

# In Search of Ahimsa

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The cover of *Nonviolence in Modern Indian History*, a collection of essays edited by David Hardiman, shows Gandhian activist P V Rajagopal addressing a large gathering of the Ekta Parishad in 2007. This can easily lead a reader to expect that the book contains answers to one of the most urgent questions of our times: How can non-violence be an effective counter to hatred and polarisation in contemporary India?

Those seeking clear and direct answers to this question will be disappointed. Instead, this book offers glimpses of past struggles to practise nonviolence which can inform that quest for answers.

## Ahimsa as Love

First of all, how ahimsa is defined is crucial. In the first chapter of the book, an essay by Hardiman on the shifting meanings of ahimsa in Indian history, gives a brief overview of different types of violence as understood by various traditions of the subcontinent. The categories include accidental, occupational, protective and intentional violence. Of these, only the intentional type has traditionally been deemed to be *himsa* or violence.

Hardiman notes that personal practice of non-violence, by Jains for instance, has been applied formulaically rather than as an ideal and method to create a better world. Nevertheless, Gandhi's ambitious endeavour for non-violence had to contend with the claim, made among others by Lala Lajpat Rai, that ahimsa had contributed to the emasculation and downfall of India. On the contrary, Gandhi argued, the truth of ahimsa had either been ignored or perverted for over 1,500 years.

Varying interpretations of non-violence posed a problem even during the freedom struggle. Anil Nauriya's essay on "Nonviolent Action and Socialist Radicalism" describes Acharya Narendra

## BOOK REVIEWS

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Deva's discomfort with the many possible interpretations of what is essentially a metaphysical concept.

It is Tridip Suhred's essay, titled "Fiery Ordeal: Conundrums of Ahimsa," that gives the reader an intimate understanding of Gandhi's definition of violence and non-violence. The fiery ordeal was a term used by Gandhi to describe the moral dilemma he faced at one juncture on whether or not to end the agony of a terminally ill calf at Sabarmati Ashram. Gandhi supported putting an end to the calf's agony as an act of love, even though he knew that public opinion would not approve of his action. But, an act of conscience and performance of duty, Gandhi was clear, cannot be made contingent on public opinion.

Suhred, reading Gandhi in the original Gujarati, suggests that the appropriate English word for the term ahimsa is love rather than non-violence. This is why Gandhi's definition of violence was any act of causing pain to, wishing ill to, or killing a living being that was driven by anger or a selfish intent, that is, the opposite of love. That is why swaraj and ahimsa were inextricable for Gandhi; for swaraj was the act of ruling or controlling one's mind and passions.

Acknowledging that perfect control over the self and, thus, perfect ahimsa is not possible in the human frame, Gandhi's struggle was to find ways to keep ahimsa within the human grasp, that is, not to define it in a manner that makes it unrealisable. This is a crucial clue for contemporary efforts to work with non-violence: they cannot be built

upon an understanding of violence in absolutist terms.

## Ahimsa and Injustice

We live in a time when Gandhi's non-violence is commonly misrepresented as a way of keeping dominant elites in place. V Geetha's essay, "Travelling with Non-violence," dwells on the manner in which Gandhi tried to balance the claims of justice and love or compassion. Geetha significantly highlights that for Gandhi, injustice and wrongdoing were inherently violent. The central question today is this: Can there be conversion of hearts in response to what Gandhi termed the politics of "anguished love?" As Geetha writes, "sustained exchanges between the arbiters of injustice and the votaries of justice ought to constitute the struggle for justice" (pp 229–30).

Geetha, who is a dedicated and insightful scholar of Ambedkar's writings, gives a nuanced description of what she calls the "disconcerted agony" that Gandhi experienced after signing of the Poona Pact:

While he (Gandhi) had circumvented B R Ambedkar's firm commitment to justice and made him settle for a measure that left Dalits linked to the caste Hindus while granting them concessions—this is the form that compassion took in this instance—he realised that the love he sought, both for his cause and the untouchables was vulnerable to being expressed as bad faith, and in fact could be deeply flawed—this in fact was the burden of his many speeches during the years 1933–36. He expressed his anguish at the patronising tone that caste Hindus adopted; he was unhappy with the paltriness of spirit that some of them exhibited, and when in 1935 Ambedkar proclaimed his desire to not die a Hindu, he wrote in a letter to Vallabhbhai Patel that howsoever one read this decision, the fact remained that even now caste Hindus and others were more committed to win Ambedkar to their point of view, with respect to conversion, rather than fighting untouchability. He also noted that Ambedkar had every right to want to opt out of Hinduism and that his anger was entirely justified. It was the Hindus that were indebted to Dalits, he pointed out, and it would behave them to pay that debt, which in Gandhi's lexicon translated into a programme of serving and suffering. (p 232)

These details of historical record are particularly important at a time when a

far more one-dimensional, or biased, recollection of the Poona Pact is more common. At the same time there remains the danger of ahimsa being deployed as a tool in the hands of elites. Nauriya's essay counters this anxiety by highlighting that, in Acharya Narendra Deva's assessment, Gandhian non-violence can be established only by elimination of exploitation.

### Strategic Non-violent Resistance

Over the last 70-odd years there has been a global proliferation of non-violent resistance. But, how much of strategic use of non-violent resistance, in different corners of the world, actually qualifies as ahimsa?

Hardiman's essay "Nonviolent Resistance in India 1915–47" offers some clues because it is mostly a review of Western literature both studying Gandhi's endeavour in India and movements across the world since the end of colonialism. This includes, naturally, the works of Gene Sharp who argued that non-violent resistance is preferable not because it is morally right, but because it is more expedient for defeating the opponent and creating a more lasting result. Hardiman points out that Sharp's work set a pattern for work in this field which cited historical examples in a simplistic manner and tailored them to fit the claim in favour of expediency.

Hardiman argues that such theorists have been driven by their need to make a convincing case to a Western readership that non-violence is a viable method for challenging oppressive power. In order to do this, both the moral dimension and Gandhi's emphasis on constructive work are underplayed in order to make non-violence look more widely practicable.

Therefore, Hardiman gives a detailed review of *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (2011) by Erica Cehnoweth and Maria J Stephan, perhaps the most extensive study on the topic. Chenoweth and Stephan compared 323 protest campaigns across the world from 1900 to 2006, of which, about one-third were predominantly nonviolent. While only 25% of the violent movements succeeded in attaining their goal, 53% of the non-violent movements were a success. The study also

found that the frequency of non-violent movements has been increasing over time, while the success rate of violent movements has been declining. Still more significantly, the study noted that extreme repression creates a "backfire effect," which increases support for a non-violent struggle.

While this analysis is heartening for all those who oppose repressive regimes there is also a severe limitation in the statist mentality of such non-violent resistance. As Hardiman writes:

Capturing State power and transforming a society through the work of a constitutional government that is responsible to an electorate is regarded as the panacea. It celebrates a form of *coup d'état* while downplaying the fact that all too often the interest groups that gain office by such means start to misappropriate resources for themselves and govern in corrupt and repressive ways. Without ongoing resistance that builds new institutions from below, there is no genuine democracy—at least not in the sense that radical critics of constitutional democracy (such as Gandhi) have understood it. (p 84)

Above all, what matters most is the ongoing process of non-violence as a public culture rather than, what are often, short term victories over state power. In India, this has been evident in various movements, notably the Chipko Movement and the Narmada Bachao Andolan. In addition there have been lesser known successes by individual activists such as Jagannathan, whose story is told in one chapter of the book.

### Ahimsa and Tantramukti

Kurt Schock's essay titled "Gandhian Struggles for Land in India" takes on the claim that non-violent resistance tends to be a "bourgeois" method of struggle that is suitable only for extending representative democracy and a market-based economy. Schock, who is also author of a major book, *Unarmed Insurrections:*

*People Power Movements in Nondemocracies* (2005), argues that, on the contrary, non-violent resistance is both radical and revolutionary and can be used to challenge structural violence. In a narrative that traverses from the Bhoodan Movement to the land rights struggles of the Ekta Parishad in India today, Schock describes the organisational methodology.

Among the strands common to both movements Schock identifies Vinoba's principle of *tantramukti*, namely freedom from any formal structure. This implies a people's movement that is self-activating rather than dependent on formal organisations. But, this, argues Schock, may well have contributed to the demise of the Bhoodan Movement after Vinoba retired from activism in 1969. Perhaps learning from those mistakes, the Ekta Parishad has built a decentralised network of organisations that presumably enable it to retain spontaneity while having a fulcrum that holds it all together. However, while Bhoodan challenged the notion of private property, Ekta Parishad does not.

Given that land distribution is a highly charged issue across the global South, a movement like Ekta Parishad is acutely relevant. Schock writes:

Since increasing land inequality plagues India and the violent Naxalite movement is growing, Gandhian movements are crucial as they aim to promote justice while also breaking cycles of violence rather than perpetuating them. (p 228)

Published by Orient BlackSwan as part of its Gandhi Studies series, this book is a somewhat disparate collection of essays that provide a historical overview, but may leave you hungry for a more detailed understanding of how non-violence has proven to be a practicable ideal.

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### EPW Index

An author-title index for *EPW* has been prepared for the years from 1968 to 2012. The PDFs of the Index have been uploaded, year-wise, on the *EPW* website. Visitors can download the index for all the years from the site. (The Index for a few years is yet to be prepared and will be uploaded when ready.)

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