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REVIEW ARTICLE

GANDHI AND NEHRU ON AHIMSA (NON-VIOLENCE): WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THEIR AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

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ABSTRACT

Ahimsa has had a place in Indian religions since ancient times. It has evolved in meaning within and among different religious groups. Ahimsa is the highest law. It is the very essence of human nature. Gandhi gave the practical message of spirituality, love, truth and non-violence, but he did not enunciate any system of philosophy. From his early childhood he loved truth and as he grew up truth and non-violence became his sole objects. He became the apostle of Ahimsa. In other words, he perfected the art and science of Ahimsa. Nehru's attitude towards non-violence is interesting. Though he was attached to it he did not give absolute allegiance to it as Gandhi did. Mahatma Gandhi was a practical idealist who practised ahimsa in his own life. Nehru also believes that the ideas of non-violent resistance and the non violent technique of struggle were of great value to India as well as to the rest of the world and Gandhi has done a tremendous service in forcing modern thought to consider them. Although the doctrine of non-violence has great future yet probably mankind is not sufficiently advanced to adopt it in its entirety. Nehru is firm in his belief that all life is full of conflict and violence and it seems to be true that violence breeds violence and is thus not the way to overcome it.

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INTRODUCTION

Ahimsa has had a place in Indian religions since ancient times. It has evolved in meaning within and among different religious groups. Ahimsa is the highest law. It is the very essence of human nature. The word non-violence connotes a negative, almost passive condition, whereas the Sanskrit term "Ahimsa" suggests a dynamic state of mind in which power is released. The Sanskrit word ahimsa has two components: himsa which is often translated as 'violence' or 'injury' and 'a' which is often translated as 'no' or 'not'. The combination of two components makes ahimsa the negation of violence or injury. Gandhi gave the practical message of spirituality, love, truth and non-violence, but he did not enunciate any system of philosophy. He led a life of action and sacrificed himself for the welfare of society. From his early childhood he loved truth and as he grew up truth and non-violence became his sole objects. He became the apostle of Ahimsa. In other words, he perfected the art and science of Ahimsa. Nehru's attitude towards non-violence is interesting. Though he was attached to it he did not give absolute allegiance to it as Gandhi did.

Mahatma Gandhi was a practical idealist who practised ahimsa in his own life. He had his first object lesson in ahimsa when he made a written confession to his father about his habit of

stealing money for smoking. His father wept and forgave him. Recalling this incident Gandhi writes: "This was, for me, an object-lesson in Ahimsa. Then I could read in it nothing more than a father's love, but today I know that it was pure Ahimsa" (32). According to Gandhi non-violence and truth are correlated and cannot be disentangled. He believed that Ahimsa is the means and truth is the end. If we take care of means, we are bound to reach the end sooner or later. Means to be means must always be within our reach, and so ahimsa is our supreme duty. Thus without ahimsa it is not possible to seek and find Truth. Ahimsa and Truth are so intertwined that it is practically impossible to separate them. Ahimsa is a comprehensive principle. As Gandhi explains in his autobiography:

We are helpless mortals caught in the conflagration of himsa. The saying that life lives on life has a deep meaning in it. Man cannot for a moment live without consciously or unconsciously committing outward himsa. The very fact of his living eating, drinking and moving about-necessarily involves some himsa, destruction of life, be it ever so minute. A votary of ahimsa therefore remains true to his faith if the spring of all his actions is compassion, if he shuns to the best of his ability the destruction of the tiniest creature, tries to save it, and thus incessantly strives to be free from the deadly coil of himsa. (277) Gandhi along with the other followers of ahimsa accepts that in this world himsa and evil exist, even as they work towards the elimination of these. He accepts that people are

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free to commit himsa and in all honesty, cannot be compelled to not commit such acts. Compulsion often creates another set of harms which is contrary to the way of ahimsa and a lesser of two evils approach to benefit has no place in ahimsa, we must refrain from committing all harm and evil regardless of our intentions. The challenge for us is to live the fullness of pure ahimsa, for as Gandhi says “when such Ahimsa becomes all embracing, it transforms everything it touches. There is no limit to its power” (32). Ahimsa is love infinite. None should be regarded as an enemy. We should love the evil doer but should fight the poison of evil in his heart. Hate the sin and not the sinner. Without the observance of Ahimsa in thought, word and deed, Truth cannot be realized. He writes:

This ahimsa is the basis of the search for truth. I am realizing every day that the search is vain unless it is founded on ahimsa as the basis. It is quite proper to resist and attack a system, but to resist and attack its author is tantamount to resisting and attacking oneself... To slight a single human being is to slight those divine powers, and thus to harm not only that being but with him the whole world. (220) Truth, harmony, brotherhood and justice are the attributes of ahimsa. Ahimsa is defined as a physical force. Humility consciousness of the living presence of God within one’s heart, complete abstention from exploitation in any form and sound moral character are the pre requisites for the practice of ahimsa.

Thus the practice of ahimsa is a serious matter. Lived properly, it alters the fabric of life. True ahimsa might require a life time to learn, but Gandhi does not talk about a momentary diversion. He talks about changing the face of the world and quite seriously writes in his *Non-Violent Resistance* that:

Ahimsa in its dynamic condition means conscious suffering. It does not mean meek submission to the will of the evil doer, but it means pitting of one’s whole soul against the will of the tyrant. Working under this law of our being, it is possible for a single individual to defy the whole might of an unjust empire to save his honour, his religion, his soul, and lay the foundation for that empire’s fall or its regeneration. (134) Ahimsa is not weak. This is a common misconception. Ahimsa faces the opponent with kindness and sympathy but with the sure determination that whatever the opposition, it will hold its ground. Unlike violence, ahimsa is subtle and pervasive so that we are not likely to be aware of its work. Its subtlety does not diminish its efficacy; on the contrary, it makes it more difficult to oppose. During Boer War Gandhi writes in his autobiography about his thinking that: “It was clear to me that participation in war could never be consistent with ahimsa. But it is not always given to one to be equally clear about one’s duty. A votary of truth is often obliged to group in the dark” (277). Thus in this condition Gandhi becomes confused but he is firm in his resolution when he looks toward the second side of this war, i.e. to serve and nurse the wounded soldiers and people in the war. Following the principle of ahimsa, one should not make any distinction between friends and foes. He lays his argument:

I make no distinction, from the point of view of ahimsa, between combatants and non-combatants. He who volunteers to serve a band of dacoits, by working as their carrier, or their

watchman while they are about their business, or their nurse when they are wounded, is as much guilty of dacoity as the dacoits themselves. In the same way those who confine themselves to attending to the wounded in battle cannot be absolved from the guilt of war. (278) Gandhi brilliantly explains that ahimsa is a form of unity in the society but it cannot be asserted with the certainty that this form may take its existence wholly for long time. Because himsa breeds himsa and it is duty of the seeker after peace or worshipper of ahimsa to maintain the peace and try to stop violence. Gandhi writes:

Then, again, because underlying ahimsa is the unity of all life, the error of one cannot but affect all, and hence man cannot be wholly free from himsa. So long as he continues to be a social being, he cannot but participate in the himsa that the very existence of society involves. When two nations are fighting, the duty of a votary of ahimsa is to stop the war. He who is not equal to that duty, he who has no power of resisting war, he who is not qualified to resist war, may take part in war, and yet whole-heartedly try to free himself, his nation and the world from war. (277) According to Gandhi non-violence is not a negative policy or doctrine, but it is a positive and honorable method of meeting violence, injustice, repression, tyranny and cruelty. It brings about harmony, peace and amity. It is the sole basis of humanity. Thus Gandhi was the person who discovered the law of Ahimsa which had been submerged under conflicts, wars, dissensions and violence, and extended its scope and application to all spheres of life political, economics, social, individual and collective.

Nehru examines the doctrine of non-violence in much detail in his *An Autobiography*. He places arguments in favour of and against it objectively and tries to judge its every aspect from various angles. Although in 1920 he showed great zeal for it and considered it not only as the right method but also as the most effective one for the purpose, and granted it as a powerful weapon against tyrannous British Government: “In spite of its negative name it was a dynamic method, the very opposite of a meek submission to a tyrant’s will. It was not a coward’s refuge from action, but the brave man’s defiance of evil and national subjection” (88). He criticizes the contemporary tendency to condemn objective and policies because they were supposed to conflict with non-violence. It seemed to him an inversion of the right method of looking at such problems. The idea of non-violence was becoming an inflexible dogma which might not be challenged. Nehru also believes that the ideas of non-violent resistance and the non violent technique of struggle were of great value to India as well as to the rest of the world and Gandhi has done a tremendous service in forcing modern thought to consider them. Although the doctrine of non-violence has great future yet probably mankind is not sufficiently advanced to adopt it in its entirety. Nehru is firm in his belief that all life is full of conflict and violence and it seems to be true that violence breeds violence and is thus not the way to overcome it. And yet to forswear it altogether leads to a wholly negative attitude utterly out of touch with life itself. Violence is the very life blood of the modern state and social system. He is of the opinion that:

Without the coercive apparatus of State taxes would not be realized, landlords would not get their rents and private

property would disappear. The law, with the help of its armed forces excludes other from the use of private property. The national State itself exists because of offensive and defensive violence. (558) He refers to Gandhi who prefers violence to cowardice, fear and slavery and host of other evils. The final tests of ethics and morality are good will and ill-will. Although violence is very often unjustifiable morally and may be considered dangerous from that view point, it in theory need not always be so. He refers the negative approach towards it. He is firm in his belief that like all great idea its influence would grow and it would more and more affect the actions of mankind. He dislikes the stress on pure non-violence because this stress makes it something remote and apart from life; consequently develops the tendency either to accept it blindly and religiously or not at all; and the intellectual element recedes into the background. In discussion of conversion and compulsion Nehru lays stress on violence also. He considers it bad but not essentially immoral because there are shades and grades of it where it may be preferable to something that is worse. Nehru says that if we consider non-violence and all it implies from the religious dogmatic point of view there is no room for argument. It reduces itself to the narrow creed of a sect which people may or may not accept. It loses vitality and application to present day problems. But if we are prepared to discuss it in relation to existing conditions it can help us greatly in our attempts to refashion this world. This consideration must take into account the nature and weaknesses of collective man. Any activity on a mass scale, and especially any activity aiming at radical and revolutionary changes, is affected not only by what the leaders think of it but by existing conditions and, still more, by what the human material they work with thinks about it.

But it is true that violence has played a great part in the world's history. It is today playing an equally important part, and probably it will continue to do so for a considerable time. Most of the changes in the past have been caused by violence and coercion. Nehru emphasizes the importance of violence for the modern state and social system and calls it their life blood. Violence is inevitable for them since the national state itself exists because of offensive and defensive violence. Under present international conditions when nations are pitched against nations, violence seems almost inevitable. Many countries of the world can never achieve freedom without violence. He expects even Gandhi's approval in this respect:

I do not know for certain, but I imagine that Gandhiji will admit that in the imperfect world a national State will have to use force to defend itself against unprovoked attack from outside. Of course the State should allow an absolutely peaceful and friendly policy to its neighbour and other States, but nevertheless it is absurd to deny the possibility of attack.

(561) In his view even democracy is not devoid of violence as it indeed means 'the coercion of the minority by the majority'. Nehru regards it an illusion to imagine that any dominant imperialist power will give up its domination over a country unless effective pressure, amounting to coercion is exercised. Gandhi obviously wanted to exert pressure through non-violence which according to Nehru is a subtle kind of coercion the effect of which on the opponent is undoubted. It exposes his moral defences, unnerves him, appeals to the best in him and leaves the door open for reconciliation. There is very thin line between violence and non-violence, and moral force sometimes is far more terrible than physical violence. He admits that he is 'full of violence' and consciously or unconsciously has attempted to coerce others. Nevertheless he dislikes violence intensely with the view that it 'always attracts the morally second rate' asserting that leaders of communities enjoying violence are seldom best men and women. Non-violence appealed to him because the remedies of the modern world lie in peace and peace can never be attained without non-violence. The moral and ethical side of non-violence had a special appeal for him, conclusively though not foot proof, he deems it fit for Indian background:

What I admired was the moral and ethical side of our movement and of satyagraha. I did not give an absolute allegiance to the doctrine of non-violence or accept it for ever, but it attracted me more and more, and the belief grew upon me that, situated as we were in India and with our background and traditions, it was the right policy for us. (79-80) Thus like Gandhi, Nehru also comes to the conclusion that non-violence is an inevitable and perfect method to resist. Thus in conclusion, we can say that Gandhi completely denies coercion and violent methods in his actions. But according to Nehru it is impossible to ignore the importance of violence. To ignore it, he says, is to ignore life. Yet violence is undoubtedly bad and brings an unending trail of evil consequences with it. And worse even than violence are the motives of hatred, cruelty, revenge and punishment which very often accompany it. Nehru supports the view that indeed violence is bad not intrinsically, but because of these motives that go with it. Thus Nehru accepts it as a political weapon it is not because he regards it as dogma, but merely as the right policy for India in the conditions which prevail.

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