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Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation: Lessons from Gandhian Thought

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In this paper, I explore the potentials of the Gandhian conceptual framework for proposing strategies to reduce tensions among communities and nations, and to reconcile broken relations. The analysis focuses on three major Gandhian concepts such as i) ahimsa which denotes nonviolence, ii) satyagraha which signifies non-cooperation and civil disobedience, and iii) antyodaya which implies concern for the disadvantaged and victims. First, the discussion attempts to identify the methods proposed by the Gandhian framework for avoiding potential conflicts that might lead to violence. The paper examines manifold implications of the concept of nonviolence and elucidates both the merits and limits of the concept in contemporary contexts. Secondly, the paper analyses the feasibility of the strategy of nonviolent non-cooperation, which compels parties involved in the conflict to look for possible solutions. Thirdly, the paper elucidates the possibility of drawing substantial support from Gandhian thought to defend our obligation to be on the side of victims of aggressions and transgressions. Finally, the paper evaluates the constraints of the Gandhian framework in responding to sudden and unanticipated crises, its excessive demandingness, and the problem of impossible possibilities.

Introduction

The Gandhian approach to international peace has been gathering great attention since the second half of the twentieth century, ever since the success of the Indian freedom movement. Likewise, Gandhian views on human nature, political values, and social dynamics bring deeper insights into several issues in political thought and moral philosophy. A closer look would reveal the promising nature of the Gandhian conceptual framework in drawing measures to reduce tensions among communities and nations, resolve wars and conflicts, regain social harmony, repair damages, and reconcile broken relations. Accordingly, the global community acknowledges its commitment to a *culture of peace*, which denounces the culture of hostilities, and a great regard for the Gandhian way[1].

[1] Mary King, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr: The power of nonviolent action (Paris: UNESCO, 1999), pp. vi-vii

Potentials of the framework were predicted well before the Indian episode as Gandhi observes: "If India reaches her destiny through truth and nonviolence, she will have made no small contribution to the world peace for which all nations of the earth are thirsting".[2] The global orientation of the Gandhian framework is worked out by establishing a perfect alchemy between the Jain tradition of the East and the Biblical tradition from the West and integrating the virtues of individuals and values of collective social structures. For instance, the Gandhian position manifests an impeccable commitment to the five great virtues (*mahāvratas*), such as nonviolence (*ahimsa*), truthfulness (*satya*), non-stealing (*asteya*), non-attachment (*aparigraha*), and chastity (*brahmacharya*), that are upheld in the East, and furthermore, attempts to harmonise these concepts with the Western intellectual traditions. The five great virtues get paramount importance in Jainism, the champion of absolute nonviolence.[3] However, the five rules of Buddhism and the five regulations of the Yoga school of Hinduism propose the same list of imperatives,[4]and Gandhi was quite familiar with both these philosophical traditions.[5]

A major merit of Gandhian thought is the synthesis established between the Eastern wisdom and the Western intellectual traditions. Specifically, three of the significant Gandhian concepts, namely, nonviolence (*ahimsa*), civil disobedience (*satyagraha*), and upliftment of the last (*antyodaya*), draw immense support from the Western tradition as well. For instance, Gandhi acknowledges the influence of Tolstoy's works, such as *The Kingdom of God is Within You* and *Confessions* in moulding the Gandhian version of nonviolence which focuses on 'love as the law of life'.[6] Likewise, the Gandhian concept of civil disobedience absorbs great inspiration from Henri David Thoreau's work, titled *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*.[7] The Gandhian ideal of the concern for the last is largely from John Ruskin's book, *Unto This Last,* which as Gandhi admits, brought about an instantaneous and practical transformation in his life.[8] The chapter XIX, titled 'The magic spell of a book' of his autobiography acknowledges its profound impact on Gandhi, guiding him to the deeper implications of the 'Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard'.[9] Furthermore, Gandhi talks about the deep impression that the New Testament, especially the Sermon on the Mount, made in his heart, and he compares it with that of the Gita.[10] Accordingly, Gandhian philosophy appears to be a rare synthesis of eastern and western traditions.

[2] Mohandas Gandhi, India of My Dreams (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Press, 1947), pp. 264-265; Young India (1931), 12.3
[3] Mysore Hirayanna. Outlines of Indian Philosophy. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2018), p. 166.
[4] Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. Indian Philosophy vol. 2. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 351-356.
[5] Mohandas Gandhi, An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), pp. 145-150.
[6] Mohandas Gandhi, An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth. op. cit., p. 243.
[7] Henri David Thoreau, On the Duty of Civil Disobedience, Aesthetic Papers, pp. 189-211.
[8] Mohandas Gandhi, An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth. op. cit., pp. 467-471.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Mohandas Gandhi, An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth. op. cit., p. 149.

Inescapability of Conflicts

Human existence can be understood as a nexus of manifold relationships moulded by the thick web of delicate fibres of interrelationship. The process of establishing and retaining relationships, however, involves challenges and costs because each individual is radically different from others in maintaining dispositions, preferences, motivations, and other individuating traits. Conflicts, at the bottommost level, are relations among persons[11], and possibly the disturbed relations. Furthermore, human existence is a pursuit of achieving a set of essential needs such as biological necessities, safety concerns, the craving for belongingness, and wants for self-esteem and self-actualisation.[12] The third in the above hierarchy, which is the need of belongingness, demands special attention in this regard. It is conceived to be a natural instinct of animals that are higher in the evolutionary process to manifest a sense of belongingness with the group, and human beings are no exception in this regard. The sense of belongingness to a specific group necessitates excluding members of other groups that manifest features dissimilar to the criteria of affinity being considered. Given the fact that all humans are not equal in manifold parameters, exclusion turns out to be a corollary of the sense of belongingness.

The above tendency to adopt an inclusion-exclusion approach leads to discriminatory outcomes such as labelling non-members as outsiders, strangers, and enemies. However, Singer and others would justify the imperative of 'equality of consideration'[13] irrespective of our differences. Stated otherwise, it is justifiable to grant equal consideration to everyone based on human dignity which outshines possible differences that are contingent. The line of argument which traces the phenomenon of conflicts back to human instincts, however, follows the Hobbesian reasoning, which focuses on the darker side of the human condition. Whereas the Gandhian view of human nature introduces an optimistic account, which manifests an unshakable belief in the goodness of humankind. Gandhi believes in the immense potential of humankind to transcend the drives imposed by nature and transgress the limits imposed by one's physical constraints. He argues that human goodness can transform the worst among evildoers and the vibes of love would open both hardened hearts and unseeing eyes. For instance, Gandhi was convinced to change the mind of the pilot who bombed Hiroshima as he argued that "I will not go to underground. I will not go to shelters. I will come out in the open and let the pilot see I have not the face of evil against him."[14] He was so sure that the above disposition could transform humans and situations, and avoid disgraceful outcomes.

Nonviolence: the only enduring solution to conflicts

Gandhian thought suggests 'nonviolence' as the law of the civilized society and, furthermore recommends it as the only enduring framework to assure the prevalence of justice and reconciliation of social bonds. First, the preference for nonviolent engagements and sincere efforts to promote a culture of nonviolence ensure an environment which avoids potential conflicts that might lead to violence. Resonating Romans 6:23, "The wages

[11] Thomas Nagel, 'War and Massacre', Philosophy and Public Affairs 1(2): 1972, pp. 123-144.
[12] Abraham Maslow, A Theory of Human Motivation, Psychological Review 50: 370-396.
[13] Peter Singer, Writings on an Ethical Life (New York: Harper Collins, 2000), p. 29.
[14] Margaret Bourke-White, Half Way to Freedom. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1949), p. 232.

of sin is death,"[15] Gandhi would suggest that violence leads to further violence and destruction of everyone. Therefore, it is indispensable that efforts should be made to curb its further breeding, though it involves some cost. Here, the Gandhian proposal looks significantly different from the Western concept of pacifism which is primarily the avoidance of harming others. Gandhi would rather recommend positive measures to promote peace and harmony in the society. A closer look would make us convinced that the apparent passive implication of the prefix *non* in nonviolence is deceptive, for it is not confined to the avoidance of violence which is denoted by the popular normative concept of *nonmaleficence*. Rather, it signifies *beneficence* which is positively contributing to the welfare of everyone. Likewise, the Gandhian concept of nonviolence is heavily loaded with deep metaphysical and ethical implications, and he prefers to call nonviolence *the soul force*.

Metaphysical and practical implications of the Gandhian concept of nonviolence can be better understood by analysing the three forms of nonviolence which Gandhi identifies.[16] The first form of nonviolence, according to Gandhi, is the one that the weak adopts. Here, nonviolence is the manifestation of one's helplessness, for the weak prefers to follow nonviolence because of the inability to confront the oppressor. Accordingly, the above disposition cannot claim the status of a virtue; rather, it appears to be a sign of one's incapability and wretchedness. The second type of nonviolence is that of cowards who do not have the courage to face the oppressor. Both the above two types of nonviolence lack solid foundations on character traits and virtues. Instead, both are manifestations of helplessness, which is largely determined by situations. In the due course of time, it is possible that both will turn to violence when the situations change in such a way that they are capable to respond to the oppressor. For this reason, Gandhi does not consider the nonviolence of the weak and cowards to be nonviolence in its true sense, and he adds that he 'would rather have the violence of the brave than the nonviolence of the weak and coward'17. Gandhi would count the third type of nonviolence, that of the morally strong, as the only form of nonviolence which claims merit. Here, nonviolence is the manifestation of great moral strength which emerges from one's fathomless spiritual force and impeccable virtuous disposition. Hence, nonviolence is a character trait of a brave and virtuous person, not of the weak and cowards, and "the path of true nonviolence demands much more courage than violence".18

Accordingly, nonviolence is not an expression of one's weakness but a testimonial to the possession of one of the deadliest weapons that might eliminate all enemies. Gandhi believed that nonviolence is "infinitely greater than and superior to brute force", "mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction invented by ingenuine humans", and furthermore, "destruction is not the law of genuine humans".19 Here, his position resembles to the Biblical exhortation to "feed one's enemies if they are hungry; give them something to drink if they are thirsty; by doing this one will heap burning coals on heads of enemies".20 Since deeds of care and compassion can change minds of enemies and burn out the latent feelings of enmity, enemies no more exist. This radical suggestion to respond

[15] The Bible, Revised Standard Version, Romans 6:23
[16] Ramachandra Krishna Prabhu & U.R. Rao (ed). The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi. (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1966), pp. 167-168.
[17] Sudhir Chandra, Gandhi: An Impossible Possibility. (London: Routledge, 2020), p. 3.
[18] Mohandas Gandhi, 'Nonviolence'. Harijan 4 August, 248-249, 1946.
[19] Jivatram Bhagwandas Kripalani, Gandhi: His Life and Thought. (New Delhi: Publication Division, Government of India, 1970), p. 350.
[20] The Bible, Revised Standard Version, Romans 12:20.

to violence with nonviolent and compassionate deeds necessitates acquiring deeper convictions and higher moral sensibilities. Hence, nonviolence is the weapon of the strongest who maintain a virtuous disposition to denounce evil while keeping no hatred towards evildoers. Gandhi prefers to call it the soul force, an active force of the highest order, or the power of God within us.21

Given that the commitment to nonviolence is closely linked to the moral strength of persons, we need to take nonviolence principally as a disposition to denounce ill feelings that generate aggression. Additionally, the rule of the virtuous disposition of nonviolence would reverse the destructive forces and resolve conflicts that might damage relations. Our commitment to a culture of nonviolence might nurture virtues of empathy, openness, tolerance, forgiveness, and inclusiveness that demand urgent attention today. The idea of peace, according to Gandhi, should not be confined to the absence of war. Rather, it should imply the prevalence of synergy and harmony within oneself and the collective. Gandhian view that 'wars are won not with weapons but by moral force' is corroborated by historical facts that witness the success of nonviolent solutions that involve open dialogue, mediation, and collective effort to eliminate possible root causes. For instance, the success stories of Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, the 14th Dalai Lama, and Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan validate the Gandhian approach. Nonviolence has a long history of success, which is much higher than alarmingly costly violent solutions to social problems.22 Moreover, the solutions drawn on nonviolent grounds manifest added advantages of endurance and perceived fairness. However, the turn to nonviolence requires constant moral training and deep cultural transformation that might claim lengthy efforts and prolonged attention. It looks humanly impossible to practice unconditional love for the evildoer and to maintain an unblemished nonviolent disposition. However, turning to his faith in human goodness, Gandhi would argue that it is quite possible.

Nonviolence, suffering for others, and self-harming

While applying the principle of nonviolence, one might face serious challenges from within because this ambitious task disturbs and redefines one's entire value system. It looks self-deceptive to suppress one's own emotions against the oppressor, counterintuitive to sacrifice legitimate claims to lead a life which one finds valuable, and unfair to oneself while tolerating the oppressor and thereby perpetuating injustice. As the disposition of individuals is a decisive factor in the rule of nonviolence, the voice of the self is the prime challenge in refraining from violent responses. It is sensible that one is primarily responsible to oneself, and therefore, everyone has a right, and therefore an obligation, to protect oneself from evildoers such as political invaders, ideological infiltrators, and domestic oppressors. Accordingly, nonviolent tolerance to evildoers appears to be committing a major crime against oneself. One may find no significant difference between acts of self-harming and acts of vicarious suffering and nonviolence. Additionally, we may be compelled to acknowledge the slippery slope on which the entire premises in defence of vicarious suffering rest and admit that suicides are morally justifiable. However, it is widely believed that life is intrinsically valuable and acts that cause harm to one's own life or lives of others are morally reprehensible.

[21] Ramachandra Krishna Prabhu & U.R. Rao (ed), op. cit., p. 154.
[22] Jivatram Bhagwandas Kripalani, op. cit., p. 355.

The sublime manifestation of nonviolence, which is the nonviolence of the brave, should not be conceived as an act of self-harming. Acts of self-harming are generally performed by agents whose agency is significantly compromised[23] and whose ability to cope up with situations is at a lower degree. However, the question that what all kinds of acts of self-harming might be regarded morally inappropriate is subject to the scrutiny of each culture. Stated otherwise, it is not that all kinds of self-injuries are morally blameworthy, and some are indeed supererogatory. Accordingly, it looks better to focus on consequences rather than acts to determine the moral nature of self-harming acts. The absolutist attention to acts alone would prohibit harming oneself even for altruistic acts whereas consideration of consequences would identify ethical distinctions among amputating to save oneself from cancer, which might affect the whole body, harming oneself through smoking, which might bring an early death, and engaging oneself in masochist behaviours. While it is not good to harm oneself because life is valuable, it may be morally permissible to harm oneself for greater or far-reaching consequences and, therefore, the vicarious suffering of the morally strong should not be taken as the acts of the weak. Rather, it is a method of eliminating the enemy by heaping coals of fire on her head, as we read in Proverbs (25:21) and Romans (12:20). Here, the fire of compassion and nonviolence blazes and purifies her mind and transforms her altogether, and which in turns assures that she is no more your enemy.

The idea of nonviolence occupies a central position in Gandhian ethical philosophy, political thought, and metaphysics. Among the eleven great vows proposed as the guidelines for human conduct, nonviolence and truth, the first two among the five cardinal virtues get prime attention. Subsequently, while developing his political theory, he justifies the inseparable nature of these two concepts as the two sides of the same coin and additionally, correlates the concepts with the ideas of *means and ends*.[24] While our ultimate goal, according to Gandhi, is truth, the only means to achieve the goal is nonviolence. Both means and ends are equally important, and both are convertible terms as well. Though we do not have any command over ends or outcomes, it is very well possible for us to control the means or our present actions that might bring the desired outcomes. This is because means grow into ends in due course of time, and ends are nothing external.[25] The above argument is well moored on the golden rule and the law of karma that assert the fact that we are makers of our destiny and we will harvest what we have cultivated. In addition to the fact that the world is being governed by natural laws, it is being governed by moral laws as well. Therefore, it is essential to turn to nonviolent means if we look for a desirable social order ahead, for violent means results in further violence, whereas nonviolence promotes harmony and synergy.

The turn to nonviolence, however, is not problem free. As the Gandhian position suggests, it demands much more than the pacifist position of avoidance of harming others. Rather, it is a commitment to do good irrespective the of adverse state of affairs, particularly while the recipients have already violated the dictates of nonviolence and do not deserve a nonviolent treatment. It is possible that the framework of nonviolence would turn out to be inadequate in responding to sudden and unanticipated crises that demand immediate attention. Furthermore, it should face serious challenges from sociocultural processes that are antagonistic to the idea of nonviolence, which requires lengthy efforts and prolonged attention. Therefore, nonviolence is not an immediate solution to most of

[23] Zsuzsanna Chapell, 'The enacted ethics of self-injury', Topoi 41 (2022): 383-394.
[24] Mohandas Gandhi, India of My Dreams, op. cit. p. 64.
[25] Jivatram Bhagwandas Kripalani, op. cit., p. 349

our day-to-day conflicts but a long-term method for avoiding conflicts and resolving it without ill feelings. Stated otherwise, it is largely a preventive method or a long-term social insurance strategy rather than a treatment measure.

Nonviolent non-cooperation and disobedience with civility

The second strategy, introduced by the Gandhian framework for reconciliation and conflict resolution, is *nonviolent non-cooperation* which is meant for pressurising parties of the conflict to look for possible solutions to the problem. The idea of nonviolent non-cooperation is essentially dualistic, for it involves both nonviolence and non-cooperation in the conceptualisation part and internal and external components in the domain of its application. Here, non-cooperation or boycott is adopted as an effective strategy to pressurise the parties of conflicts, and the whole effort should be free from any violence. Likewise, non-cooperation is proposed both from within the specific society and groups that are not parties to the conflict. While non-cooperation from others might compel the parties of the conflict to explore possible measures to resolve the problem, disobedience of the domestic civil societies may force power structures to rectify the unjust measures that are adopted.

The above strategy of nonviolent non-cooperation is a major construct in the Gandhian concept of satyagraha, which, in the literal sense, implies steadfastness to truth. The idea of *truth* occupies a central position in the Gandhian moral philosophy and political thought as well. As a political position, *satyagraha* would imply a collective effort to seek truth, fight for truth, and abide by truth. In the etymological sense, the concept *satya* or truth originates from the root *sat,* which implies 'being', 'source' or 'the ultimate reality.' Moreover, for Gandhi, it is nothing but the cosmic harmony which denounces conflicts on contingent grounds. In concrete situations, however, we make a putative difference between fighting for 'true' causes and fighting for unfair causes. Likewise, we may find it possible to distinguish fighting clean from fighting dirty. Accordingly, all reactions and wars are not equally wrong, and we do have an obligation to offer moral support to the ones whose cause is just and whose concern is closer to truth. To avoid committing the same mistake, however, the support offered to the one who is fighting for a fair cause should be nonviolent.

A closer look at the Gandhian thought would reveal its great potential in responding to contemporary conflicts that find no adequate solutions. It is possible that we may have learned to live with these problems, but the problems do not affect everyone equally. Frequent occurrences of similar conflicts, along with the overwhelming load of information, result in the phenomenon of normative numbness, which makes us incapable of responding to the legitimate concerns of the oppressed. The larger the number of victims of any conflict, the deeper permeating shall be our psychic numbness.[26] However, it is quite difficult to believe that one will be immune to the impacts of the conflict forever because it is not easy to predict all possible ramifications of the trouble and its long-term impacts. Given the potential magnitude of any conflict, the Gandhian position would insist that the civilised world has an obligation to motivate the evildoer to rectify mistakes and turn to the path of harmonious coexistence. Here, the strategy of disobedience with civility may be adopted by insiders, such as civil societies and voluntary groups, and non-cooperation

[26] Scott Slovic & Paul Slovic, 'The Arithmetic of Compassion', New York Times Dec 4, 2015

and sanctions may be considered by other external groups, such as other states and international organisations.

While heeding to the voice of Gandhi, it looks perfectly justifiable to impose nonviolent measures such as non-cooperation on parties of conflicts, adopting collective boycott against them, and enforcing economic sanctions that incapacitate them. In the real-world scenario, however, the above strategies must face several serious challenges. Though the strategies might appear prima facie nonviolent and justifiable, the possibility of leaving negative feelings behind is a major concern. The wound that might be caused by the sense of 'outsider' or 'unwanted' might generate additional incisive issues that result in greater bleeding. Hence, the possibility of unintended violence that might follow nonviolent non-cooperation is a major limitation of the above proposal. Secondly, nonviolent strategies draw justifications from our obligation to stay with the truth, which is debatable. It is possible that we do not have fair access to the truth, or the truth known to us is seriously manipulated, or it should be evaluated in the light of other convincing truths that claim priority. Lastly, it is possible, at least in a shorter duration, that the evildoer may get chances to do greater harm if nonviolent strategies are adopted.

Obligation to be on the side of victims

A broader interpretation of Gandhian thought would vindicate our collective obligation to be on the side of *the last* in society and with the *victims* of aggression and transgressions. The concern for the last and compassion towards the oppressed are two major features of Gandhian social philosophy. Gandhi has repeatedly acknowledged that the above ideas were borrowed from John Ruskin. For instance, the chapter XVIII, titled 'The Magic Spell of the Book', in part IV of his autobiography, speaks about the deep impact of Ruskin's thoughts on Gandhi. Gandhi confesses that Ruskin's book, *Unto This Last*, "brought about an instantaneous and practical transformation" in his life,[27] and he decided to change his life radically. Subsequently, Ruskin's idea took an ever-living rebirth as the Gandhian concept of *Sarvodaya,* which signifies the concern for the last. Envisioning an egalitarian social order, the idea of *Sarvodaya* prioritises collective welfare over individuals' good, advocates trusteeship over capitalistic ownership, denounces majoritarian oppressions, acknowledges the truth that humankind is one, and accepts the duty to identify oneself with the oppressed. At a later stage, the idea of *Sarvodaya* evolved into a social movement and subsequently became an independent school of Gandhian thought.

Historical accounts witness to the alarming fact that innocent civilians, specifically women, are major victims of violence since the wrong targets are always being chosen as a combat strategy. Massive elimination of innocent civilians is often justified with several unconvincing reasons, such as the act was unintended, no better alternative was available, or the population was indirectly supporting the opponent by passive cooperation. Though the larger size of the number of casualties has imposed a psychic numbness, it is very well known to humanity that more than 40 million innocent civilians were brutally killed in the World War II. However, the numbness persists in the present times while more than 25,000 civilians are killed in the war in Gaza.28 Additionally, thousands are taken as hostages,

[27] Mohandas Gandhi, An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), pp. 467-471.
[28] United Nations, UN News, 22 January 2024.

mutilated, and raped. Likewise, the office of the United Nations High Commissioner (OHCHR) has reported 27,149 civilian casualties for the period between February 2022 and September 2023 in the Ukraine-Russia conflict.29 Various international agencies have released alarming genocide reports from various parts of the world, for instance, from Rwanda, Somalia, Nigeria, and Myanmar.

The Gandhian insistence on the obligation to be on the side of the voiceless victims of aggression manifests the absolutist orientation of his position.30 Advocating the sanctity of human life, Gandhi argues for the essential equality of all humans and discards discrimination based on power, nationality, religion, class, and caste. The position is largely inspired by the Upanishadic view that establishes the identity between *Brahman* and *Atman*, that is, the identity between the cosmic self and individual selves.31 This identity serves as the foundation for inherent unity among all humans and as the ultimate reason for ascribing equal value to all humans. Additionally, the same position motivates him to find the presence of God even in the most wretched state of human existence, and hence, he calls the last *daridra narayana*, a terminology which equates the poor with God32. While considering convincing reasons for war restrictions and conflict resolution, respect for the absolute value of human existence appears to be the prime concern. Both absolutists and consequentialists, regardless of their ideological preferences, may admit that personhood is the central concept in adjudicating conflicts. This is because conflicts, at the bottommost level, are afflicted relations among persons.33 Since attention to the idea of personhood necessitates normative considerations, it appears imperative to consider who should be targeted and what methods are justifiable. Since civilians are not the real cause of the problem, targeting civilians in conflicts turns out to be morally objectionable. Even if the aggression is targeted at evildoers, it is not violent elimination but nonviolent non-cooperation that results in incapacitating them would look morally defensible.

It is possible that our estimations of the actual impacts of violence would turn out to be dishonest because the calculations performed are significantly flawed. Generally, our assessment is confined to the number of casualties and material damages, and it disregards several major impacts, such as several unreported harms to the life of individuals and the quality of their life, irrevocable damages to the stability of the social structure, and irreparable damages to the environment. Displacement and exile are corollaries of conflicts, and the fugitives are likely to be subjected to further harm. Likewise, conflicts disturb the social harmony and infuse a sense of distrust, which in turn leads to added disharmony. Though the global community is concerned with curbing the carbon footprint resulting from industrial activities, transportation, and agriculture, it has not started thinking seriously about the dreadful volume of carbon emissions from wars and conflicts. In addition to the emissions from bombs and weapons used at the war front, greenhouse gases are released both from increased fuel consumption by troops and fires caused by

[29] OHCHR, Ukraine: Civilian casualty update, 11 September 2023

[30] Ramachandra Guha, Gandhi: The Years that Changed the World. (Gurgaon: Penguin Books, 2018), pp. 172-178, 263-277; Thomas Weber, Gandhian philosophy, conflict resolution theory, and practical approaches to negotiation, Journal of Peace Research 38(4): 493-513.

[31] Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. Indian Philosophy vol. 1. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 169-173.

[32] Ramachandra Krishna Prabhu & U.R. Rao (ed). The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi. (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1966), pp. 54-56.

[33] Thomas Nagel, 'War and Massacre', Philosophy and Public Affairs 1(2): 1972, pp. 123-144.

wars.34 Even after thirty-two years, the oil wells set fire during the Gulf War continue to pollute the region with unstoppable emissions.

Since conflict resolution demands a fair treatment of all possible victims of war which include humans, society, and nature, the Gandhian position that adopts a holistic framework turns out to be a promising candidate in global debates on conflict resolution and reconciliation. While it is impossible to undo the harms committed by conflicts and aggressions, it is quite possible to check the troubles from appearing again and curb the progression by repairing damages, rectifying mistakes, and supporting the victims. It is precisely for this reason that the Gandhian proposal of nurturing a culture of nonviolence looks meritorious and enduring. Here, the framework which Gandhi adopts appears to be radically different from other pacifist proposals. While other pacifist positions suggest avoidance of aggression, Gandhian thought proposes positive measures of social action that promote justice, peace, and reconciliation. Indeed, the obligation to pursue these constructive measures falls on everyone. It exceeds political strategies and policy deliberations. It lays great expectations on civil societies.

The suggestion to be on the side of the victims of conflicts appears to be a great idea. However, one may find it difficult as well. First, it is counterintuitive to be with victims if they no longer exist, for it is impossible to extend our concern to non-contemporaries who were eliminated by conflicts. This is a significant challenge in rectificatory justice, even if the accused is ready to compensate for the harm caused. Likewise, it is counted as a major reason for not forgiving for the wrongs committed in the distant past. Both theological and legal deliberations, at least in certain cases, are tendentious to absolve the accused if the harmed no longer exists. For instance, a person may be found guilty of living with someone while his wedded partner is alive, and no divorce is granted. After the wedded partner's death, however, the person may be treated differently. Secondly, it is practically impossible to fully repair the harm caused to victims, even if they exist. Though it may be possible to compensate for the material damages by rebuilding their houses and cities and adopting affirmative actions, it is impossible to heal their inner wounds, erase the traumas, and regain the dignity which is brutally assaulted. Finally, owing to displacement, it is quite laborious to locate the victims of conflicts and bring them united to fight for the cause.

An impossible possibility

Promoting a culture of nonviolence might look as the only enduring solution to conflicts, aggressions, and wars. However, one may believe that the pursuit of nonviolence, specifically the nonviolence of the brave, is 'a fine ideal, much to be desired, but dreadfully unrealistic'.[35] Many of Gandhi's contemporaries, such as Rabindranath Tagore and Jawaharlal Nehru, and the Indian National Congress, the party he established, found him too difficult to follow. The scepticism of the Indian National Congress towards the Gandhian doctrine of nonviolence betrayed itself in its 1920 Nagpur session by declaring its motto of 'achieving freedom by legitimate and peaceful means';[36] not precisely through nonviolence. This lack of conviction, both of his party and the people, culminated in conflicts and violence at a later stage. Moreover, the upsurge in violence proved that the

[34] Carbon Literacy Trust, 'The climate impact of war', February 2024.
[35] William Shirer, Gandhi: A Memoir, Calcutta: Rupa & Co., 1993, p. xi.
[36] Sudhir Chandra, Gandhi: An Impossible Possibility. (London: Routledge, 2020), p. 2.

nonviolence adopted earlier was not the nonviolence of the brave but that of the weak and coward. Since the Gandhian ideal of nonviolence appears to be overly demanding, many find it quite impossible. For the same reason, many found him enigmatic, and he remains posthumously as enigmatic as he was while alive[37]

The Gandhian ideals of nonviolence, non-cooperation, and the concern for the last appear impossible at first glance. However, a closer look makes us to believe otherwise and acknowledge the virtue of endurance linked to the ideals. Gandhi would find the ideals perfectly possible, for he had a deep trust in humanity.[38] It seems justifiable to hold that the trust in humanity is the backbone of Gandhian thought. This trust prompted him to identify immense potential of humankind and achieve targets that were apparently impossible. Likewise, it is the trust which people invested in Gandhi made him great and possible. Now, as Sudhir Chandra argues, it is our distrust which makes him impossible as well, 'when the world needs him more than ever before'.[39] Stated otherwise, it is our choice, either to trust or distrust, that determines the success and failure of the framework proposed by Gandhi. Likewise, trust, a foundational value, is essential for both establishing and maintaining relationships. Trust is crucial in reconciling broken relations as well.

The apparent difficulty involved in practising Gandhian ideals is not a valid reason to take them impossible. Rather, these ideals entail an upward journey which ensures lasting outcomes, and we find nothing in human history that contradicts Gandhi's proposal to resolve conflicts. It appears counterintuitive to hold that durable interpersonal relations and viable collective existence are possible through oppressive strategies that discount truth, trust, and concern. Though one might have the illusion that better possible options are violence, shrewd diplomacy and sanctions, these paths do not bring the desired outcome. Since aggressions and conflicts are relations among persons,[40]individuals appear to be the primary focus in conflict resolution initiatives. Therefore, the Gandhian approach calls for taking responsibility for our actions, doing self-examination, listening to the inner voice, and identifying the dignity of persons. Gandhi has faith in human goodness, and therefore, he appeals to higher human sensibilities for a peaceful coexistence. Since the root causes of conflicts are essentially not merely political, solutions can never be confined to political strategies alone.[41]It demands turning to the trust Gandhi had in human goodness and reaffirming our trust in Gandhian ideals.

Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to evaluate the potential of the Gandhian conceptual framework for offering conflict resolution strategies that are enduring and possible ways to reconcile broken relations. The discussion presents lessons from three major Gandhian concepts, such as nonviolence, non-cooperation and civil disobedience, and the concern for the last. It is argued that the commitment to nonviolence is the only enduring way to resolve conflicts and reconcile broken relations. However, it is not an easy ideal. For Gandhi, it is the nonviolence of the brave which claims the status of a virtue that promotes harmony and reconciliation, whereas the nonviolence of the weak and coward may not be

[37] Sudhir Chandra op. cit. p. 14.
[38] Sudhir Chandra op. cit. p. 17.
[39] Sudhir Chandra op. cit. p. 157.
[40] Thomas Nagel, op. cit., p. 133.
[41] Sudhir Chandra op. cit. p. 144.

regarded as virtuous. Nonviolence, as Gandhi presents, is not confined to the avoidance of violence; rather, it signifies the disposition to contribute positively to the welfare of everyone. The discussion incorporates a careful evaluation of commonly raised problems, such as the possibility of self-harming and the likelihood of perpetuating evils. Furthermore, the feasibility of nonviolent non-cooperation and disobedience with civility as two potential strategies to pressurise parties of the conflict to think about reconciliatory paths is examined. The discussion evaluates the phenomenon of psychic numbness, which results in the silence of the masses, and affirms the role of collective efforts in resolving conflicts, reconciling relations, and bringing social harmony. The Gandhian suggestion exceeds political strategies and deliberations, and it lays great expectations on civil societies. Additionally, the paper presents reasons for justifying our duty to be on the side of victims of conflicts and aggressions. It is necessary to expand our notion of victims and revise the prevailing concept of rectification. While analysing possible implications of the three Gandhian concepts, I have tried to incorporate possible objections that each one attracts. Among other concerns, constraints in responding to sudden and unanticipated crises and the overly demanding nature are two major limitations of the framework, and the latter makes it look impossible. The discussion identifies the role of trust in determining the impossibility and possibility of the Gandhian framework. I have tried to clarify why the Gandhian way of conflict resolution and reconciliation looks advantageous over other pacifist proposals. It claims added advantages such as the virtue of endurance inherent to nonviolent measures, the focus on constructive collective actions for conflict avoidance and reconciliation, and the emphasis on inclusive restorative practices.

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