon applied in political actions. He, as we know, largely succeeded in *Ahimsa* and *Satyagraha*, because he was brave, humble and free from hatred. All these three were, and are, fully within the scope of non-violence; in other words, they were, and are, themselves the best introduction of *Ahimsa*. And Mahatma Gandhi practiced them in best possible manner both in his individual life and public life.

Further, he loved everybody without any discrimination. Love is a value supplementary to *Ahimsa*. It is an ornament of the brave. In it everything is good, positive and beneficial provided it is not momentary. Mahatma Gandhi saw the ultimate Truth in love and said, ‘To see the universal and pervading spirit of Truth face-to-face one must be able to love the meanest of certain as myself.’ That is why; his non-violence was that of the brave. It was not born out of cowardice.

Extending the principle of non-violence into political space, he envisaged non-cooperation movement. Non-cooperation involved the purposeful withholding of cooperation or the unwillingness to initiate in cooperation with an opponent. The goal of noncooperation is to halt or hinder an industry, political system, or economic process. Methods of noncooperation include labor strikes, economic boycotts, civil disobedience, tax refusal, and general disobedience.

Gandhi’s emphasis was both on opposing the British Raj and on building a society that would make India worthy of her freedom. He led the famous “Salt March to the Sea” to make salt in defiance of the British tax laws and spent countless months in British jails, and at the same time he worked to end the caste system; he transformed the despised outcastes into “Harijans” (the children of God); he instituted the hand-spinning of thread and the hand-weaving of Khadi cloth; he improved sanitation, and he established an entirely new concept of “basic education” to meet the needs of Indian villagers.

1.2 CONCEPT OF NON-VIOLENCE

Mahatma Gandhi and non-violence have become integral to each other and one cannot think of Gandhi without non-violence and non-violence without Gandhi in our own times. Gandhi’s concept of non-violence is very comprehensive and seminal. As we know violence has many forms, it could be physical or psychological, it could be individual or institutional and it could be obvious or subtle. To refrain from physical violence is not enough, one has to pledge oneself even to avoid any thought of violence. Now let us analyze the concept of *ahimsa* (non-violence) and its relation with *Satyagraha*.

The word *ahimsa* literally means non-injury, non-killing. Or in other words, it means abstaining from harming anyone in any form. It implies completely renunciation of one's will or intention to hurt or harm any living being. First of all *ahimsa* means not only injury but also positive love and charity and this charity and love for everyone including to our enemy. The real *ahimsa*, according to Gandhi is that, one should not possess ill will even towards one's enemy. True observance of *ahimsa* requires self-suffering rather than inflicting suffering upon the wrongdoer. Thus, it is clear that, to be follower of *ahimsa* in the Gandhian sense is not a very easy task. As according to Gandhi the follower of *ahimsa* must always be ready to die without any desire ever to hurt or kill anyone.

Gandhi distinguishes three kinds of *himsa* and took abstention from all of them as true *ahimsa*. The first one is *Krita himsa*, (violence done by one's own self). Then there is *Karita himsa* (violence instigated and got done by somebody else). Lastly, there is *anumodiata himsa* (watching passively some violence done by someone else). According to Gandhi, the follower must abstain from all of these. Here *ahimsa* includes all moral virtues, like humility, forgiveness, love, charity, selflessness, fearlessness, innocence, nonattachment, etc. *Ahimsa* is such a moral virtue without which we could cease to be a human. *Ahimsa* is our fundamental law. According to Gandhi, *ahimsa* is the soul force and without that we cannot become nonviolent. Therefore nonviolence is possible by the strength of the soul. *Ahimsa* is the weapon of the strong, not the weak. As Gandhi says, 'Nonviolence presupposes ability to strike. It is a conscious, deliberate restraint put upon one's desire for vengeance.' So true nonviolence resides in our mind and it is an inner disposition.

Non-violence is not a negative virtue, but the positive one of love and compassion. He writes, '*ahimsa* is one of the world's great principles which no power on earth can wipe out. Thousands like myself may die in trying to vindicate the ideal but *ahimsa* will never die. And the gospel of *ahimsa* can be spread only through believers dying for the cause.' What Gandhi means by this is that non-violence is an eternal principle underlying human civilization because human existence depends on this principle. Man has been learning to practice this principle in life through centuries, though complete non-violence has not been possible yet.

Gandhi considers non-violence as the foundation of human civilization because it is this principle that prevents destruction of the human race along with the rest of the creation. It is this principle that has made man realize that human progress lies in the mutual love and respect for one another's life. Man has come to realize this truth about *ahimsa* after centuries of experiments. History of man is testimony to the triumph of non-violence because violence has never brought any good to mankind.

He believes non-violence as a means to Truth because he thinks that only a non-violent person can attain Truth. Truth which is the supreme principle of existence is attainable only by a person loving all existence. Non-violence is the love for all beings. Thus truth is fortified by and ushered in by love, according to Gandhi. Truth and non-violence thus are the two fundamental principles of existence, one standing for the ontological principle that sustains all existence, the other for the moral law that ensures and fortifies the former. Truth is the law of existence while non violence is the law of love. Both are moral laws in a sense but the law of Truth is more fundamental because the law of love presupposes it.

Gandhi writes, ‘ I am not a visionary. I claim to be a practical idealist. The religion of non-violence is not meant for the *rishis* and saints. It is meant for the common people as well. Non-violence is the law of our species as violence is the law of the brute. The spirit lies dormant in the brute and he knows no law but that of physical might. The dignity of man requires obedience to a higher law—to the strength of the spirit.’ Here Gandhi holds that the law of non-violence is the law of the spirit and is therefore superior to the law of the physical might. The law is the foundation of human life and culture. In this sense it is the law of the spiritual progress of mankind in general. Gandhi writes, ‘The *rishis*, who discovered the law of non-violence in the midst of violence, were greater than Newton. They were themselves greater warriors than Wellington. Having themselves known the use of arms, they realized their uselessness and taught a weary world that its salvation lay not through violence but through nonviolence.’ Non-violence is not the weapon of the weak but of the strong in the sense that only the strong man knows the limits of the physical strength. Nonviolence lies outside the boundary of violence because only when the limits of the latter are known or realized that we come face to face with non violence. The might of non-violence is far superior to the total strength of violence in the world.

The kind of non-violence advocated by Gandhi is based on cultivating a particular philosophical outlook and is integrally associated with Truth. According to Gandhi God is Truth and Truth is God. Thus one cannot think of non-violence without being accompanied by truthfulness. Gandhi believed in what he called Satyagraha, i.e., insistence on Truth. Thus first of all one should be thoroughly convinced of Truth of one’s cause before launching any struggle for that. Without such deep rooted conviction one cannot consistently avoid violence in ones struggle. Gandhi stressed purity of soul time and again. One is faced with crises in life, especially when such crises Gandhi used to deeply reflect on the causes and would not take any decision unless he felt his soul is pure and without any malice. It is not easy to practice such rigorous self-discipline for ordinary people, howsoever desirable. Nevertheless it should remain an ideal for us to be achieved. We see so much violence to achieve them. Similarly we see so much state try to pursue their own desire and to perpetuate their hold over the state.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Is preferring Non-violence amounts to being coward?

2) Discuss the relationship between Non-violence and Truth?

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1.3 VIOLENCE AND SATYAGRAHA

The philosophy of *Satyagraha* and non-violence had been adopted by Gandhi from his religious beliefs. Some Western thinkers believe that he got the idea from the New Testament, specially from the Sermon on the Mount. It is true that Gandhi was greatly influenced by the Sermon. But he found that it only confirmed his own *Vaishnavite* faith. As is generally known the *Vaishnavites*, the *Jains* and the *Buddhists* believe that ahimsa or non-violence is the highest virtue. And Gandhi used this philosophy to the solution of political, economic and social problems.

Though non-violence may not seem to have any authority in Hindu religion, Gandhi had his own way of interpreting the Gita. He did not consider it a book on politics or political or military strategy but a religious scripture. It showed the way to self-realization through right action undertaken as one's *dharma* (duty) without consideration of its fruit, favourable or unfavourable. Whether Hindu scriptures sanction violence in asserting one's legitimate rights or not, may be a question under dispute but Gandhi believed that they lay emphasis on ahimsa or non-violence as a great virtue.

All founders of great religion have exhorted us to avoid violence and have stressed need for peace. It is not Buddhism and Christianity alone, even Islam's central emphasis is on peace and non-violence. But he find so much violence precisely because religion as soon after the death of their founder turn into huge establishments and the politics of controlling these institutions begin and violence ensue. And of course, religious doctrine are used to legitimize violence giving false impression about the doctrines themselves. Individual violence, though condemnable is not as dangerous as institutional violence and particularly state violence.

He believed that injustice can be removed through Truth, non-violence and purity of means has been considered too idealistic to be put into practice. Those who make this criticism forget that by these means alone Gandhi achieved a great measure of success in the movements he led both in South Africa and India. He did not believe that the practice of non-violence in the political field was beyond the capacity of man, as he said: 'The first condition of non-violence is justice all round in every department of life.... The votary of non-violence has to cultivate the capacity for sacrifice of the highest type in order to be free from fear. He who has not overcome all fear cannot practice ahimsa to perfection'.

It is also proved that any conflict between individuals or communities or races or nations can be resolved, when the traditional methods of reasoning and peaceful negotiations fail, not taking recourse to the usual armed rebellion or war which is immoral and against human nature and divine law of love, but by adopting the technique of *Satyagraha*, i.e., the spirituality of combat. It enjoins and empowers the *Satyagrahis* to hang on firmly or adhere steadfastly to truth and non-violence in resisting and defying unjust laws unmindful of the suffering which civil disobedience brings. *Satyagraha* seeks to convert the opponent to the Truth through self-suffering and sacrifice of the *Satyagrahis*. In other words, by putting the law of 'Condemn the Evil but, at the same time Love the Evil-doer', *Satyagraha* pierces through the heart of the opponent, opens his eyes to see the Truth, and weans him away from untruth and violence. In order to bring about

such a radical transformation in the antagonist, the *Satyagrahi* must have absolute faith in self-suffering as a means of revealing the Truth to the opponent and hence a source of new life to the antagonist. He says ‘ the appeal of reasoning is more to the head, but the penetration of the heart comes from suffering. It opens up the inner understanding of man.’

In order to be effective, self-suffering, the core of *Satyagraha* should be reinforced with courage of conviction and strong will power to hold on steadfastly to *Ahimsa* in the face of brute force. in fact , Gandhi advised that ‘ when there is only a choice between cowardice and violence I would advice violence’. He understood and practise non-violence as in its positive sense as ‘love in action’. Thus for rigorous practice of non-violence strict self-discipline is highly necessary. Gandhi had practiced this strict self-discipline to a degree of perfection. If one accepts Truth through self-discipline no violence of any degree will be involved. Anything enforced from above, be it truth, involves. Thus non-violence has to be accompanied by strict self-discipline. A non-violence resister has to have great patience. In fact truth and patience are quite integral to each other. One can hardly pursue the truth without inexhaustible amount of patience.

Such an approach when carried out in the best spirit of nonviolence has four important characteristics: (1) Participants fight tyranny, aggression, an evil system with all the vigour at their command, but they believe in the worth and dignity of their opponent and insist upon loving him even when he showers abuse or inflicts physical punishment upon them, yes, even when he kills them. (2) Participants try to bring about a change of attitude within their enemy; they strive to raise his sights, not to subdue, cripple, or kill him. (3) They take loss and suffering upon themselves. They do not inflict pain upon another, nor threaten him with pain. There is no warning of retaliation, massive or otherwise. It is important to bear in mind that nonviolent action does not mean the absence of violence, nor the absence of anguish and suffering, but that the agony involved is taken upon one’s self and not visited upon an opponent. (4) Constructive work is undertaken wherever possible. Protest against injustice, against destructive systems and practices is not enough. The eradication of poverty, the building of cooperatives, the establishment of village industry, the improvement of educational facilities, these and similar efforts must be constantly entered into.

The term “nonviolence” is often linked with or even used as a synonym for pacifism; however, the two concepts are fundamentally different. Pacifism denotes the rejection of the use of violence as a personal decision on moral or spiritual grounds, but does not inherently imply any inclination toward change on a socio-political level. Nonviolence, on the other hand, is most often associated with the intent to achieve social or political change. Indeed, the desire to pursue change effectively may be a reason for the rejection of violence. Also, a person may advocate nonviolence in a specific context while advocating violence in other contexts.

1.4 RELEVANCE OF NON-VIOLENCE

The acid test of relevance of works and views of a great man is definitely the application of them in prevailing conditions of time and space. Mahatma Gandhi is fortunately among those few great men in the entire human history whose individual life, works and views not only had proved to be great and exemplary

during his own lifetime but there relevance and significance remained intact after his passing away. Recognizing the relevance and effectiveness of non-violence, United Nations observes October 2—the birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi as International Non-Violence Day.

For, Gandhi became ideal hero for thousands around the world in general and renowned figures like Martin Luther King Junior of America, Nelson Mandela of South Africa and Ninoy Aquino of the Philippines in particular. Simultaneous to this, his views and works are still worth giving a thought, and if they are applied according to the prevailing conditions of time and space, no doubt, they are fully capable of bringing sound and beautiful results and some time beyond expectations.

Many examples of non-violent action include: Martin Luther King's adoption of Gandhi's nonviolent methods in the struggle to win civil rights for African Americans, and César Chávez's campaigns of nonviolence in the 1960s to protest the treatment of farm workers in California. The 1989 "Velvet Revolution" in Czechoslovakia that saw the overthrow of the Communist government is considered one of the important of the largely nonviolent revolutions. Many ruthless dictatorships have been undermined as a result of mass protest by unarmed civilians, such as those of the shah in Iran (1979), Marcos in the Philippines(1986), Pinochet in Chile (1989) and Ceausescu in Romania(1989). Most recently the nonviolent campaigns of Leymah Gbowee and the women of Liberia were able to achieve peace after a 14-year civil war. In an essay, "To Abolish War," evolutionary biologist Judith Hand advocated for the use of nonviolent direct action to dismantle the global war machine.

It may be pertinent to mention here that Gandhi believed and showed that civil resistance is the inherent right of every citizen and is a sovereign remedy in the hands of the people. His political theory and action can only be appreciated if this note of defiance of evil and resistance to any irresponsible authority, irrespective of political forms, which tramples on the individual's liberty and freedom, is duly recognized. The legacy of Gandhi, Dr. King and many others stands to be seriously challenged at this juncture of human history. Both of them as also several political thinkers have viewed violence and democracy as incompatible. But Gandhi's interpretation gains relevance and appreciation from communist thinkers as he considered any sort of exploitation of man by man indistinguishable from violence.

It is not possible to indefinitely bear injustice and tyranny. The unchecked violence of tyrants degrades human beings. Pioneers in every field have always worked for freedom of belief, expression, movement etc. If nations do not adopt Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence to remove injustices and resolve national and international disputes, there is no escape from hate, violence and war. There is also no escape from weapons of war becoming sharper and ever more destructive. Today, we have reached a stage when their use will not only destroy civilization but may also destroy the human race itself.

One can legitimately ask: why should non-violence be used when violence offers more tangible and faster solutions? It is important to realize that the use of violence to solve a social or political problem creates a host of other problems in its wake. No matter how pure and sublime one's aim is, use of violence to achieve it can

never be justified. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi: 'Violence breeds violence...Pure goals can never justify impure or violent action...They say the means are after all just means. I would say means are after all everything. As the means, so the end....If we take care of the means we are bound to reach the end sooner or later tool' that is available to all. One doesn't need either time or resources to acquire this tool. Every single person in this world can practice non-violence right from this moment, if one realizes its importance.

Also, non-violent approach breaks the cycle of violence and counter-violence, which is usually triggered by the use of violence as a solution. If one group attacks another one violently, the attacked group is naturally instigated to retaliate with violence. This, in turn, provokes the first group to counter-attack with fiercer violence. This chain reaction continues until the government agencies effectively quell it or one of the groups is completely wiped out i.e. until a group has 'won.' How can we term this outcome as a 'win' when there is no one to celebrate the 'win' because this disastrous cycle results into nothing but massive bloodshed and deaths? Ethnic cleansing and communal riots are the obvious examples in which there is widespread bloodshed.

In fact, retaliatory violence legitimizes aggressive violence in the eyes of people. Also, violence 'empowers' victims and they begin to behave with the sense of power, which is the root of evil. Thus 'empowerment' of victims of violence through violence aggravates the situation. The victim in fact is not empowered through violence as he thinks. He, in turn, also become part of the same game and both aggressors and victims find justification in each other and become each other's mirror image.

It is a fact that non-violent Satyagraha sometimes takes longer time but, definitely, it cause less damage to persons and property and does not leave trace of hatred and ill-will. Ultimately imbued with Ahimsa it is pursuit of Truth and Truth wins always. It is not argued that everyone will have faith in non-violence. It is very natural that some will not like it due to difference in perception. Non-violence, as a strategy, was often rejected and criticized by many, basically on the grounds that violence is a necessary accompaniment to revolutionary change and that right to self-defense is fundamental.

Whichever side of the coin one chooses to look at, violent means cannot ensure a sustainable peace. To achieve a good end, means should also be good. A fragile peace is no peace at all. Non-violence, in essence, is the use of peaceful means to bring about a positive and lasting social or political change. Use of non-violence as a solution is tantamount to giving aid to the injured, water to the thirsty and food to the hungry.

The obvious question which arises is: whether a non-violent society is foreseeable in the distant future. While attitudes have to change, so does the character of the state and its relations and behaviour with the people. One cannot deny that not until humanity dies will Gandhi's philosophy have relevance for us...it was a voice against injustice and oppression – the eternal voice of humanism. To practice non-violence, all we have to do is to understand what non-violence really is. What changes it can bring and how we can apply it to our personal, social and global life. There is a saying, 'No creation is possible without imagination'.

1.5 LIMITATIONS

Many people felt that non-violence as a principle and as a tactic could work in the context of colonial rule in India, for it wrong-footed the British, putting them on the defensive. Until then they had been able to counter what was normally the petty violence of protesters with a ruthless use of their superior gunpowder. Faced with non-violence they were left in a quandary, as their counter-violence merely served to reveal the moral bankruptcy of their rule. In this respect, Gandhi's insistence on complete non-violence was critical in achieving a moral advantage for nations.

But can we consider non-violence as an absolute value? It is often argued that non-violence works very well against opponents with a moral conscience but not so much useful against an enemy without moral sense. For example, Nelson Mandela who is a great admirer of Gandhi felt that non-violence could not succeed in South Africa against a white regime which was not prepared to accept the morality of the struggle for democratic rights and which was prepared to use the most violent and murderous means to suppress it. As Mandela wrote 'Non-violence passive resistance is effective as long as your opponent adheres to the same rules as you do. But if peaceful protest is met with violence its efficacy is at an end'. Gandhi did not accept this sort of critique-there was, he held no human without some form of moral conscience, and even the Nazis might be made to yield. As he stated 'The hardest metal yields to sufficient heat'. Dennis Dalton, otherwise a strong admirer of Gandhi, felt that Gandhian method may not have worked in Nazi Germany. Under such a totalitarian regime, even the slightest dissidence was crushed, with arrests in the dead of night and instant executions or incarceration in concentration camps in such a way that the population as a whole remained in ignorance. He felt that *Satyagraha* can only succeed when the government is ambivalent, as was the case in India and in western democracies. In situations in which rulers are prepared to eliminate many of their citizens to remain in power, it cannot work. For example, Martin Luther King does not hesitate to call upon governmental authorities to use force to restore order when nonviolent Negroes are mobbed by violent whites. This is a tacit admission of the limits of human endurance in the given situation; it is not possible to ask men to suffer perpetually or to seek victory only through sainthood.

In a sense, it can be said that Gandhi's quest for a predominantly non-violent society as the realizable goal as unattainable due to human imperfection. It indicates the direction rather than the destination, the process rather than the consummation. The structure of the state that will emerge as a result of a non-violent revolution will be a compromise, a *via media*, between the ideal non-violent society and the facts of human nature. It will be the attainable middle way of Gandhi, the first step after the revolution, towards the ideal.

1.6 LET US SUM UP

We have looked at the Gandhi's concept of non-violence and his search for and perfection of a tool of political action that would yet remain faithful to his philosophical commitment to non-violence. We tried to understand the call of *Ahimsa* is to use the 'love-force' or 'brute-force' to overcome evil not by inflicting injury or death on the evil-doer but by self-suffering with ardent and earnest

hope of bringing about a change of heart in the evil-prone antagonist. The purpose here was to review the dynamics of Gandhian non-violent resistance - its operation and functioning in the system - and to see how it was used by Gandhi as a political weapon with the spirit of positive, liberative and self-suffering love.

Check Your Progress II
Note: Use the space provided for your answers.
1) What is the role of *Satyagraha* in Non-violence?
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2) Is Non-violence an absolute value?
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1.7 KEY WORDS

- Satyagrahi** : seeker to convert the opponent to the Truth through self-suffering and sacrifice.
- Pacifism** : opposed to war or rejection of the use of violence of any kind.

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