

# Gandhian Non-Violence: Technique and Contribution (A Historical Perspective)

## Abstract

Gandhiji believes that salvation of mankind is only through Non-violence in its dynamic condition means conscious suffering. Non-violence has been part of the Indian religious tradition for centuries, Non-violence for Gandhi was not just a tactic, but a spirituality, a way of life, the centre of his religion. The technique of struggle against racialism, known as satyagraha, which he practised in South Africa was based on truth and non-violence. Gandhiji entered in Indian politics when congress was suffering from lack of national leadership. He introduced his non-violence modes with great success in the non-co-operation movement and later in civil disobedience and quit India movement. It was only in latter half of the twentieth century that Gandhi's methods came to be invoked across the globe, in Asia, Africa, America and Europe. There is a steady growth in the acceptance, practice and education of non-violent techniques among peace activists, academics and even in military,

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## Introduction

Gandhiji's legacy includes not just the brilliantly waged struggle against institutionalised racism in South Africa, the independence movement of India, and a ground-breaking path of inter-religious dialogue, but also boasts the first widespread application of non-violence as the most powerful tool for positive social change. Gandhiji's greatest contribution to human thought and practice is his conception of non-violence. According to Gandhiji, the salvation of mankind lies only through non-violence in its dynamic condition means conscious suffering. It does not mean submission to the will of the evil doer, but it means putting of one's whole soul against the will of the tyrant.

## Aim of the Study

In this paper I have tried to elaborate his concept of non-violence and also tried to show its relevance in today's world. In the world of corruption and injustice, how far his concept of non-violence is justified? How far his concept of non-violence is helpful in maintaining peace and harmony among us?

Non-violence has been part of the Indian religious tradition for centuries ; Hindu, Jain and Buddhist, *Ahimsa parmo dharma* described in Mahabharata. Both Jainism and Buddhism preached non-violence as the basic principle of their religion. He taught that non-violence is not just refusal to kill , it is the action of love and truth as a force for positive social change. Indeed, he insisted that non-violence was the most active and powerful force in the world, Since he saw it as the force of God, the method of God, the power of God at work for good among the human race, he concluded that non-violence is more powerful than nuclear weapons. If millions of ordinary Americans would practice non-violence, would peacefully, publicly and actively resist the production and maintenance of nuclear weapons, disarmament would be assured. Non-violence always works, he said because it uses the method of suffering love to melt the human heart.

Gandhiji's non- violence was synonymous with love for nature and for whole humanity. This non- violence was not of weak and coward people. But the path of non-violence is of courage and inner strength. He cleared it in his message that if we have to choose one thing among violence and cowardness than we should choose violence.<sup>1</sup>

Non-violence in its dynamic condition means conscious suffering. It does not means mear submission to the will of the evil-doer, but it means putting 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

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of an unjust empire to save his honour, his religion, his soul, and lay the foundation for that empire's fall or its regeneration.<sup>2</sup>

While Gandhi was a brilliant political strategist and revolutionary, What set him apart from others was his unique reliance upon God in his public practice of non-violence. Non-violence for Gandhi was not just a tactic, but a spirituality, a way of life, the centre of his religion. "Non-violence succeeds only when we have a real living faith in God." As such, Gandhi stands on the world stage as a prophet and an apostle, a messenger from God telling us that God is non-violent and wants us to become non-violent even on the political, national and international levels, if we only dare try. It was Gandhiji's genius that transformed, what had been an individual ethic, into a tool of social and political action. This he did in the course of his twenty year long struggle against racialism in South Africa. Gandhiji expressed that after going there he realizes his main deeds.<sup>3</sup>

Non-violence was not Gandhi's invention. He is however called the father of non-violence because according to Mark Shepard, "He raised non-violent action to a level never before achieved."<sup>4</sup> Krishna Kripalani again asserts "Gandhi was the first in human history to extend the principal of non-violence from the individual to social and political plan".<sup>5</sup>

The technique of struggle against racialism was based on truth and non-violence. To differentiate this technique from all prevalent traditional techniques of struggle it was named as Satyagraha.<sup>6</sup> Satyagraha tells that importance of truth is in self suffering not in torturing others.<sup>7</sup> Since 1894 he had been pleading with the colonial regime for the removal of iniquitous curbs and disabilities from which Indian immigrants suffered in Natal and Transvaal.

Satyagraha based on non-violence was organised by him in 1907 to protest against the transvaal's Asiatic Registration Act. Satyagraha consisted of training a core of volunteers who helped to lead mass marches and mass violations of specific laws that resulted in intentional mass arrests.<sup>8</sup> In 1913 Gandhi led a miner's march to Tolstoy Farm. Eventually the satyagraha converted the South African authorities and the Indian Relief Act passed in 1914.

Gandhi's championing of the cause of non-violence as the tool of India's freedom struggle was not without its share of criticism. That was, however, expected considering the fact that Gandhi entered the political scenario soon after the ascendancy of the extremists in the history of India's freedom struggle. Armed revolution was believed to be the only legitimate way to snatch political power from an oppressive regime. Gandhi's system of Satyagraha on the basis of non-violence and non-cooperation was largely unheard of, and generally distrusted. However, Gandhi's faith was strong. It was a faith based not on arms and antagonism, but on extreme moral courage that drew its strength from innate human truth and honesty.

At that time he knew that britisher were superior and undefeatable in their violent power. Therefore, their protest should be done by non violent

methods.<sup>9</sup> He applied his systems with success in South Africa and was convinced of its power. However, it was an uphill task for him to convince his countrymen.

Gandhi slowly started to popularise the ideas in the ranks of the Indian National Congress, under proper guidance from his political mentor Gopal Krishna Gokhale. The Congress was suffering from a lack of national leadership following the arrest and execution of the extremist leaders like Tilak and LalaLajpatRai, and the protest to the insulting Rowlatt Act was an immediate necessity. At this time liberals and extremists were unable to provide leadership to India. Gandhiji entered in Indian politics to fill this gap of Indian political platform.<sup>10</sup> Gandhi soon held the mantle and introduced his non-violence methods with great success in the non-cooperation movement. It was a new era in the history of Indian Freedom struggle. Though the movement ended on an abrupt note, yet its significance was immense.

Non-violence played a very important role in defining the course of Indian national movement, from the 1920s to the final achievement of the freedom. It formed the basis of the methods of Satyagraha that became closely associated with the Gandhian whirlwind in Indian politics. Gandhiji defined non cooperation, civil disobedience and quit India movement as a moral protest against injustice.<sup>11</sup> Gandhi understood economic profit to be the guiding force of the imperialist project and attacked the British government at where it hurt most, which was financial gain.

Picketing, non-cooperation and organised resistance to British modes of oppression were the main modes of the non-violent political movements in India. It shaped the course of the Civil Disobedience Movement as well. Even at a later time, during the Quit India movement, Gandhi's theory of non-violence held strong in the face of the new and radical waves in the world of Indian politics like communism and armed revolution. Even at the dawn of independence, as Nehru was getting ready to eloquently unleash his 'tryst with destiny', Gandhi was busy on the troubled roads of Bengal, preaching non-violence to mad rioters. It was probably pre-ordained that he had to lay down his life for holding on to his ideals.

It was only in the latter half of the twentieth century that Gandhi's methods came to be invoked across the globe, in Asia, Africa, America, and Europe. In South Africa, the African National Congress (ANC) carried on non-violent agitation and passive resistance for nearly forty years. Chief Albert Luthuli, sixth president of the ANC and a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, belonged to the Zulu warrior-tribe, but was inspired by Gandhi's writings and became a champion of non-violence. The ANC was, however, unable to sustain its non-violent struggle in the fire of ruthless oppression by the apartheid regime. After the massacre of Sharpeville and until the release of Nelson Mandela, the major liberation movement in South took to guerrilla warfare.

This non-violent resistance was joined by students, industrial workers, religious leaders, youth and women's organization Thus, the liberators of the

blacks in South Africa were not only the guerrilla fighters, but hundreds of thousands of men, women and children, shop assistants, and workers living in shanty towns who consciously or unconsciously adopted methods that Gandhi would have approved. In the United States Gandhi's teachings and example inspired Martin Luther King Jr., a Baptist minister, who was able, in the words of an American writer, to 'meld the image of Gandhi and the image of the Negro preacher, and to use biblical symbols that bypassed cerebral centres and exploded in the well of the Negro psyche'. King championed the non-violent method as a practical alternative not only to armed conflicts within a country but between countries.

The last two decades of the twentieth century witnessed some spectacular demonstrations of "peoples power" to non-violently resist colonial rule, foreign domination, racial discrimination, and tyrannical regimes. In the Czech Republic and Poland, the Baltic States, the Philippines, and several other countries, unarmed men and women collectively dared to defy the might of the modern state. In Poland, Lech Walesa, the leader of the "Solidarity" movement, acknowledged that he derived his insights from his study of Gandhi's campaigns. He skillfully alternated disciplined and peaceful strikes with negotiations. He was one of the first to be clapped into prison from where he sent out earnest appeals to his countrymen to refrain from violence. His struggle had its vicissitudes, but by 1989 Poland became the first country in eastern Europe to free itself from Soviet domination. Another striking victory of non-violence was witnessed in Philippines as a result of which the despotic and corrupt regime of President Ferdinand Marcos was overthrown.

Gandhi's ideas have fuelled not only struggles against foreign domination and tyrannical rule, but also crusades against the piling up of nuclear weapons and the havoc being wrought by developed countries through wanton and wasteful use of the resources of the planet. Petra Kelly, a leader of the Green Peace movement in Germany who was influenced by the ideas of Martin Luther King and Gandhi, denounced methods of production which depended upon a ceaseless supply of raw materials and were leading to the exhaustion of natural resources and threatening ecological devastation. Speaking almost in the Gandhian idiom, she said, 'We cannot solve any political problem without also addressing spiritual ones.'

The alternative of non-violence, although not universally embraced in all areas, has produced astounding results, wherever utilized. In the last fifty years or so, many service organizations upholding

this principle have sprung up in different parts of the world. There is a steady growth in the acceptance, practice, and education of nonviolent techniques among peace activists, academics, and even the military. While this is a good basis, we need to strive for greater consciousness about non-violence as the only sure guarantee for peace. As we move from decade to decade, century to century, and millennium to millennium, it's imperative that we evolve from a conflict and crisis-ridden reality to a new order of a non-violent world. We need to convince ourselves and hundreds and thousands more that there is no better code of ethics or behaviour that will liberate us from destruction and misery.

#### **Conclusion**

Non-violence is a philosophy, an existing theory and a practice, a lifestyle, and a means of social, political and economic struggle as old as history itself. Non-violence provides us with tools, the positive means to oppose and stop wars and preparations for war to resist violence, to struggle against racial and economic oppression and discrimination and to seek social justice and genuine democracy for people throughout the world.

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