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Relevance of Mohandas Gandhi in the 21st Century - Reflection on Ahimsa

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(Source: From a travel memoir “Quest for Gandhi: A Nonkilling Journey” by Balwant Bhaneja, Hawai’i: Center for Global Nonkilling, and IGINP, Madurai, 2010, pp.110)

Friends,

Travelling across India and meeting scholars, politicians, activists, artists, and journalists—everyone of these whose life had been in one way or the other touched by Mahatma Gandhi - made me realize that Gandhi in his life and after his death remained an exceptional man. Though not perfect, he was one of those rare individuals that we do not generally find in history books—a man persistently searching for unity in his thoughts, words and deeds. Despite his outward calm, there was always an inner turmoil going on to accomplish the monumental goals he had set for himself.

As I travelled I noted a tremendous upsurge of civil society activism across the country. Unique contributions were being made in different parts of India through nonviolent creativity responding to local issues of peace and social justice. The work in the voluntary sector on education and training, rural reconstruction, emancipation of women, land reform movement, and nuclear disarmament was an extension of the causes that Gandhi ji initiated and pursued vigorously throughout his life.

In the state of Maharashtra alone, Vanadana Shiva, Medha Patekar, Shabana Azmi, and Vijay Tendulkar were well-known figures who had gained local and international recognition for their conscientious actions championing issues pertaining to gender discrimination, rising communalism, and environmental degradation. Both Ekta Parishad and Manushi movements which served the rural and urban poor showed the nonviolent inventiveness to mobilize the marginalized. These two organizations were engaged, and confronted the authorities to seek solutions to difficult problems of poverty and exploitation.

Impact of Ahimsa

My visit to India was intended to comprehend the meaning of Ahimsa from its source, that understanding came to me in a flash towards the end of the trip. Our fascination for the philosophical abstractions of western liberal ideas of justice, freedom, and equality led us to ignore its entomological roots in Himsa, which

translated from Sanskrit means “slaying” The double negative of “A” in front of Himsa in the word Ahimsa, Dr. Dharendra Sharma wrote in his 1960s PhD thesis, showed a strong negation of violence in Indian tradition. Ahimsa was mentioned in historical records since the times of Emperor Asoka as well as the emperor’s self-revulsion after the bloody victory in the Kalinga war. This journey gave me a true sense of the meaning of the word Ahimsa. How deeply embedded in my DNA - the concept of Nonkilling -- the nonslaying of the other, prevailed I had not realised.

The Origin of Ahimsa as a concept was ancient, but its political applications were more recent. These started in an organized way in the late 19th and 20th century by Mahatma Gandhi - first in South Africa using civil disobedience struggle for the civil rights of migrant workers, and later massively for Independence from British rule in India. This non violent political action was followed successfully by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his civil rights movement in the USA, subsequently becoming an important tool in global post-war decolonization.

Seven decades of democratic experiment in India is a testimony to the Gandhian way. As former Indian Prime Minister Dr. I.K. Gujral noted: “Gandhian heritage is now beyond Gandhi’s statues, museums and exhibitions. It had become part of our psyche. The way political conflicts are resolved today in India can generally be described as the Gandhian way - the nonviolent democratic way.” The way India had weathered various political storms since Independence - with flexibility, adjustment, and consensus building are part of India’s Gandhian tradition of mutual respect and accommodation.

The Science Policy Professor Sharma had expressed doubts about the adequacy of ancient Indian Vedic scriptures for rapidly changing vistas of contemporary knowledge. He stated that during ancient times, the notion of cosmos was limited to one universe, one sun, and one moon. In the 21st century, there is an unparalleled expansion in knowledge of cosmos. Now they include multiple suns, moons, galaxies, and universes of infinite possibilities providing new opportunities for knowledge deduced and its application. “We need to seriously look at the impacts of these developments. Continual scientific findings have created serious gaps in all ancient paradigms that need to be seriously examined”. In this setting, the globe has become insignificantly tiny, yet at the same time highly precious and unique. The challenge is how to bring awareness of this new cosmic reality to vast cultural diversity that might compel nation-states and nonstate actors to cooperate, instead of a death wish for each other, and the planet.

Ahimsa and Gandhi

Key ingredients of Gandhi’s Ahimsa ethic as means and end can be summarized as:

a belief in unity of life and brotherhood of Man;

non-injury in thought, word, and deed;

sense of sacrifice based on the values of equability and detachment;
 trusteeship in public service;
 love of one's opponent; compassion and forgiveness,
 voluntary respect for State laws; and
 keen desire for openness and dialogue.

For Gandhi, Ahimsa was a work in progress, a fundamental tool for one's continual search of Truth that will bring change at individual and societal levels. In his Autobiography, he reveals himself with all his warts in the hope that his "experiments with Truth" will encourage others in actualization of the Self and the society they live in.

Ahimsa to Gandhi is not a refuge for cowardice. There is no place for cowards in his Truth Force. To him, Ahimsa is in fact the only way to merge into the Absolute, without fear uttering God's name unto one's last breath. The Beauty of Gandhi is that he practices what he preaches. A few months before his assassination in 1947, Gandhi remarked that his life has been his message. Gandhi's life shows that practicing nonviolence requires an earnest desire to adhere to such other human values as truth, righteousness, justice, love, and peace. These Gandhian characteristics have been now widely tested over a century, and continue to inspire others interested in nonviolent social and political action across the globe. Gandhi's life also raises the question of how much value the contributions of such inspiring individuals should, either secular or spiritual, be incorporated into the training and development of Ahimsa practitioners?

Gandhi's life in particular points in that direction, that is, in order to employ nonviolent methods such a person must have the highest moral order so as to invoke/embody nonviolence within. They have to be morally credible to such a degree that their presence itself should become conducive to transform a climate of violence; their presence generating respect and tolerance among disputing parties, leading to reconciliation and amity.

Spirituality and character development played a primary and politically consequential role in Gandhi ji's unique contribution in discovering nonviolent political action. His constant use of religious terminology and language in the justification of a social or political act was to enhance his own understanding of ancient scriptures as well as to share his unique socially relevant insights and perspective with the masses of India.

Peace, Nonviolence and Nonkilling

It would be remiss for me not to say a few words about the Nonkilling paradigm conceived in 2002 by Professor Glenn D. Paige. He encouraged me to go on my

Quest for Gandhi journey to India, to find the deeper meaning and relevance of Mahatma Gandhi's Ahimsa and Nonviolence in modern times. A result of the visit would evolve, over a decade in the following understanding of the Nonkilling concept.

Paige argued that while 'peace,' 'nonviolence,' and 'nonkilling' are related concepts from the same family of ideas, they are not necessarily interchangeable. "Nonkilling will certainly contribute to Nonviolence and Peace. But Peace and Nonviolence do not necessarily lead to Nonkilling." Paige refers to examples of Gandhian leaders professing nonviolence who have supported India's nuclear weapons programs, death penalty, wars. etc., or proposal by US policymakers to use nonviolence as complement to military actions in Afghanistan, Iraq, etc. Regarding Peace, all political leaders from Hitler to Stalin to Bush have justified their acts of war for peace.

I pray that all of us, you and I, will follow in Gandhi ji's footsteps, truthfully examining our spirituality and character development revering and affirming Life while shaping the 21st Century through a deeper understanding of Ahimsa, Nonviolence and Nonkilling.

Thank you.

(Source: Excerpted from a travel memoir book "Quest for Gandhi: A Nonkilling Journey" by Balwant Bhaneja, Hawai'i: Center for Global Nonkilling, and IGINP, Madurai, 2010, pp.110) This book can be for free download at: <https://nonkilling.org/center/book-review/quest-for-gandhi-a-nonkilling-journey/>