

## Module 3 : Mahatma Gandhi

### Section 4 : Non-Violence (Ahimsa)

Non-violence is a key concept in the intellectual frame work and practical aspect of Gandhi's life. His interpretation of non-violence is his significant contribution. He is considered as a great votary of non-violence. When there is so much of violence, terrorism, aggression etc. in the world right from the beginning of human civilization, Gandhi's advocacy of non-violence in all walks of life is a mark of sanity and civilized existence. October 2, his birth day is observed as the "World non-violence day" by the UNO.

Non-violence or ahimsa as is called in the Indian terminology is not Gandhi's new innovation but its references are found in the religion-philosophical treatises of India. But Gandhi has given it a new dimension. There is reference to it in the Veda, Upanishad, Gita and the philosophical systems. In the Vedic literature non-violence is taken as a righteous quality of the devas. It is also taken as a moral ideal in the sense of non-sacrificing of the animals in the Vedic rituals. In *ChhandogyaUpanisad* (III/16) and *TaittiriyaUpanisad* (1/a) non-violence is taken as one of the virtues out of the four such as *Vairagya*, Dana, ahimsa and satya. In the *Biḥhuti* yoga of the *Bhagavat Gita* (Verse-5) non-violence is taken as one of the states of beings which proceed from God. In *DaivasurSampad* Yoga (Verse-2) while distinguishing between the god-like and demonical mind non-violence is refereed as one of the noble virtues which come under the former. Out of the twenty six noble qualities enlisted in the Yoga, non-violence is considered as one among them.

In some of the Indian philosophical systems non-violence is taken as a moral obligation or as a spiritual ideal. In Jainism it is accepted that all animals, insects and even plants possess souls. So they give utmost importance to the practice of ahimsa. Not only one should not take life, even one should not think or speak of injuring living beings. The Jainas denied God for whose propitiation the sacrifices are being made. In accordance with their metaphysical position they accepted five vows of leading a life of good conduct. Out of the five vows, no-violence or non-injury is the most important requirement. In yoga system of Patanjali eight fold disciplines have been emphasized for spiritual attainment. The first discipline is Yama or restraint. Yama consists of five moral ideals, the first being non-violence which is taken as abstention from injury to life. So far Buddhism is concerned; there is no mention of non-violence even in the four noble truths comprising the Buddhism. However, the Buddhist way of life reflects the significance of non-violence as a supreme value of life.

Thus in the religious and philosophical traditions of India, non-violence is considered as a moral ideal of life in different terms and forms. In this connection it is worthwhile to distinguish physical no-violence from mental non-violence. Abstention from physical injury or pain gets priority in Jainism. This can be taken as physical non-violence. But in Yoga and Buddhism mental form of non-violence gets priority over the physical abstention of injury. For they give sanction to non-vegetarian diet or killing of some animals even accepting non-violence as a supreme moral ideal. This can be treated s mental non-violence.

The literal significance of non-violence seems negative as it means absence of violence. But Gandhi attributes positive connotation to it. According to him it implies positive quality of love. A believer of non-violence must not have any hatred towards others or even to oppressors. Further non-violence cannot be practiced without overcoming all sorts of fear. Between violence and cowardice Gandhi prefers the former. He takes non-violence as active resistance to injustice. Accordingly the best form of resistance to injustice is the non-violent resistance. If non-violent resistance is not possible then he will prefer violent resistance to injustice rather than to tolerate it out of fear. So any sort of injustice should be opposed if not non-violently then violently rather to remain a coward and accept it. Further Gandhi considers non-violence as a higher value than life. If life is to be sacrificed for the sake of non-violence, then there is nothing immortal in it. When it is a question of life or non-violence, Gandhi prefers the latter.

Further non-violence does not seem to be the same thing as non-killing. Non-violence and non-killing cannot be taken as identical. For our biological needs we have to destroy other forms of life? In the natural process of our growth we kill bacteria's and living cells. Even sometimes killing harmful bacteria or a rabid dog becomes a moral necessity. In this context it is worthwhile to note that Gandhi sanctions mercy-killing. He justified the killing of a calf in his ashram which was groaning in pain as there was no known means to save the life of the calf from the pain. Thus simply non-killing is not a non-violent act because the intention was not to inflict pain upon the victim, but of relieving its pain by some unfavorable consequence when no other means was available. So Gandhi's approach is not something dogmatic but pragmatic on this vital issue of social and moral concern.

Gandhi holds that every able-bodied person must do some work to earn his livelihood. Gandhi relates non-violence with bread-labour. In this way non-violence, equality and freedom seem to be interrelated. Non-violence involves non-exploitation or equality. There cannot be non-violence in a society if society is affected by gross inequality and exploitation.

A distinction can be made between the absolute form of non-violence and its relative form. Absolute non-violence is impossible as long as we exist physically. Our survival will be untenable by accepting absolute non-violence. The realization of absolute non-violence is impossible. We accept relative non-violence and put no limit to its application. The more is its scope of application the greater will be realization of justice. Further instead of giving non-violence any extra-mundane justification, Gandhi brings out its relevance in our social relationships. It can have universal application and be made the ideal of our social interactions. It enhances other ethical values in the society as well. A well-ordered society is possible if non-violence can be taken as an ideal in all social goals. Practice of non-violence by and large in social life improves the quality of life. Violence though exists in practice in some form or other; it cannot be accepted as a value in social relationships.

Gandhi's emphasis on non-violence to be the basic of all social relationships is owing to some of his basic conviction. He accepts a teleological view of history or of human civilization. He believes that society is gradually marching towards a non-violent order. The progress of man from Cannibalism to nomadism, from nomadism to stable social order and then to the idea of organized state indicates the progress of civilization. Again an international mind and cosmopolitan outlook are also growing which indicates gradual march of civilization towards non-violence. The teleological progress of civilization and gradual diminishing of violence show the increasing realization of non-violence in the society. Realization of non-violence is the law of human race.

Gandhi further assumes that non-violence is somewhat instinctive in human nature. Love, affection, fellow-feeling, sense of sacrifice etc. bind man to family and society. These qualities are somewhat innately present in human nature. If there is violence in society it is due to discrimination, inequality and defective systems. The prevalence of injustice, exploitation and immoral system makes man reactionary and aggressive at times.

Gandhi's firm conviction of the innate goodness of human nature makes him apply the non-violent method of resistance to solve any social conflict. Every social problem is ultimately, he believes, a moral problem. Every wrong doer is transformable by a moral appeal. There is no criminal who is not morally transformable. Because of this conviction Gandhi thinks that any conflict can be solved by resorting to satyagraha, a non-violent method of resistance. Satyagraha is Gandhi's greatest innovation in the political culture. Satyagraha becomes the panacea of the only means of social control for ushering in a moral change in the society. It can resolve any conflict or crisis in the process of engineering an ideal society. Hence the practical aspect of non-violence is satyagraha and it will be discussed in more detail later.

Again Gandhi takes non-violence as the law of the human race, and violence as the law of the brutes. He takes non-violence as a law since life continues in the midst of violence and destruction. Every person loves his own life. Self-love compels love for others as man cannot live alone in the society since non-violence and love are somewhat synonymous and love is there in human heart, non-violence is also there in human race.

The theoretical and practical implications of non-violence have been brought out by scholars from Gandhi's numerous writings and speeches on non-violence. Most of the theoretical assumptions of what is non-violence are somewhat debatable. Here we can point out some of the difficulties associated with Gandhi's view on non-violence.

The view that non-violence is the law of the human race is misleading. Gandhi's upholding of non-violence in preference to violence shows that he treats non-violence as a value but not as a fact or descriptive law. A descriptive law is a fact and something natural. It is neither changeable nor violable. If non-violence is a law it must be operative in the world. In that case there is no sense in trying to extend it to all spheres of social relations. Thus non-violence is a moral ideal, a normative principle. If this value can be widespread in society, society will be well-ordered and more civilized. So non-violence can be considered as a value but not as a natural law.

Further Gandhi's teleological interpretation of history, that the progress of civilization is a progressive march towards the realization of nonviolence is not free from difficulties. This hypothesis is falsifiable by contrary evidences of our experience. Violence with greater ferocity and magnitude has been occurring in human society. Two world wars were fought in 20th century causing great devastations to mankind. Arms race, intensive research on nuclear weapons of mass destruction and bitterness between nations

are always in the process of increase in the world. So it is incorrect to say that the progress of civilization is a progressive march towards the realization of non-violence. For the sake of argument even if it is assumed that society has moved progressively towards non-violence in the past, there is a justification to think of this trend to continue in future.

Further Gandhi's view that man has some basic goodness or that man is innately non-violent is also disputable. According to modern psychology human behavior is very often guided by powerful instincts or biological urges. Rational reflection on good life and good society makes man to believe in non-violence as a moral ideal. It is more appropriate to say that non-violence is a moral ideal for civilized living but not something innately present in human nature. Selfishness, greed, self-interest etc. are natural to human nature whereas non-violence is a cultural value that has emerged in human society for peaceful coexistence.

Gandhi's notion of mercy-killing, particularly in the context of killing a cow in his ashram, is untenable in Hindu social practice. His view indicates that he makes a distinction between human life and animal life. Human life has a higher value than animal life since the former has the faculty of rationality whereas the latter has not. A poisonous snake or a rabid dog may be killed as they are dangerous to man. Gandhi can justify killing on an animal for animal nuisance, unlike human nuisance, is not reformable. But from this theoretical position one need not make a plea for killing of animals. Gandhi is a champion of non-violence who restricts violence to the narrowest possible extent. But his position is also not supported by orthodox believers.

Further Gandhi's firm conviction that every human is transformable is not always true. Similarly the view that every social conflict can be resolved by the non-violent method of satyagraha is very simplistic. Social problems are so deep rooted and bound up with so many other issues that they cannot be easily solved. Non-violent resistance is not that panacea for resolution of all social conflicts as Gandhi supposed it to be.

Despite these limitations Gandhi's theoretical understanding and practical application of non-violence has far reaching consequences. As long as we are interested in peaceful living and amicable settlement of all our conflicts Gandhi's vision of non-violence will be of great strength and inspiration.