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Advances in Non-Violence

By Rajni Bakshi

Assembled dignitaries, Ladies and Gentlemen -- Namaskar and Greetings.

It is truly an honour to be here with you today – particularly since we are gathered to observe the International Day of Non-violence.

Mahatma Gandhi is indeed an inspiration for people across the world. But, at the very outset I want to acknowledge that many who admire Gandhiji still remain deeply sceptical about non-violence.

I have met many people who are not impressed by the fact that all the countries in the United Nations agreed to celebrate an International Day of non-violence – because they see this merely as wishful thinking or even worse – a form of tokenism.

Some of the sceptics believe that power actually flows from the barrel of a gun – so non-violence can have little or no place in the ‘real’ world. And then there are those who feel that non-violence is a worth-while aspiration but too lofty an ideal and therefore not practical, not possible, for ordinary people.

In his own lifetime, Gandhiji repeatedly faced and countered such criticism by famously saying that ‘non-violence is as old as the hills’.

But what does that mean? After all, human history is filled with horrible acts of individual and mass violence?

Gandhi was well aware of this. His point was that violence in history marks the breaks, the interruptions in ‘soul force’ – soul force being the essence of human life. After all, if violence was indeed the dominant human impulse, Gandhiji argued, our species would not have survived – we would have destroyed ourselves long ago.

There is no denying that what flows from the barrel of a gun has huge impact – we are surrounded by evidence of this, be it in wars, terrorism or acts of an individual psychopath. But, as the great political theorist Hannah Arendt has so precisely said: what comes out of a gun is effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience – but never power. And this truth cannot be over-emphasized.

And as for ordinary people not being capable of non-violence – well Gandhiji first and foremost offered himself as an example of a most ordinary person who learnt to cultivate non-violence, within himself as an inward spiritual journey and as a method of political action.

You could easily say – so what? Gandhi may have started out as an ordinary person but he became a Mahatma. True. But YOU don't have to be a great-soul, mahan-atma or Mahatma, in order to cultivate non-violence within yourself and in society.

My purpose here today is to share with you evidence about how this has been done – and done many times over – in the last 70 years.

I plan to do this at three levels:

1. By correcting some of the false assumptions or impressions about non-violence.
2. By reviewing evidence of how non-violence has been deployed in societies across the world.
3. By summarizing core insights that are applicable in our everyday life.

Ahimsa is the Sanskrit word for non-killing and non-injury – and it is a core principle of the three major religious traditions of the Indian sub-continent : Hindu, Jain and Buddhist.

All these traditions have found, over many centuries of practice, that **absolute Ahimsa is not possible for human beings**. Thus, killing out of necessity for food has not been regarded as ahimsa. For example, the Tibetan Buddhists are non-vegetarians, in a terrain with scant vegetation yak meat had to be the staple food.

So the first wrong impression that I would like to correct is that non-violence is sometimes defined or understood in absolute terms and thus dismissed as untenable and unviable.

There is another, closely linked assumption, that is also false – namely that humans are hard-wired to be violent. In Gandhi's time, in the early 20th century, violence was considered 'normal' while non-violence was considered almost other-worldly. However, in the last half century a wide range of multi-disciplinary research has shown that while violence is a significant human impulse it is not the dominant

impulse. For example, the work of some anthropologists – drawing on archaeology, studies of nomadic communities and evolutionary theory – shows that war is a relatively recent phenomenon, that it was rare or non-existent in the distant past.

The second wrong impression is to equate ahimsa/ non-violence with weakness. Nothing could be farther than the truth. Passivity or submission in the face of oppression is a form of weakness. But non-violence requires steadfast valour, the willingness to boldly speak truth to power – thus it can only be the weapon of the brave. **Ahimsa is NOT for the weak.** On the contrary, Gandhi often said that unless you have the ability to defend yourself, you cannot be non-violent.

The third wrong impression is that non-violence and passive resistance are treated as the same. Passive resistance is often just a tactic to out-smart an opponent. Sometimes passive resistance is done on a trial basis, with a preparation for an armed resistance, in case the passive resistance does not get the desired results. That is why Gandhiji insisted that passive resistance is for the weak and those with a limited goal of fulfilling some demands. By contrast non-violence is based on the inner-strength of the practitioner and its core objective is the transformation – NOT the destruction – of the opponent.

The fourth, and very dominant, assumption about non-violence is that it cannot work against a ruthless opponent – that Gandhi's struggle would have failed if the opponents had been Nazis. There is no doubt that specific acts of non-violent resistance can be crushed by a brutal opponent. But it is equally important to note that there are some cases of non-cooperation and non-violence succeeding against Nazis.

For example, during the Second World War the Norwegian government issued a directive to make the teaching of Nazi doctrine compulsory in schools. But so many Norwegian teachers refused to follow the order, some even going to prison camps, that eventually the order could not be carried out. In 1943, when the Nazis began to arrest Jewish men who were married to Christian women – thousands of those women protested peacefully for several days until their husbands were released.

This is evidence which contradicts the most commonly broadcast falsehood – namely that only **saints or extraordinary people can practice non-violence.** For instance:

- It is true that struggle against apartheid in South Africa was not entirely non-violent, but the thousands of people who made the Soweto boycotts of the late 1980s, a success were no saints.
- When the Polish union Solidarity dug in for its struggle using non-violent principles – its votaries were not saints.
- The millions came out on the streets and peacefully over-threw the regime of General Pinochet in Chile were not saints.

In case you have doubts about just how ordinary people made these changes happen, please see an American PBS documentary called ‘A Force More Powerful’ which uses archival footage from each of these and other movements to show how non-violence works on the ground – it’s a combination of training, determination and valour.

In fact, for more than a century these are the methods that have worked more often than violent insurgencies. A study by Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan has combined statistical analysis with case studies of specific countries and territories to show why civil resistance and non-cooperation was able to involve far greater numbers of people and usually led to more durable and internally peaceful democracies.

Swarthmore college in the USA has created a data base on non-violent struggles across the world – and the range of these struggles is astounding going much beyond the more well-known events like the Occupy Wall Street movement and Arab spring.

However, this leads to the difficult question – how many of these struggles are just passive resistance and how many are actually bringing non-violence to life. I honestly don’t know for this is clearly an area in which much more investigation is required.

Nevertheless one thing is clear and undisputable -- and here I quote the noted philosopher Hannah Arndet: “...the distinction between violent and non-violent action is that the former is exclusively bent upon the destruction of the old and the latter chiefly concerned with the establishment of something new.”

Of course, struggles against oppressive regimes are merely one dimension of the striving for non-violence. Equally important are developments in efforts to counter violence in everyday life. As in the past even today members of the Quaker

community in the West have been at the forefront in developing non-violence training programs that help people to resolve conflicts in communities. In Latin America a wide variety of groups have evolved methods of conflict resolution – for in societies that have suffered from a high level of violence in daily life the longing for non-violence is naturally intense.

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What then can we draw from all these developments for our everyday lives.

At its highest level, Ahimsa is a form of tapas – which in Sanskrit means spiritual striving that is neither easy nor without pain. In his commentary on the Yoga Sutras the famous yoga teacher B K S Iyengar wrote that Ahimsa cannot be properly understood without reference to tapas. Therefore, guru Iyengar wrote, “Mahatma Gandhi would never have been able to summon up the implacable peacefulness which moved an empire, without his ruthless attitude towards his own self. Violence is perhaps too strong a word for tapas, but it is a burning zeal and austerity, a sort of unflagging hardness of attitude towards oneself which makes possible compassion and forgiveness towards others.”

Again you may ask – how many people can do this? And clearly there is no known answer to this question. But there is certainly no reason to assume that some approximation of this effort is not possible for all.

This has been the message of not just Gandhiji but also Thomas Merton, a Christian monk and anti-war activist; and of course Martin Luther King Jr. – and these are just the well-known travellers of this path.

Their core insights are as follows:

1. To be non-violent means that I cannot feel superior to my opponent. I must at least try not to see the adversary as being totally wicked and utterly incapable of being reasonable or well-intentioned. Such an attitude, as Merton wrote, would defeat the very purpose of non-violence –namely, openness, communication, dialogue. It is when these core values are undermined that some acts of civil disobedience or passive resistance become self-defeating because they end up antagonizing the adversary, making him or her more un-willing to communicate through anything other than bullets and batons.

2. The purpose is not to humiliate or destroy the opponent but to win his or her friendship and understanding.
3. The focus is sharply on the wrong doing not on the wrong doer.
4. Action is rooted in the belief that the universe is on the side of justice.
5. And most important of all, there is a willingness to suffer without retaliation.

Some, if not all, of this must be possible for, most of us. Why else would millions of people be so deeply moved by Nelson Mandela's famous words that: '... to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.'

Non-violence is the road to this higher freedom. And yet, in this case more than any other, the journey is truly the destination. Despite many manuals on methodology non-violence is neither a ready-made formula nor a destination. It is a process that calls both for dogged experimentation and faith.

The obstacles to this process are not so much the external reality and material circumstances but lack of confidence within.

I close by sharing that I find it both comforting and creatively challenging to remember that for Gandhiji's non-violence was a science – and in science there are no 'failed' experiments. Knowing what does not work moves us forward the process of discovering what does work. As Gandhiji said, we live in an age of wonders when no one will say that an idea is worthless or impossible because it is new.

“Things undreamt of are daily being seen, the impossible is ever becoming possible. We are constantly being astonished these days at the amazing discoveries in the field of violence. But I maintain that far more undreamt of and seemingly impossible discoveries will be made in the field of non-violence.”

Om Shanti, Shanti, Shanti

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