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WHAT AHIMSA IS 'NOT' DEMYSTIFYING GANDHI'S PHILOSOPHY OF AHIMSA

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ABSTRACT

The perceived irrelevance of Ahimsa or 'non violence', the philosophy that lay that the heart of Gandhi's whole approach to morality and politics owes largely to certain misconceptions about what it really means. These misconceptions inform and affect the practice of Ahimsa. In fact, even for all our yearning for sustainable peace, it remains a great challenge to eliminate these misconceptions because they do not merely reflect ignorance but rather exist as the off shoots of quite a hegemonic worldview that rationalises and legitimises use of brute force and violence. The purpose of this article is to identify some of these misconceptions and thereby help demystify the Gandhian philosophy of Ahimsa and Satyagraha with which it is essentially bound up. Doing so, the author hopes to contribute towards promoting and encouraging resort to this tremendously potent technique of securing peaceful social change in contemporary times, thereby ending the utterly mistaken notion that Ahimsa or 'non-violence' has become redundant.

INTRODUCTION

Ahimsa or non violence constitutes the essence of Gandhi's worldview. Integrally paired with Satyagraha, it constitutes a vibrant instance of what might be called a practical idealism or the application of a strong moral, spiritual philosophy to solve worldly problems involving the resolution of conflicts and securing socio-cultural, economic and political emancipation and change. Amid different other versions of pacific creeds that exist, Gandhian Ahimsa is a unique synthesis of Eastern (Hindu

Vaishnavism, Jainism, Buddhism) and Western (teachings of Christ, Leo Tolstoy, Henry David Thoreau and Ruskin)¹ influences. Although Gandhi borrowed from these sources, he evolved his own version of Ahimsa and Satyagraha that at times departed remarkably from these sources. For an instance, as Parekh observed, “The Indian traditions were developed within the metaphysical context of non-involvement in the world; for Gandhi such involvement was the sine qua non of moksha (liberation).”²

Defining Ahimsa, Gandhi wrote, “Ahimsa means avoiding injury to anything on earth in thought, word & deed.”³ It is the natural corollary of Satyagraha or the pursuit of Truth. Gandhi wrote, “It is soul-force or truth force or truth seeking force. It is in short satyagraha which means resistance to evil will all the moral and spiritual force that a person can command. It is the use of moral force or firmness in the vindication of Truth.”⁴ The connection between Satyagraha and Ahimsa emerges from his adherence to the principle of ‘purity of means and ends’ or that ‘means justify ends’. The highest human end, Gandhi thought, is Truth and the noblest means to attain it is through the practice of Ahimsa.

Gandhi admitted that perfect and absolute Ahimsa might be unattainable. He however still insisted that it remains the worthiest of all ways. “Nonviolence,” he wrote, “is a perfect state. It is the goal towards which all mankind moves naturally, though unconsciously.”⁵ Giving the example of the perfect line and triangle in Euclidian geometry, he would say that setting absolute and uncompromisable moral standards is vital even if it might not be possible to approximate them perfectly. Gandhi was convinced that they provide “...a creative but non-debilitating sense of discontent” that “was the inspiring principle of all moral progress.”⁶

However, the concept of Ahimsa---perhaps due its insistence on strict adherence to peaceful means under all possible circumstances and in the pursuit of all possible objectives, however high or noble they be---has often been misunderstood. Non violence has been sometimes looked down upon as a means adopted by the weak and powerless, being at times associated with meekness, softness and a sense of impotence. Certain contemporary human security challenges such as terrorism and intractable civil wars have further thrown up questions about efficacy of Ahimsa in addressing them.

However, a proper appraisal of Gandhian Ahimsa remains incomplete if certain critical misgivings continue to colour our understanding of this highly potent approach to social change. The purpose of this paper is to identify and steer clear off some of these in an attempt to demystify the concept.

CONFUTING THE MISCONCEPTIONS

A common misconception concerning Ahimsa is that it is a plausible option only till conflicts reach a certain threshold of violence, beyond which the principle is no longer applicable. Such a notion is premised on the view of the tendency of conflicts to remain non violent or turn violent differs along a two ends of continuum. Closely associated with this view is also a narrow understanding of violence per se, that it only means causing some real physical or material harm to

the adversary, thus excluding consideration of psychological, social, cultural or simply the more structural forms of violence, injury, hurt or abuse.

The view of violence on which Gandhian Ahimsa is based is different. It views as well as advocates non-violence as an absolute principle. Structural, cultural and psychological harm is as much condemnable as are the more direct forms of violence such as physical assault. As Parekh observes, “Gandhi argued that violence was never justified. He went even further and contended that unless a votary of non-violence believed in its ‘absolute efficacy’, that is, that it never fails, he would not perform bold experiments and courageously explore its fullest potential. That it *neuer* fails is for Gandhi the necessary postulate of the ‘science’ of non-violence.”⁷ He thus took a very strict view against violence in all conceivable forms.

For Gandhi then, non-violence and violence are dichotomous paradigms rather than being phases of a conflict along a continuum. There is a clear choice between violence or non violence. It thus becomes clear that Ahimsa is different from other pacific philosophies like Utopian Liberalism as the latter hold that brute force can still be used in the last resort. They however recommend using peaceful means to the greatest extent possible. Gandhian ahimsa completely abhors violence as in this view, “resort to physical force reflects poverty of strength, frailty of conviction and dependence of external props to prove the merit one’s case which implies it’s self evidence is under doubt even for those who advocate it.”⁸

Another related misconception often emerges from Gandhi’s tendency to accommodate human frailties and limitations in the practice of absolute Ahimsa. Gandhi once said as he openly rebuked the villagers of Berriah who fled leaving their wives, children and belongings to the looters, while shamelessly pleading non-violence, “I do believe that, where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence...”⁹ Critics have tended to rather exploit this comment of Gandhi to show that he made a qualified endorsement of Ahimsa. But this is a misrepresentation of what Gandhi actually implied. As much as he was stubborn against conceding any relaxations to the principle or ideal of Ahimsa, he did empathise with human limitations. Thus he was prepared not to compel the incapable to practise the rather exacting doctrine of Ahimsa. It was in this context, that he thought that it is wiser to resort to violence if one cannot garner the strength needed for Satyagrha based on Ahimsa. He strictly warned against labelling acts of the intimidated or cowardly as exemplars of Ahimsa. Gandhi wrote, “abstinence is forgiveness only when there is the power to punish; it is meaningless when it pretends to proceed from a helpless creature. A mouse hardly forgives a cat when it allows itself to be torn to pieces by her.”¹⁰ Through these statements Gandhi only wanted to highlight the depth of calibre that practice of Ahimsa requires, rather than try to dilute his call to adopt it. This is amply borne out in Parekh’s observation that, “Ancient Indian thinkers of all schools had argued that since violence was inescapable, ahimsa consisted in using as little violence as possible. Gandhi agreed, but insisted that such minimal violence was ‘pardonable’, ‘excusable’, ‘understandable’, but never ‘justified’.”¹¹

This leads us to another common misconception that practising Ahimsa or non violence is very easy. While using force requires one to have many resources at their disposal including physical might, weapons and armoury, Ahimsa or non-

violence seems to require literally nothing at all. All one has to do is refrain from striking back, physically. But even such a view is utterly mistaken and myopic. While it is indeed true that Ahimsa can be professed by any person, it is certainly not an easy to do. It requires a whole bunch of virtues that must be continually perfected by the adherent of Ahimsa in order to be able to apply this method successfully. Regarding Ahimsa to be “a weapon of matchless potency” he explained how it drew its vigour from a Satyagrahi’s spiritual power above all. To achieve this, a Satyagrahi must observe strict inner purity; self control; sexual abstinence; physical hygiene; highest moral, ethical standards; non possession of material objects or have things with a sense of trusteeship; deep perseverance, self suffering and possess absolute bravery or fearlessness. Gandhi believed that all of these together go to make a Satyagrahi spiritually so empowered that he/she is capable of commanding the soul force required to battle an adversary, even one that might be unmatched in terms of physical might. “The highest violence can be met by the highest non-violence”, wrote Gandhi.¹² “The brave are those armed with fearlessness, not with the sword, the rifle and the like. These are taken up only by those who are possessed by fear”¹³

Ahimsa has also been misconceived as simply the absence of violence when in essence, Gandhi always insisted that it meant much more than simply absence of violence. But, Ahimsa is not the same as passive resistance. A passive resister remains non-violent only for want of resources and might. Given these, they have no reason to avoid violence. By sheer contrast, a Satyagrahi refrains from violence on principled grounds. An *Ahimsak* believes in the truth so firmly that that they find no need to use any other means apart from moral force to win the battle of Truth. Moreover, Gandhian Ahimsa is as much or more of a positive concept than an negative one. While it requires a Satyagrahi to refrain from of brute force, it also urges him/her to love the adversary. Central to Satyagraha and Ahimsa is a distinction between the wrong and the wrong doer. Ahimsa calls for positive action to help the wrong doer find emancipation from his/her ignorance of the Truth. As such, Ahimsa flows from a position of empathy and an orientation to serve everyone in pursuit of the Truth. It entails a strong sense of responsibility on the part of the Satyagrahi who must shoulder the project of effecting a moral transformation of the adversary against whose wrong doing, the battle is waged. It thus becomes clear why violence has no place in the philosophy of Ahimsa. Thus, remaining non-violent is the only the by-product of a higher goal of seeking the Truth and helping others see it through persuasion. Thus for Gandhi, simply being non-violent, that is, avoiding injury to others is really only the lowest form of Ahimsa. He called it “unviolence” or the “non-violence of the weak”. In its higher or more fuller form, Ahimsa embraces the positive meaning of empathy, love and aid to secure moral transformation of the adversary. To quote Gandhi, “In its positive form, Ahimsa means the largest love, the greatest charity.”¹⁴ “If I am a follower of Ahimsa, I must love my enemy.”¹⁵ Ahimsa, in short, is a total philosophy of life pervading the whole being of man and his moral universe rather than being a mere calculated strategy to applied merely to isolated acts.

Ahimsa has also been viewed as impractical as techniques of mass resistance. Such a view is premised upon the idea that it might not be possible to inculcate on a mass scale, the discipline and spiritual commitment that Satyagraha and Ahimsa requires to be efficacious. However, even this turns out to be a mistaken view. The success of Ahimsa is independent of numbers, supporters or followers. As Gandhi put it,

“one man can offer it just as well as millions.¹⁶” All it requires is a demonstrated firmness of conviction about the Truth. In fact, it has been shown¹⁷ show effective Satyagraha is as a strategy of convincing masses to stop cooperating with an unjust system. “Indeed one perfect civil resister is enough to win the battle of Right against Wrong.¹⁶”

Ahimsa is not a game of victors and losers in a battle for material gains. The usual view of any conflict treats it either as a zero sum game (where one wins as the other loses) or that it produces a win win solution that is possible only when the parties to a conflict agree to make reasonable compromises (so that everyone gains while everyone also loses something). Ahimsa is often misconceived if it is thought to produce either kinds of outcomes. By complete contrast, Ahimsa resolves conflicts in such a way that all parties to the conflict emerge as absolute winners. While the Satyagrahi himself or herself aware of the truth is a partial winner from the start of the battle, he/she emerges as a complete winner as the evil or untruth in the adversary is purged and even they (that is the adversary) are brought to realise the Truth and thus embraced into the fraternal bond of truthfulness. As such, Satyagraha, being based as it is on Ahimsa can be offered against anybody, including one’s family and the closest of friends. It entails no inimical attitude towards those it is apparently offered against.

Another quite commonly mistaken view is that Ahimsa amounts to a form of coercion. Several scholars who have analysed Gandhian Satyagraha and Ahimsa as a well calculated strategy of effecting peaceful social change have often concluded that it entails a form of coercion upon the adversary to concede to the version of Truth that a Satyagrahi presses upon. As one commentator observes, “The avowed tactic of non violent resistance is to manipulate political forces in such a way as to coalace public opinion against an opponent –robbing him of a populace’s cooperation, thus compelling change. By any usual definition of coercion, this is indeed coercive.”¹⁸ In the same vein, another scholar observes, “... despite the protestations of a few followers of Gandhi that satyagraha is always persuasive and never coercive, the method does contain a positive element of coercion.”¹⁹ However, this is also misleading. Because, triumph for a Satyagrahi is only when they have succeeded in effecting a moral transformation of the adversary. The idea of coercion simply fails to achieve this. By coercion one can only be externally caused or compelled to give in, whereas Ahimsa aspires to secure a change of heart which can only be secured through persuasion. Satyagraha is geared to facilitate truth realisation by eliminating every trace of violence. It is calculated to appeal to the moral giant that lies dormant in the bosom of one’s opponent. Coercion is nothing but psychological violence, that an adherent of Ahimsa rejects coercion as strictly as he/she refrains from physical violence and functions solely through persuasion. Strictness and assertiveness against the resistance of the adversary should not be misconstrued as a Satyagrahi’s resort to coercion.

Lastly, Ahimsa is often mistaken for an advocacy of inaction. Such a view derives from the notion that spiritualism promotes detachment from worldly affairs and issues and so if one were to live a truly non-violent existence, they would probably have to renounce all worldly pursuits and live like a yogi or a sage. But Gandhian Ahimsa has never promoted such isolation. Rather, Gandhi would call himself a ‘practical idealist’, as one who firmly believed in practicing what he preached. As he wrote, “Complete non-violence means complete cessation of all activity. Not

such, however, is my definition of non-violence.²⁰” In fact, Gandhi was a strong advocate of the spiritualisation of politics. “Politics bereft of religion are a death – trap because they kill the soul.²¹” As such Gandhian Ahimsa stands for active resistance to all forms of injustice, untruth and malaise by holding fast to the peaceful, spiritual means of conflict resolution. Inaction in the face of untruth is treated as the same as endorsing it and thus a Satyagrahi feels duty bound to stand against all forms of untruth and injustice through Ahimsa or the spiritual force of non-violence.

WHY SUCH MISCONCEPTIONS?

At the heart of these misconceptions about Ahimsa such as the ones just discussed, lies a deep seated belief that violence ultimately delivers the desired results; a faith in the efficacy of use of brute force or at least the threat of it. Such a view has dominated human history and assumed such a hegemonic status that Ahimsa and Satyagraha appear as redundant or inefficacious means of resolving our challenges. But the need of the hour is to dispel the hegemony of what has been called the ‘Ideology of Violence’. Clarifications of the misconceptions associated with Gandhian Ahimsa, as this article has hopefully succeeded in offering, can go a long way in that direction of reinvigorating faith in the tremendous potency of pacific modes of securing desirable social change as the Gandhian philosophy of Ahimsa and Satyagraha have always been promoting.

CONCLUSION

This article endeavoured to highlight certain common misperceptions associated with the Gandhian philosophy of Ahimsa and Satyagraha with a view to demystify the concept by offering due correctives in the light of what Gandhi had actually implied. It is hoped that it serves as an eye opener towards the true character of this highly potent approach to securing peaceful social transformation besides aiding in the process of enervating the deeply entrenched ‘Ideology of Violence’ that continues to hegemonise thinking about conflict resolution in our world and replacing it by more frequent resort to such active, pacific modes of conflict transformation as Gandhi preached and practised.

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