

# Gandhiji's Diagnostic Approach to the Moral Equivalent of War

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## Abstract

Gandhiji's conception of peace has a certain poignancy today. Preemptive wars are regarded as justified, if not virtuous in certain quarters. Policies which fan conflict, if not at the time of their initiation, then later, are scarcely recognized as bearing the seeds of trouble. Above all, we have become used to as whole raft of injustices which show themselves with apparent inevitability, or to adapt Mill's usage, which are part of society's everyday performances. The inference made is that therefore 'nothing can be done'. Derapage is the order of the day, but that the notching down of opportunities for ameliorative action is likely to lead to an everlasting bonfire does not attract notice.

**Keywords:** Diagnostic, approach, war, moral, conflict.

## Introduction

Gandhi's main message to the world has tended to mask his strenuous wrestling with the feasibility of nonviolence in each and every situation which a closer look at his life and work reveals, for reflection on the three pillars of his thinking, reveals more. I refer here to struggle, reconciliation, and reconstruction of variety of struggles that human beings were necessarily engaged in, and that some from of struggle continues to beset them and the collectives in the midst of which they live. The struggle would not end with the fight against colonialism. Reconciliation often involved *gelassenheit* or letting be, and allowing situations to change with development of new directions in the succession of events. In this his sense of timing and his understanding of the ethic of compromise was pivotal, for, in the realm of public affairs, meeting the other halfway is often the only way that meeting can take place at all. Future reconstruction was left in the hands of those who would benefit by it. But, in order to aid the process, small initiatives already in operation served as guides to possibilities, with the caveat that whatever appeared to be in fructuous was best laid aside.

## Gandhi's diagnostic eye for general frame work

Working within this general framework, his diagnostic eye saw clearly that situations- that is, the people living in them- would only change for the better if alternatives became visible, and this points back to the initiatives just referred to. At the human makeup contained many hitherto unexplored resources and powers which, if tapped, could facilitate building an alternative society. But he also learnt a more sombre lesson- that human beings were also capable of indescribable brutality. This agonizing insight peaked especially in four contexts: his experience has a volunteer ambulance worker in the Zulu war, Jallianwala Bagh, chauri chaura, and kohat. These were hard lessons for a man of Gandhi's temperament whose entire pedagogy was built on faith in the essential goodness of men and women. Further reflection reveals that their can be occasions when *vox populi* is by no means *vox Dei*. This was no less hard a lesson. A democracy in which the people had no traing in citizenship could throw up a tyrannical government. Successful such a strategy needed to be for it to be worth while. And here he draws on military analogies. Sometimes it is fitting to withdraw in order to 'fight another day', and such a recourse would not count as defeat. Each strange of a campaign would cumulatively convey to the 'adversary the commitment of the campaigners to their cause. Their sufferings would be the means of 'converting the opponent and opening his ears, which are otherwise shut, to the voice of reason'.

Now William James wrote an article entitled 'the moral equivalent of the war' first published by the association for international conciliation in America in 1910, and subsequently included in his memories and studies in

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1911. It is so much in tune with Gandhi's approach that I deal with it in some detail. It is known that Gandhi had read the verities of religious experience which appeared in 1902. It is unlikely that he had read much, if any, of James' philosophical writings which laid the foundation of pragmatism which was developed further by Dewey and others. However, some of the central theses in James' work are maintained by Gandhi too, and these include the affirmation of the reality of relation and, derived from this, the rejection of absolutism in any form, and affirmation of the importance of the individual. The loose-jointedness of things in the universe provided the frame work within which individuals could operate relatively freely and which also enabled the open-endedness of the future. Like Joseph Butler, James maintained the future did not have caste-iron inevitability about it. But, since this was so, it was all the more important that present trends were diagnosed and action ordered accordingly, so as to curb undesirable tendencies. Such strategies were intrinsic to a healthy democracy. James himself had waged a constant battle in diverse spheres, and most of all against illness by which he was dogged all his life for both Gandhi and James, every day experience was the starting point for all experiments. One cannot miss a certain tension between some of ideas Gandhi puts forward in his translation. For example, delinking ethics from the practice of any particular religion sit side by side with the belief that each religion has ethical teaching as its core. Some religions might reserve the core place for doctrine. The leaders of the movement did seem to wish find in ethics a substitute for religion. But to maintain this was no part of Gandhi's purpose.

The overall appeal of movement, and this is what attracted Gandhi was to men of good will, reformist and liberal in temper, and who were in favour strengthening moral insight regardless of diversity of religious frame works. The most pertinent way of understanding Gandhi's experiments in nonviolence is probably, with Mahadev Desai, to see them in terms of 'Non violence in evolution'. He gradually builds up a praxis which combines three elements- struggle against oppression, reconciliation among all contending parties, and innovative lines of reconstruction of society. The spur was neither fame nor a competitive spirit but the possibility of an alternative to society as it existed. National unity did not depend on having enemies, nor was negotiation incompatible with *pari passu* resistance. War was against the law of our being. It was, quite literally, de-humanising. The 'heroism of the battle field was, in fact, a reversion to barbarism. He writes in the *Hindustan Standard* 'it is beneath the dignity of man to resort to mutual slaughter.' In contrast to military strategy, his announcement of forthcoming policies stemmed not out of threat but from a sense of fairness. If the practice of nonviolence involved rigorous discipline, a 'nerve' analogous to what was to be found in the training of troops, it went along with gallantry.

Occasions when he seemed to be allying himself with those making war, continue to trouble

those who admire, if not venerate him. The reasons he gives for his participation in ambulance service in 1899, and 1906, and offering to do so in 1914, are basically of two kinds. At the personal level he needs to educate himself in nonviolence before he can prescribe it to others. One must be ready to be killed, but not to kill.

Gandhi had soft corner for inconsistencies, referring to his changes in point of view over a life time and his advice to pay more attention to his later views. Or, in these special cases, does Gandhi combine an ethic of principle (seeing it has a guide line) with a rather 'modern' sense of situation? There is fifth possibility which is not usually discussed in the context of Gandhi's thought, but which might be worth considering.

However, in working out the content of the moral equivalent of war, Gandhi's thinking went beyond that of people like Tolstoy who set great store by refusal of military service. There must be non co-operation with the system that supports state'. This was also his reaction to Dick Sheppard whose witness he admired. The building up of self-confidence would be advanced by constructive work aimed at fostering the growth of a nonviolent society. Moreover, Gandhi was bold enough to say 'I do believe that, when there is only a choice between cowardice and violence I would advise violence'.

The contrast between cowardice and courage is an important emphasis in Gandhi's working out of the notion of a moral equivalent to war. Also to be borne in mind is the consideration that he looked upon explicit warfare as on the same wavelength as the hostilities and conflicts of everyday life, including the communal violence that occurred from time to time. He often used the word 'fearlessness' instead of 'courage' as he builds up his case for insisting that many of the virtues cultivated through military discipline are no less relevant for satyagrah and others facing situations where violent retaliation may be the 'natural' thing to resort to. He also speaks of courage in connection with bhakti in which there could be no place for cowardice.

The promotion of nonviolence was set up as a task. Nonviolent ways of life depended on a staged process of learning which would affect each aspect of everyday life. For that reason, there should be nonviolence towards the non human world as well. Appeal to scriptural injunction was not needed for perceiving what would promote human dignity. In short, while pacifists concentrated on opposition to war, Gandhi understood nonviolence in a much wider context, diagnosing the presence of violence, and looking forward to what could be put in its place? In the present scenario Gandhian thought of nonviolence is panacea for violent atmosphere of the world. And Gandhi used to refer two kinds of power or force, violence versus soul-force. Soul-force at work collectively he regarded as alternative weaponry, something needed both in time of peace as well as war, since peace as we know it is not free from conflict. It was power not easily available, and certainly not accessible without much discipline.

**Aim of the Study**

The aim of the article is "The struggle would not end with the fight against colonialism. Reconciliation often involved *gelassenheit* or letting be, and allowing situations to change with development of new directions in the succession of events. In this his sense of timing and his understanding of the ethic of compromise was pivotal, for, in the realm of public affairs, meeting the other halfway is often the only way that meeting can take place at all.

**Conclusion**

The working out the content of the moral equivalent of war, Gandhi's thinking went beyond that of people like Tolstoy who set great store by refusal of military service. There must be non co-operation with the 'system that supports state'. This was also his reaction to Dick Sheppard whose witness he admired. The building up of self-confidence would be advanced by constructive work aimed at fostering the growth of a nonviolent society. Moreover, Gandhi was bold enough to say 'I do believe that, when there is only a choice between cowardice and violence I would advise violence'. This was the pragmatic truth of Gandhi and one should inculcate such kind of notion, through which diagnose the moral equivalent of war.

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