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TERRORISM AND GANDHIAN NON-VIOLENCE

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The extreme violence the world is experiencing in 21st century is of bit different type – what world now calls it terrorist violence in the post-9/11 situation. In a way violence is violence by whatever name we call it. Wars until twentieth century were representative of aggressive invasions by some countries against the other, or some nations against other nations. However, terrorist violence has two characteristics: one, it is not frontal war (but not guerilla war either) and two, it is more of a reactive violence.

Recent terroristic attacks by Naxalites or Maoists, whatever we choose to call them, are of the intensity which have disturbed the whole country. Also, the brutality with which jihadis in Pakistan are killing are highly disturbing as well. The attack last Friday i.e. on 28th May on Ahmedi Mosques in Lahore killing 70 persons who were praying inside the two mosques shook the conscience of humanity.

India produced apostle of non-violence in the person of Gandhi in the last century and he liberated India from clutches of British colonialism through non-violent means. Many people begin to raise question in the face of such terroristic attacks on innocent civilians as to the relevance of Gandhiji's non-violence in our era. Has Gandhi become irrelevant? Is he fit only for paying rich tributes on his birth day or day of martyrdom, and nothing else?

It is for Gandhian philosophers to answer these questions. Are those who proclaim themselves to be Gandhians, take Gandhi and his philosophy seriously? Or Gandhism has also become a sort of religion with certain rituals and priesthood with certain ashrams and properties thrown in? Where are active Gandhians? Gandhi was not mere philosopher of non-violence but an active practitioner who made it a way of life.

When I was visiting Gujarat during eighties when frequent caste and communal violence was taking place I did not find a single Gandhian in Ahmedabad (which has Sabarmati Ashram) who could dare communalists or even undertake an indefinite fast (as most powerful tool Gandhi employed to fight communal violence) to stop communal frenzy. In fact during 2002 those in charge of Sabarmati Ashram did not allow a peace meeting to be held on their premises by peace activists like Medha Patkar and others fearing state government may stop their grant. How such Gandhians who care for state grant can ever practice ideals of Gandhian philosophy based on the concept of human behavior purged of all vested interests.

Let us first understand crucial elements of Gandhian philosophy of non-violence. Gandhiji always spoke of *Satyagraha* and *Ahimsa* i.e. insistence on truth and non-violence. Both concepts are integral to each other. No non-violence is possible without truth and no truth is possible without non-violence either. Also, we often say God is truth but Gandhiji reversed this and said Truth is God.

Why truth and non-violence are integral to each other is because truth has to be non-coercive and based on deeper conviction. An element of coercion would contaminate truth. Violence, on the other hand, is highest degree of coercion and is used to make people believe what they do not want to believe and accept what they do not want to accept. Thus violence and truth are totally opposed to each other.

Non-violence, on the other hand, guarantees freedom of conscience and people are free to base their behavior on their deeper conviction. Self interests would also contaminate truth and lead to unauthentic behavior and hence violence. Thus a non-violent behavior should have following attributes: 1) It must be based on genuine conviction; 2) it should be truthful and 3) it should be based on freedom of conscience. Any behavior lacking these attributes is likely to lead to violence.

It is also important to understand that by violence we should not only mean physical violence. Violence can be subdivided into three categories: 1) physical violence leading to injury or death; 2) violence by words and 3) violence of ethical norms and fundamental values. Physical violence could be either individual or of nations and communities; similarly violence by words also can imply individual or group or entire nation and of course violation of norms could be cultural norms of a civilizational group or those of an individual.

Another important dimension is that behavior such as this is possible only if an individual or a collectivity (a group, nation or religious or cultural community) is possible only when one is constant communication with ones inner self and is very well conscious of ones own ethical norms and civilizational values. Such a communication is *sin qua non* of authentic behavior.

Interestingly an American Jesuit and a Gandhian John Merton describes such a communication as 'encounter with solitude'. One can deeply reflect and have encounter with ones self only when one communicates with oneself in complete solitude unaffected by what goes on out there and totally concentrates on what is inside ones own authentic self. That is why all Rishis, saints and prophets never neglected this deep reflection and communication with ones own self and thus discovered truth.

Of course this authentic communication with self can be sub-divided into two categories: 1) one who does it for self knowledge and does or does not want to communicate with the world outside him or her and 2) one who not only wants to communicate with the world at large but also wants to transform the world. Many prophets and Gandhi himself in our own time falls into second category.

Gandhi was primarily an activist and was not only in search of truth but also wanted to see truth in action. For such people justice and freedom not only of the self but of the entire people or nation become central. Such people not only transform themselves but know that individual transformation would mean nothing without transforming the world around them. This is what Gandhiji set about to do both in South Africa and in India when he returned to his own country.

Thus from above discussion we can conclude that for a non-violent world following conditions must be fulfilled: 1) the world order has to be based on truthfulness and justice and 2) non-

coercive and genuine convictions and freedom of self or of nations and communities. Since today our world lacks all this violence has become all pervasive around us either aggressive violence of one country or nation against another country or nation or reactive violence of resistance groups, freedom fighters or even of terrorists.

I would also like to say here that those who follow founder of such movements often fail to rise up to the ethical standards of its founders and soon the movement develops vested interests and becomes a powerful establishment, the very anti-thesis of the original movement. Gandhian movement could not escape this irony. Not only after Gandhiji's death but in his life itself Gandhi began to become irrelevant with dawn of freedom. Gandhi was no more needed as freedom was there and now power was the goal. Gandhi's advice was no more needed as it could deliver values, not power.

And then Gandhian movement was soon transformed into an establishment with allotments of lands, formation of trusts, control over properties and so on. Even worse, it lost its dynamic spirit and became orthodoxy with its symbol of spinning wheel and *khadi* without much relevance to new economic realities. Thus Gandhians, devoid of creative thinking became ritualistic.

Now coming to all pervasive violence in the contemporary world how relevant is Gandhism? Its relevance depends of course on truth, justice and freedom from coercion. Since these attributes are lacking how can we have a violence-free world? These attributes are *sin qua non* and despite everyone talking of Gandhian non-violence, violence remains all pervasive.

Can we then say violence-free world is just a dream? In a sense yes but not quite so. One must dream a dream but one also needs an activist like Gandhi with creative thinking and practical application. The concept of non-violence has been there for centuries as all spiritual thinkers, Prophets, Rishi and Munis have emphasized it but it was Gandhi in twentieth century who practically and creatively applied for freedom of the country.

The problem of violence has become much more complex with highly destructive weapons based on latest technology and hence results in loss of heavy life, less of actual combatants but mostly of non-combatants. It is, therefore, highly necessary that violence in our world which is highly unjust, highly unevenly developed and promotes greed among few, ignoring needs of vast majority of people and is heavily biased in favor of few rich nations, to creatively apply non-violent methods of resistance to save humanity.

Should we wait for another Gandhi? It will be our weakness to wait for one. We need collective value-based thinking. We must transform our education system and make it accessible to poorest of poor again through creative methods, an education system which is cooperative, not competitive. Gandhian concept of economy has to be just and need based and our education system has to promote this concept of economy with creative use of modern technology. We can then hope to contain violence at least on local levels.

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