

THE MANY FACES OF NONVIOLENCE RESOLVING COMMUNAL CONFLICTS

Nonviolence: Concept, Meaning and Its Many Facets

Nonviolence is being recognized increasingly in the world today as a powerful means to solve all the problems humanity is facing these days. But unless we gain a deep insight into the concept and perception of nonviolence as understood in the context of the Indian cultural heritage with special reference to the nonviolent Jain tradition, it will be difficult for me to explain as to how it can be applied to problem-solving. In India the word that the people use mostly in day-to-day conversation, in speeches and in writings is *ahimsa* and the word *nonviolence* used in the WEST is not synonymous with it in any way. Nonviolence is interpreted as refraining from killing or violence. But the word *ahimsa* has a very deep meaning and many facets. It lays greater emphasis on mental and verbal nonviolence. The thoughts that originate in our minds, the words we speak and the actions that follow as a result of our thinking are all interwoven and intertwined. So unless we are rid of mental violence, physical violence can never be eliminated from the globe. It is a matter of great happiness for me to see that there is a paradigm shift in the understanding of nonviolence or *ahimsa* among the academics now. After the advent of Gandhi, the world began to realize the importance of nonviolent resistance gradually. The fall of the Mighty British Empire in India through nonviolent awakening generated by Gandhi among the people of India is no small event. His approach to nonviolence was totally different from what the WEST was familiar with so far. Instead of intimidation and terrorization through weapons he chose to arouse nonviolent awakening among the people and educate them in its application to solving the political problems that agitated the minds of the people in India at that time on account of untold suffering, persecution and atrocities perpetrated on them by the alien rulers so ruthlessly. The first condition of nonviolence is fearlessness or what we call *abhaya*. The moment a nonviolent crusader sheds the element of fear, the formidable foe with all his physical and state power is so awe-struck that fear begins to grip him and he runs away.

The problem that Gandhi faced was so great that it cannot be described briefly. He was dealing with the masses who were almost illiterate and ignorant, who had got accustomed to the way of life embedded in terror and persecution and who were reconciled to the fate of being ruled

ruthlessly. Suffering had become a part of their life. Moreover the masses were sharply divided into various religious groups, majors-ones being the Hindus, Muslims and Christians. The Sikhs and the Jains were tagged to the banner of Hinduism and the Buddhists had a negligible presence. Hindus were further divided into hundreds of castes and sects and each of them had some vested interests. Dr. Glenn D. Paige, Professor Emeritus of the University of Hawaii, while delivering the Third Gandhi Memorial Lecture in October 1990 in Delhi which was sponsored by Gandhi Smriti and Gandhi Darshan Smriti Committee refers to Gandhi's strategy of communicating with the villagers. "He used the five fingers of his left hand to represent the five great calls i.e. spinning, removal of untouchability, improvement of the status of women, abstinence from drugs and alcohol and achievement of Hindu-Muslim Unity." He awakened the consciousness of the people and made them stand unarmed. Gandhi's commitment to *ahimsa* was total in thought, word and deed. I would like to mention here that his friendship with Shrimad *Raichand Bhai* who was not only a great exponent of Jain philosophy but who also practised the Jain ascetic way in actual life situations was instrumental in developing and shaping Gandhi's concept of *ahimsa* which he used successfully to drive away the Britishers without treating them as enemies. The Jain principle of *ahimsa* is an important ingredient of the five-fold path taught by Lord Mahavira, the twenty fourth Tirthanker or the supreme sanctified soul in the Jain tradition, which enjoins its followers to abstain from violence, untruth, acquisitiveness, stealing and sexual lust. The Jains lay emphasis on restraining and curbing desires which are the root cause of all conflicts in the world. Non-acquisitiveness includes gradual renunciation of all worldly possessions i.e. wealth, buildings, equipments, land and even clothes. A Jain ascetic takes five vows that he would practise *ahimsa* in thought, word and deed, that he would never resort to untruth, that he would never steal, that he would own nothing, that he would remain celibate all his life and would not entertain lascivious thoughts. When a person practises the vow of non-acquisitiveness, he also gradually reduces the number of things he eats, limits of quantity of water he uses and drinks and uses only two or three sets of dresses. As a matter of fact mere abandoning of possessions will not do. In his mind he is required to develop an attitude of complete indifference towards materialistic possessions. There is a story to illustrate how a desire to possess or acquire can be controlled or inhibited completely. A couple (husband and wife) decided to practise severe austerities. They renounced everything and earned their living by dint of hard work i.e. cutting wood in the forest and selling it everyday. One day as both husband and wife, with bundles of forest wood

on their heads, were returning home, the husband who was walking ahead of his wife saw a piece of gold lying on the way. Thinking that the sight of gold might tempt his wife, he carefully covered it with a lump of earth. The wife who was following him closely behind and had watched him doing so remarked, "Aren't you ashamed of covering 'a lump of earth' with the earth?" The husband now realized his mistake. The wife had mastered her own desire to so great an extent that even the piece of gold appeared to her to be just a lump of earth or a pebble and nothing beyond that. It is the highest state of human mind totally free from any feeling of possessiveness.

The Jain View of Ahimsa: The Anuvrat Way of Resolving Communal Conflicts

The Jains are taught to practise the vow of non-possession keeping that extreme form in mind. A person who practises *aparigraha* (non-acquisitiveness) must aim at attaining to a state of mind when even gold would seem to him nothing but a lump of earth. All *arhats* (adorables) or Tirthankars are the perfect souls who have annihilated all their worldly desires. But a householder cannot renounce everything, so Lord Mahavira prescribed twelve small basic vows or what we call *anuvrats*.

His Holiness Acharya Tulsi, one of the greatest Jain saints of India has added a new dimension by taking the *anuvrats* out of the confines of the Jain sect and inviting the people belonging to other sects to join the movement of basic vows called Anuvrat Movement. Its main aim is to rejuvenate moral and spiritual values and rid the world of violence and hatred.

Acharya Tulsi also recast the basic vows keeping the evil practices that had crept into the Indian social fabric. He launched the ANUVRAT MOVEMENT based on more than 42 basic vows then. Later changes were brought about and the number of vows meant for all categories were brought down to mere 13. They are as follows :

1. I will not kill any innocent creature.
2. I will neither attack anybody nor support aggression and will endeavour to bring about world peace and disarmament.
3. I will not take part in violent agitations or in any destructive activities.

4. I will believe in human unity, will not discriminate on the basis of caste, colour etc., and will not practise untouchability.
5. I will practise religious tolerance.
6. I will observe rectitude in business and general behaviour.
7. I will by degrees develop a pure tenor of life and control over senses.
8. I will not resort to unethical practices in elections.
9. I will not encourage socially evil customs, dowry, big feasts, child marriage.
10. I will not use intoxicants like alcohol, hemp, heroin etc.
11. I will lead a life free from addictions.
12. I will do my best to avoid contributing to environmental pollution .
13. I will use water economically.

Saint Tulsi and his successor Acharya Mahapragya had toured the whole country and inspired millions of people to accept ANUVRAT code of conduct. Thousands have changed their lifestyle and have joined the vast network of self-transformed individuals.

It is through the principles of *anuvrat* that all conflicts arising out of narrow sectarian and communal consideration can be solved. *Anuvrat* workers including monks and nuns take the message of *anuvrats* into the towns and villages and prevent communal conflicts by securing the people's commitment to basic vows. The tradition of vows exists in all faiths and the human psyche is that once a person takes a vow voluntarily not to do a thing, he keeps it. Acharya Tulsi realized the tremendous significance of the power of voluntary acceptance of a vow and launched the movement. He is revered by all Hindus and Muslims and *anuvrat* workers belonging to all communities.

ANUVRAT MOVEMENT was born in the wake of communal conflicts that flared up in all parts of India after it was partitioned on religious ground. Saint Tulsi played the role of a peacemaker in many villages then. His approach to problem-solving was based on persuasion, inspiration and mediation .

I cannot resist the temptation of quoting one incident soon after India gained her freedom. Gandhi attached utmost importance to integrity and honesty in both private life and public life. Pakistan suddenly invaded Kashmir, a part of India in 1948. As a result of which the government of India withheld the payment of the instalment of money she was committed to paying. The government employees in Pakistan could not be paid their salaries as a result their families were starving. National considerations receded for Gandhi and he undertook an indefinite fast against Indian Government. The Hindus and the refugees who were rendered homeless as a result of partition were enraged. They took out processions against Gandhi everyday and communal tension grew. Gandhi was adamant. As the news of his deteriorating condition spread, the protesters' anger melted and their hearts changed by the power of Gandhi's *ahimsa*. Now the processions were led by various community leaders to urge him to break the fast. Gandhi now put another condition. He would not break the fast till all communal riots in all the cities of India came to an end. Ultimately *ahimsa* triumphed. All riots had stopped for some days and Gandhi broke his fast only after being assured that communal blood bath in the major cities had stopped.

In 1989 when the entire nation was once again plunged into communal conflicts over the issue of Babri Mosque which stood close to Rama Temple in Ayodhya and which the fanatic Hindus wanted to demolish. Both the communities were worked up into frenzied moods and there were communal riots. In Ladnun also where Acharya Tulsi was staying communal riots broke out. Tulsi was deeply hurt and he fasted to release spiritual energies to extinguish the flames of communalism. The leaders of the two communities were reconciled to one another through the principle of *anuvrat*. Anuvrat workers, in whatever cities or towns they were, met the leaders of the two communities and tried to make peace.

Acharya Mahapragya on Ahimsa

Ahimsa is an inner awakening. Fearlessness is a prerequisite of ahimsa. Writing about it Acharya Mahapragya says :

“Man always wants to live and is afraid to die. Most problems owe their origin to it. The fear of death might be reckoned as the most frightening state of mind but the most primeval and basic fear is that of the expectation of being defeated or more specially that of losing what one delusively thinks one owns (the delusion “This is mine”). Fear of losing what one is attached to (the family for example) gives birth to the fear of death and therefore the former is the most basic fear. Death is feared in other words because as a result of it we lose all those things and the people we are attached to. One is attached to the body and is afraid to lose it. The delusion regarding the body can be got rid of through the practice of *kayotsarg* (total relaxation of the body) for it results in loosening and ultimately eliminating the body's hold over the mind without embracing death. Yet *kayotsarg* induces a death like state in which all thoughts, feelings and desires vanish and the body lies still. Having faced experienced death like state one remains no longer in its grip. Thus through *kayotsarg* one can conquer the fear of death and thus rid oneself of the tension and oppressive feeling accompanying the fear.

Here what is noteworthy is that fear resides within and not outside us. External fear is mere fiction. If we succeed in cultivating fearlessness, no incident, no external circumstances can strike terror in us.

There is an incident relating to Mahatma Gandhi 's life. Once during one of his marches through the countryside he encountered a procession of people singing and dancing to the beats of a drum and carrying a goat for sacrificing in a temple dedicated to a goddess. Gandhi ji walked ahead of them and sat down obstructing their way to the temple. The people asked him to get out of their way. He told them that if they were bent upon offering a sacrifice to the goddess they might as well sacrifice him and leave the goat alone. Surely the goddess would prefer a human to animal sacrifice! The people felt ashamed and gave up the practice of offering animal sacrifice, Gandhiji could do so only because he was not afraid of death even though the circumstances were dreadful. It shows how nothing in the outer world can strike fear in those who have succeeded in building a consciousness free from fear. On the other hand if the mind is given to fear a thousand fears will assail it even when no cause exists. To conquer fear one has to conquer the attachment to things, to people and the delusion "This is mine" .

While talking of nonviolence we should not chase shadows. We should remember that of the three things i.e. violence, fear, false attachment,

it is the last that has to be tackled first. It is the delusion of attachment that causes fear and which in turn results in violence. If it had not been for fear no weapons would have been invented. Fear of the enemy leads to the unending race for more and more deadly weapon systems and the degree and possibility of violence increase correspondingly. Today the whole world is reeling with fear. Nations are afraid of one another and so are different sections of society. Not until people become fearless can nonviolence be firmly established and fearlessness is possible only when people learn to free themselves from the delusion of attachment.”

Conclusion

Ahimsa alone can provide the healing touch to the victims of communal madness. When the Sikh psyche was hurt following the destruction of their Golden Temple and merciless killing of innocent Sikhs, Acharya Tulsi used *ahimsa* as a healing balm in 1985. His appeal for peace bore fruit. The Sikh Spiritual leader Sant Longowal came to meet Tulsi who persuaded him to accept Rajiv Gandhi’s offer for talks. Sant Longowal accepted the Government’s offer for talks and the famous Rajiv-Longowal Accord was signed. Peace was restored in the Punjab though after the assassination of Sant Longowal, the situation further deteriorated. The world today needs *ahimsa* to get rid of terror. Let us make Ahimsa a way of life to heal the wounds of the people.