Mahatma Gandhi and Non-violence

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The author of this article, Shri Nishinath Changkakoti is one of the highly esteemed citizens of Assam and has earned respect for his quality of head and heart from all sections of people. This article written by him is significant from various angles. First of all, it is an article written by a distinguished policeman on the subject of non-violence. Mr Changkakoti, a member of IPS cadre, served Assam for 35 years from 1957 to 1992 rising to the highest position of the Director General of Police, Assam. He earned most coveted medals of police service namely, Indian Police Medal for meritorious service in 1980 and President's Medal for distinguished service in 1986. With this background, he has examined non-violence as practised and preached by Mahatma Gandhi. It is very important for students of Gandhian thought to understand how a life-long policeman has come to view non-violence.

It may be stated here that Shri Changkakoti is actively associated with Gandhian institutions and activities in and around Guwahati for more than two decades after his retirement. He is convinced of the validity of Gandhian approach to life and continues in his own humble way to promote awareness about Gandhian values and teachings. The present article of his can even be described as his inner exploration to understand the nature of Gandhian non-violence. He also shares some of the questions that still linger on in his mind about non-violence. This makes his article very interesting and important. His style of writing is also simple and natural.

Shri Changkakoti speaking to his colleagues and friends often mentions his enlightening experience when he attended one-and-a-half month long orientation camp at Gandhi Vichar Parishad in Wardha, which was conducted by late Ravindra Verma. He was then a student of Cotton College in the year 1953. He recalls that one of the co-participants at this camp was late J.N. Dixit who rose to serve the country as the Foreign Secretary and then as the National Security Adviser. Another memory he fondly recalls is the good fortune he had in course of this camp to listen to great thinkers and leaders of the Gandhian fraternity. They were: Acharya Kripalani, Jayaprakash Narayan, Dr. JC Kamarappa, and Shrimati Asha Devi Aryanayakan, and others. Having been born in 1934, Shri Changkakoti is in his early seventies. At this matured age, he states firmly that the camp he attended at Wardha was instrumental in making a deep impact on his mind in favour of Gandhian thought and teachings.

The life of Mahatma Gandhi is a fascinating and inspiring story of not only his experiments with truth, which he equated with God, but also his experiments with non-violence. Gandhiji had gone to South Africa at the age of twenty-four, as a young barrister, to assist an Indian business firm there to fight a case in court. Within a couple of days of his arrival in South Africa he had become painfully aware of the extent of colour prejudice of the English settlers of South Africa towards the Indians there and the insults and physical assaults which the Indians were often subjected to by the Englishmen in that Country. He, himself, had also to suffer such insults and humiliation within a short period. Ignoring such unjust and uncivilized treatment, Gandhiji could have returned to India after completing his job concerning the case, leaving his countrymen to their predicament. But his conscience, illumined by his deep faith in God, made him stay on in South Africa for more than twenty years till July 1914 to fight for abolition of racial discrimination against the Indians in that country. In the words of Louis Fischer, “Gandhi wished to establish one principle: That Indians were citizens of the British Empire and therefore entitled to equality under the laws.” Though Gandhiji was cowardly in his younger days as confessed by him in his autobiography, Providence transformed him into a fearless fighter relying entirely on non-violence, the weapon of the strongest and the bravest. His non-violent techniques, judiciously applied, consisted of sending appeals to the authorities, non-compliance with its discriminatory laws and orders, civil disobedience, organizing peaceful mass marches to highlight the grievances, resorting to strikes, courting arrests and willingly going to jail and undertaking fasts to awaken the conscience of the opponent. While applying and propagating use of non-violent methods, he constantly emphasized that “true
Ahimsa should mean a complete freedom from ill will and anger and hate and an overflowing love for all” and “it is the acid test of non-violence that in a non-violent conflict there is no rancour left behind and in the end the enemies are converted into friends.” He also pointed out that “the first condition of non-violence is justice all round, in every department of life.” In course of his non-violent struggle to achieve justice for the Indians in South Africa, Gandhiji forged the weapon of “Satyagraha” in 1906, which means urge for truth or holding fast to truth. Gandhiji said that “Satyagraha is the vindication of truth not by infliction of suffering on the opponent but on one’s self.” He further explained that “it was not part of the tactics of Satyagraha to destroy, hurt, humble or embitter the adversary. Civil resisters hope by sincerity, chivalry and self suffering, to convince the opponents’ mind and conquer his heart.”

Eventually, the Parliament of the Union of South Africa passed a bill in the beginning of July, 1914 repealing most of the discriminatory measures against the Indian settlers, conceding thereby substantial victory to Mahatma Gandhi who upheld the efficacy of non-violent techniques for achieving any just objective.

After this success, Mahatma Gandhi left South Africa for good and after a short stay in London, reached India in January 1915. Destiny did not take long to plunge him into the vortex of India’s freedom struggle. Soon the mantle of leading the Indian masses and guiding the Indian National Congress for attaining India’s independence fell upon him. It was primarily due to application of non-violent means consistently and relentlessly by Gandhiji in this struggle without creating any ill will and rancour towards the British that India could achieve freedom from their rule on the 15th of August 1947.

Gandhiji was so uncompromising in the strict application of non-violent means in India’s struggle for independence under his leadership for almost thirty years that he did not hesitate to call off the satyagraha movement against the infamous Rowlat Bill as soon as he heard of breaking out of sporadic violence in many cities as a reaction to his arrest on his way to Delhi from Bombay on 8th April, 1919, even though this programme had evoked unprecedented mass support. Again, when in February 1922, mob violence broke out at Chauri Chaura in Uttar Pradesh, in course of non-cooperation movement, he promptly suspended it to the chagrin of almost all his colleagues. However, his success in liberating India from the yoke of British rule was marred by his inability to convert Muhammad Ali Jinnah - the supreme leader of the Muslim League - to his way of thinking about future governance of British India in consequence of which he had to ruefully reconcile to the creation of Pakistan.

Savage riots broke out from the “Direct Action Day” on 16th August, 1946 declared by Muslim League, between Hindus and Muslims in many parts of India, particularly in Calcutta and Noakhali in Bengal, Bihar, Delhi and Punjab. These continued with varying intensity till sometime after independent India and Pakistan came into existence, causing Gandhiji much more anguish as he realized that a large section of the Indian people had not developed the required degree of courage and conviction for applying non-violence for solution of social and political problems, and mutual distrust and ill will between Hindus and Muslims were deep enough to goad them to violence. Gandhiji, very sorrowfully, said “I deceived myself into the belief that people were wedded to non-violence.....” Gandhiji, however, did not lose faith in the essential goodness of man. So, he rushed to Noakhali and Calcutta in Bengal and also to Bihar where he, ignoring his old age of almost 78 years, moved from door to door in the localities devastated by senseless fury, to restore sanity and peace. On 1st September 1947, he also resorted to indefinite fast “to end only if and when sanity returns to Calcutta.” In a statement to the press that day, he also said that “it may touch the hearts of all the warring factions in the Punjab if it does in Calcutta.” His fast, as before, had the expected calming effect and he could end it after 73 hours as the city leaders of Calcutta handed over to him a signed pledge that the people of Calcutta would refrain from further violence. Immediately after rioting in Calcutta stopped, Gandhiji rushed back to Delhi to restore peace in riot-torn Delhi and Punjab. Later Lord Mountbatten, last Viceroy of British India, lauded
in the following words Gandhiji’s success in bringing back peace in Bengal through his non-violent efforts. “While the 55 thousand –man boundary force in the Punjab was swamped by riots, the one-man Boundary Force brought peace in Bengal.”

As Mahatma Gandhi did not condemn and oppose use of force during the Boer War and Zulu rebellion in South Africa and during the First World War, he was criticized of being inconsistent even by some of his ardent admirers. The following excerpts from the article entitled “My attitude towards war” written by Gandhiji in “Young India” on 13-9-1928 are quite enlightening to comprehend his stand concerning these events. “There is no defense for my conduct weighed only in the scale of Ahimsa. I draw no distinction between those who wield the weapons of destruction and those who do Red Cross work. Both participate in war and advance its cause. Both are guilty of the crime of war. But even after introspection all these years, I feel that, in the circumstances in which I found myself, I was bound to adopt the course I did both during the Boer War and the great European War and for that matter the so called Zulu ‘rebellion’ of Natal in 1906.

“Life is governed by a multitude of forces. It would be smooth sailing if one could determine the course of one’s actions only by one general principle whose application at a given moment was too obvious to need even a moment’s reflection. But I cannot recall a single act, which could be so easily determined.

“Being a confirmed war resister I have never given myself training in the use of destructive weapons in spite of opportunities to take such training. It was perhaps thus that I escaped direct destruction of human life. But so long as I lived under a system of Government based on force and voluntarily partook of the many facilities and privileges it created for me, I was bound to help that Government to the extent of my ability when it was engaged in a war, unless I non-cooperated with the Government and renounced to the utmost of my capacity the privileges it offered me. And on those three occasions I had no thought of non-cooperating with the British Government.”

About his personal attitude towards the Second World War, he had explained it quite clearly in the following words in an article published in Harijan on 30-9-1939, “My personal reaction towards this war is one of greater horror than ever before. I was not so disconsolate before as I am today. But the greater horror would prevent me today from becoming the self-appointed recruiting sergeant that I had become during the last war. And yet, strange as it may appear, my sympathies are wholly with the allies. Willy-nilly this war is resolving itself into one between such democracies as the west has evolved and totalitarianism as it is typified in Herr Hitler. Unless the allies suffer demoralization, of which there is not the slightest indication, this war may be used to end all wars, at any rate of the virulent type that we see today. I have the hope that India, distraught though it is with internal dissensions, will play an effective part in ensuring the desired end and the spread of cleaner democracy than hitherto........whether I act as a humble guide of the working Committee or if I may use the same expressions without offence, of the Government, my guidance will be for the deliberate purpose of taking either or both along the path of non-violence, be the step ever so imperceptible. It is plain that I cannot force the pace either way. I can only use such power as God may endow my head or heart with for the moment.” When the Congress Working Committee passed a resolution on September 14, 1939 offering India’s full participation in the allied war effort, provided Britain enabled India to do so as an equal partner, granting it full independence, it was not to Gandhiji’s liking as he felt that whatever support was to be given to Britain should be given unconditionally and non-violently. Gandhiji, however, refrained from imposing his will undemocratically on the working committee and supported the resolution of the working committee publicly.

After India attained independence, Gandhiji’s conduct in not opposing rushing of troops by Government of India, in September-October, 1947 to Kashmir to drive away the tribal invaders backed by Pakistani forces raised eyebrows of many of his sincere followers. However, it seems that as Gandhiji was already aware that the moral progression of most of
the people of India and of the leaders whom they had chosen to govern them had not yet attained the level to be able to wield the weapon of non-violence effectively in all circumstances and as he also knew that it is the primary duty of the Government of a country to protect it from external aggression and to maintain internal law and order, he, being a pragmatist, could easily appreciate that the Government of India did not have any other immediately applicable effective opinion. In this connection, it will be worthwhile to quote the following few lines from his article “My attitude towards war” published in “Young India” on 13-9-28. “If there was a national Government, whilst I should not take any direct part in any war, I can conceive occasions when it would be my duty to vote for the military training of those who wish to take it. For I know that all its members do not believe in non-violence to the extent I do. It is not possible to make a person or a society non-violent by compulsion.”

Inscrutable being the design of the Almighty, it appears to be a cruel prank of fate that like Jesus Christ earlier, Mahatma Gandhi – a lifelong crusader for truth and non-violence– should be the victim of violence and that too, perpetrated by one of his own countrymen.

Bibliography:
The following books have been consulted in writing this article:
2. The Life of Mahatma Gandhi by Louise Fischer.
5. Epigrams from Gandhi by S.R.Tikokar.

Record-Breaking Sale of Gandhi Books

There was an overwhelming response to Gandhi Books Exhibition-cum-Sale. Gandhi Books of Rs.2,87,000/- worth were sold within last 6 days (28th January to 2nd February, 2008). ‘An Autobiography’ of Mahatma Gandhi, and a set of five important books, ‘Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi’ were the top-selling books at the exhibition. About 3500 copies of ‘Gandhi’s Autobiography’ and 165 copies of ‘Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi’ were sold.

To commemorate Gandhi’s 60th Death Anniversary, 300 books on & by Gandhi were displayed & sold at 50% discount by Mumbai Sarvodaya Gandhi Book Centre with the financial assistance of ‘Babunath Mandir Charities’. About 3500 copies of ‘Gandhi’s Autobiography’ and 165 copies of ‘Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi’ were sold.

Gandhi’s 60th Death Anniversary

January 2nd

Hutatma Chowk,

Chowki and at Centre, Nana

present context of violence, terrorism

Gandhiji has left indelible footprints on the sand of time. Even after 60 years of his departure from the world, the attractions of his thoughts and deeds have not waned. More than 2.50 Lakh copies of ‘An Autobiography’ of Mahatma Gandhi are being sold every year. After reading Gandhi books, many people have decided to follow the path of Truth and Non-Violence and are striving to sustain morality by practicing peaceful conflict resolution which is the need of the hour. (Received by e-mail from MKGANDHI [info@mkgandhi.org])