

Principles of nonviolence as developed by Mahatma Gandhi

*Presentation of Ela Gandhi
for Nonviolence in the 21st Century, October 2, 2021*

Thank you programme director, eminent speakers, all those who have logged on into this programme and organisers of the programme.

During the Ahmadabad workers struggle in response to some violent reactions from the workers, Gandhiji expressed the following sentiments,

"A man cannot commit both civil and criminal disobedience at the same time even as he cannot be both temperate and furious at the same time. And just as self-restraint is acquired only after one has been able to master one's passions, so is the capacity for civil disobedience acquired after one has disciplined oneself in complete and voluntary obedience of the laws of the land."

For anyone who has to organise vast masses of mankind for nonviolent action, full control over himself/herself is of absolute necessity. He compared this power over self, with steam when kept in a leaky pipe will yield no power, so to self control if not properly learned will fail to materialise when needed most. Self control was central and he said that -This control is unattainable save by the grace of God.

So Gandhiji makes three points in expressing these sentiments, 1. that self control or discipline is of extreme importance for nonviolent action. 2. Just as a soldier has to train to engage in violent confrontation so too a nonviolent activist needs to train in order to practice nonviolence. and 3. that self control and discipline is learned from spiritual observance. It is inner strength that one needs in times of crisis. Spirituality was firmly linked to Gandhiji's work. Shankarlal Banker a follower of Gandhian ideas made the following observations, 1. Working actively was as important as searching for spiritual bliss and 2. Do a job, do it well, do it with complete detachment. That is what Gandhiji taught.

So locating nonviolence within this context we see that nonviolence for Gandhiji was not just the absence of violence but in fact a whole way of

thinking and living. It was not for one day or a period but for a lifetime. Martin Luther King understood this and described some of the basics of a nonviolent struggle among which are:

1. There is no enemy, the undesirable act is the one that needs to be rectified. So the emphasis is on what injustice has been done and not on the person or persons who perpetrate the injustice.
2. Nonviolence therefore cannot inflict any injury on another.
3. Nonviolent action is based on transforming the opponent through persuasion and self suffering not through attacking, humiliating and defeating.
4. Nonviolence is based on the principle of agape or the all embracing love through which people can change.
5. Therefore at the end there is no victor or vanquished in a nonviolent struggle. All should ideally come together and join hands and work together for the common good of all.

These principles are developed in our hearts and minds and we cultivate our strength through daily spiritual observance and practice.

Every evening at his prayer meetings Gandhiji and his followers pledged 11 vows. These vows reinforced the key aspects of a way of thinking and living. These vows were strict adherence to ahimsa or nonviolence, to truth, never to take or covet something that does not belong to you, cultivate self discipline or control over your own instincts and urges, there should be complete non attachment to objects, building a work ethic, eat healthily, build fearlessness and courage, respect all faiths, support local economies and give equal regard to all.

He believed that by observing these 11 principles we gain sufficient strength to withstand the aggression that maybe used against us when we stand up for a just cause. He advocated that it is our duty to stand up for justice using nonviolent methods, as, not doing anything is virtually colluding with the acts of injustice. So nonviolence is by no means passive, in fact it is very active because it engages in mobilising and educating people on the issues as well as cultivating a disciplined life style.

Finally he trained Satyagrahis to always abide by truth under all circumstance. He also saw the importance of communication both in daily life but more especially in situations of conflict. His advice to Satyagrahi's was therefore, to never utter a harsh word, no matter what the provocation. They should always be perfectly courteous at all times to all people, even those who may be considered as enemies. He said that they should win over people with opposing views rather than fight with them. Forcible conversion of thought is not effective, but gentle persuasion has been proved to be far more effective.

This in a nutshell is his theoretic beliefs, but practically, he proved through his own actions that he was able to win the respect and admiration of his opponents such as Jan Smuts in SA and many others in India.

Of course there are many who have criticised him on the basis of various personal issues, yet none of his critics have referred to his contribution towards building a culture of nonviolence.

Let us see what has recently been happening around the world because of violent confrontations: deaths and injuries inflicted on innocent civilians, more and more people trying to run away from situations of violence and injustices e.g. Myanmar, Afghanistan, Sudan and Somalia, and many other countries around the world where there is strife oppression and poverty. These people seek shelter in other countries giving rise to the growing refugee population around the world. In addition we also see environmental degradation because of the violent acts.

In South Africa in the past few months we saw an uprising which involved thousands of people in looting, and counter violence. But it was the few instigators who embarked on destruction of property and in their frenzy they burnt a chemical warehouse which caused tons of toxic effluents to flow into the nearby river and on to the sea. We saw our beaches strewn with dead fishes and other sea life. Further effects to human and animal life will only be surfaced in the future. But a sad outcome was the racial tensions that arose between the South African Indian community and the African community in KZN.

In the aftermath however we saw communities coming together to make peace, to heal each other's wounds and to use peaceful means to avoid confrontation. We saw this happening when the leader of the Indian community in Phoenix reached out to an African leader of a political party who

planned a march and were chanting slogans such as one Indian one bullet. This act of nonviolent reaching out, brought the two groups together and ensured that a peaceful march in which both communities participated was held. This is nonviolence in action. Respectful communication. confronting the problem not the person and resolving it through respectful discussion.

These kinds of actions require the greatest humility, courage foresight and respectful communication, which is aimed at compromise and not at confrontation. These are the kinds of actions we need in order to resolve our problems not calling out the police and the army to solve problems, not trying to wield power or weapons, and certainly not aggression. An already tense situation can be rendered explosive by provocation. But can by using nonviolent methods be contained by negotiations and humility as we saw in our country.

Finally for Gandhiji equality was a very important factor. This is the reason for his change in lifestyle from a status conscious barrister to a simple unassuming person. He believed that we cannot communicate effectively with the masses if we are leading a life style way beyond the means of the masses of the people. We will also not be able to understand fully the problems of the poor unless we experience poverty ourselves.

This did not mean that he wanted everyone to live in poverty. In fact he encouraged everyone to grow out of poverty and grow their life style so that they may have access to the basic necessities of life- quality education, quality health care, suitable housing and infra structure, recreation facilities and work opportunities for all. These are the pre conditions for peace. His work therefore revolved around active work in the community to build such an infra structure. These all together are the basic principles of nonviolence, encapsulating all aspects of life.

Thank you.