

Role of Mahatma Gandhi and his non-violent techniques in Indian National Movement

ZAHOOR AHMAD WANI

Lecturer of History

Department of Higher Education, Govt. of Jammu and Kashmir

ABSTRACT

Mahatma Gandhi is perhaps the most widely recognized figure of the Indian Nationalist Movement for his role in leading non-violent civil uprisings. He first employed the non-violent approach in South Africa where he was serving as an expatriate lawyer. He was hurt and angry when he witnessed discrimination and exploitation of colored people under Whites rule. He organizes non-violent protests in the country which gained him fame and support from the people of South Africa and was successful in getting removed some of the worst evils of racism. Back in India, he established an Ashram in Sabarmati in 1915 and decided to employ his newly learned ways of civil protest in his homeland that was staggering to attain freedom from the British rule. His first point of dissent with the British colonialists was the exorbitant taxes placed on Indian nationals. He organized the working class as well as those living in poverty to protest against the high taxes and social discrimination. In 1919 A.D., he employed his new techniques of Ahimsa and Satyagraha to protest the discriminatory Rowlat Act and came on the forefront of Indian National Congress, a nationalist political party in India, which demanded non-discriminatory laws, equal rights for men and women, peaceful inter-religious relations, overthrow of the caste system, and above all, Indian independence from British yoke. During his lifetime, Gandhi carried out three major nationalist movements.....Non-Cooperation movement, Civil Disobedience movement and Quit India movement.

Key Words : Mahatma, Pacifist, Satyagraha, Ahimsa, Indian National Congress, Mass movement, Middleclass, Fascist, Nationalist, Imperialis

INTRODUCTION

Ahimsa and *satyagraha* imply great significance in the life and philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi. They were two socio-political weapons he used in achieving his various goals. *Ahimsa* and *satyagraha* were not new ideals but they are the eternal principles of life preached by all religious Prophets and Saints for thousands of years. However, these ideals lacked universality and fullness of meaning. They were regarded as cloistered virtues. It was the great adventure of Gandhi that he reinterpreted and restated these fundamental principles of human behaviour in new ways and showed their universality. He made several experiments with them and with great zeal applied them in an original way practically in every aspect of human life especially in the social and political fields. In Gandhian philosophy all his main concepts like truth, *ahimsa*, *satyagraha*, *sarvodaya*, etc., are not individual and independent concepts but they are interrelated. *Satyagraha* is nothing

but the implementation of truth and *ahimsa* in the different walks of life. *Satyagraha* is a logical development of the doctrine of *ahimsa*. The history of Indian culture is the history of the evolution of the concept of *ahimsa*, and *satyagraha* is a practical application of *ahimsa* to politics. *Ahimsa* is the foundation of *satyagraha*, the “irreducible minimum” to which *satyagraha* adheres to. The idea and practice of *satyagraha* constitute the heart and soul of Gandhi’s belief in non-violence.

In medieval times India was regarded as a sea where in all the rivers of trade and industry followed and India was the largest producer and distributor of world commodities. The balance of trade was in favor of India and India had become a sink of gold and silver (Bullion). It was rechristened as golden sparrow.¹ So, the European mercantile nations were striving to set up their trading relations with India to have control over this rich trade. In these context European nations like Portuguese, Spain, Dutch, English and the French established their trade with India to reap maximum benefits from eastern trade.

But English East India Company combined their trade with diplomacy and war and control of the territories where ever their trading posts were established. It was in 1757; in the Battle of Plessey that East India Company took political control of India in their own hands.² Thereafter, they traded like rulers and ruled like traders. During the first hundred years, the British rule did not go unchallenged. There were a series of disturbances, which were both scattered and localized. Then there was Revolt of 1857, described as India’s First war of Independence³. There is a very popular proverb— Julius Caesar dead was more dangerous than Julius Caesar alive, same was the case with the revolt of 1857. It sowed the seeds of Indian nationalism. Social reformers too have their role in the emergence of Indian nationalism. Vivekananda is regarded as a spiritual precursor of Indian national movement in the same way as Roseau is regarded as a spiritual preceptor of French Revolution and Swami Dayanand Saraswati fostered the national consciousness of his countrymen by declaring that from the days of Manu to that of Pandavas Aryans were a paramount political power round the globe⁴. As a result Indian National Congress was formed in 1885 and during its first 35 years, *i.e.*; From its inception to First world war it passed through three different phases—Moderate phase, Extremist phase and Revolutionary terrorism.

The Government of India had pursued all possible measures to suppress the Extremists and Revolutionary Terrorists during the course of 1st World War and it was further determined to crush such activities. The result was the passing of the Rowlet Act in 1919, which authorized the government to imprison any person without trial and conviction in a court of Law⁵. The Act brought serious resistance from the Indian people. It brought forth Mohandass Karamchand Gandhi to the forefront of Indian politics. M.K. Gandhi was born on 2nd October at Portbandhar. He got his degree of Law in Britain. He went to South Africa concerning the judicial case of a company which employed him for the purpose. He was provoked by the humiliating condition of the Indians there. He resisted the racial policy of the white government in South Africa. There he developed the technique of Satyagraha based on the principle on Truth and Non-Violence⁶. He was successful in getting removed some of the worst evils of racism. He came back to India in 1915 and founded Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad.

To pursue Truth and Non-Violence, Hindu-Muslim unity and emancipation of depressed classes and Women remained the objectives of Gandhi while leading the Independence movement in India while passive resistance, Satyagraha and disobedience to unjust laws remained the basic means to achieve the goal of Indian Independence⁷.

Gandhi was responsible for bringing the Indian masses into arena of Indian politics. Prior to him, Indian National congress had either failed or not attempted to mobilize the masses. It was

therefore, mainly a middle class organization. Of course, it represented the aspirations of masses but it failed to draw its strength from them. Gandhi's unique role in the national movement was to mobilize the masses for the benefit of national cause and to turn congress into an organization of masses⁸. The techniques of Gandhi for the mobilization of the masses were simple. He appealed to Hindu- Muslim unity and emancipation of depressed classes and women. Thus his aims were broad based and were meant for the majority of Indian population. His aims for achieving them as well as national independence were truth and non-violence⁹. Pursue of Truth has been preached by all Prophets and Saints, and therefore, had an attractive appeal among the religious minded masses of India. It is debatable whether non –violence is a trait of the character of Indian people or not, yet it certainly suited the unarmed masses of India against the well armed might of India. Thus both truth and non-violence preached by Gandhi attracted the masses.

Besides, Gandhi indianised his personal life¹⁰. His Garments, his Food, his Living, his recourse to daily prayers made him one among the masses. Winston Churchill, the British prime minister during inter war years dubbed Gandhi a half naked Faqir. It is again debatable whether he practiced it as a tactful politician or because of his upbringing in a religious minded conservative Hindu family. Whatever, may be the answer but it brought him nearer to masses and entitled him "MAHATMA" which certainly had emotional appeal among masses.

Gandhi moulded his personality and life according to what he preached. It is called emphasis on practical morality. It is an easy acceptable solution to the problem of mankind and a simple philosophy. He practiced what he preached. His visit to Noakhali (East- Bengal) during the course of worst communal riots was one of the glaring examples¹¹.

It was British repression and Rowlatt Act, which brought Gandhi to the national political Arena. He had declared to lead a campaign if the Act was passed. As the act became reality, there was Satyagraha which continued for a month¹². The people all over the country observed Hartal, took out peaceful processions and held meetings to protest against the Rowlatt Act. The worst happened in Punjab, particularly at Amritsar where the tragedy of Jallianwallah Bagh took place. A wave of horror and indignation ran over the entire country on what happened in Punjab. In protest to Jallian Wallah Bagh massacre Rabinder Nath Tagore surrendered his Knighthood and Sir Sankaran Nair resigned from the Imperial legislative council¹³.

Jallianwallah Bagh massacre took place at a time when Indian Muslims were extremely agitated over the pan Islamic Khilafat Issue which originated as a result of Turkey's entry into First World War as an ally of Germany against British. As Ottoman Empire was dismembered and caliph was deprived of his authority. The Muslims in India regarded the treatment of Turkey as a great betrayal on the part of Britain and her allies and started a vigorous agitation to bring pressure on Britain to change its policies towards Khilafat-i-Usmania.

Gandhi felt that the movement provided an opportunity to unite Muslims and Hindus that might not come again for a hundred years¹⁴. He wrote that a Congress plea for a Hindu-Muslim unity would be an empty phrase if the Hindus hold aloof from the Muslims when their vital interests are at stake. It was of vital interest to Indian Muslims, because Islamic theory of kingship believes in an institution, which believes in combining temporal and religious authority in one hand.

Now Non-Cooperation was launched on 20th August, 1920 for three reasons, for the redressal of Punjab wrongs, restoration of Khalifa back to his position and for attainment of Swaraj. Non-cooperation moment was not all inspiration¹⁵. It also left behind deep marks of frustration on account of the sudden manner of its withdrawal. Many could not appreciate the moral grounds on which Gandhi decided to withdraw the moment and felt let down by his call for retreat when they

believed that they had cornered the British Raj. There was disappointment at the failure to achieve Swaraj, a Gandhian promise on which majority seemed to have pinned their hopes. The misadventure also prompted some of the Gandhian followers to return hurriedly to the safety of constitutional politics¹⁶. What was worse a crack appeared in the most impressive of Gandhian achievements Hindu-Muslim amity.

For a time being Indian national congress was left without any political programme and most of the congressmen busied themselves with the Gandhian constructive programme: Hand spinning on Charkha, Upliftment of Harijans, Popularization of temperance etc¹⁷. Then after a brief lull, Lahore session of the congress in December, 1929 authorized Gandhi to determine the time, issue and place on which the civil disobedience moment was to be launched.

Gandhi took the decision to start the movement. On 12th March, 1930 Gandhi started the Historic march from Sabarmati Ashram to Dandi beach accompanied by his 78 selected followers. There Gandhi and his followers broke salt law by manufacturing salt from the sea¹⁸. The choice of salt as a central issue appeared puzzling initially. But events quickly revealed the enormous potentialities of this choice. Salt was a concrete and a universal grievance of the rural poor, which was almost unique in having no socially divisive implications. With regard to food habits Salt was a daily necessity of the people. It also carried with it implications of trust, hospitality and mutual obligation. In this sense it had a far reaching emotional content. Besides, government controlled the sale of this indispensable commodity, which was felt most commonly by poor. The manufacture of Salt also became a part of Gandhian method of constructive work like Khadi production¹⁹. Above all Dandi march and the subsequent countrywide violation of the salt law provided a tremendously impressive demonstration of the power of non-violent mass struggle. Lord Irwin latter admitted to Gandhi, you planned a fine strategy round the issue of salt.

Amidst the heroic deeds of the of the people and official repression, when the movement was at its climax, the viceroy took the initiative of releasing the congress leaders and invited Gandhi for talks, which led to Gandhi-Irwin pact (March 5, 1931) and suspension of Civil Disobedience Movement and participation of congress in 2nd Roundtable Conference²⁰. But 2nd RTC failed to resolve the questions of electoral representation to different socio-religious communities and British PM Ramsay Macdonald announced his infamous communal award. According to this award the depressed classes, officially described as Scheduled castes would elect their candidates by voting in separate communal electorates²¹.

Mahatma Gandhi had strenuously opposed the idea of a separate electorate for depressed classes and had declared that he would resist it with his life. So, he began a fast unto death on the separate electorate issue on September 1932 and was able to secure an agreement between the caste Hindus and untouchables through the Poona Pact signed on 25th September, 1932²². The pact retained the joint Hindu electorate with reserved seats for untouchables, who were given greater representation than awarded by Ramsay Macdonald. Harijan upliftment now became Gandhi's principal concern. He started an All India Anti-untouchably league or Harijan Sevak Sangh in September 1932 for improving the lot of untouchables and for providing medical education and technical facilities to the Harijans. In 1933, he founded a weekly Harijans. Gandhiji also went on a 12500 miles "Harijan Tour" between 1933 and 1934. He said, "The welfare work of the untouchables is penance which the Hindu's have to do for the sin of untouchability"²³.

Meanwhile 2nd world war had taken an alarming turn. Germany had invaded the Soviet Union. After Japan attacked the US naval base at Pearl Harbor, the US had joined allied powers in the war. It was under US pressure after the fall of Burma that British send Sir Stafford Cripps to India

to negotiate any political settlement with Indian national congress²⁴. But the failure of Cripps mission and the growing threat of Japanese aggression brought about a radical change in Mahatma Gandhi's towards the British government.

Mahatma Gandhi came to believe that "presence of British in India is an invitation to Japan to invade India and their removes the bait" He therefore asked the British to Quit and leave India in God's hand or in modern parlance to anarchy²⁵. Before his arrest on 9th August, 1942, Gandhi had given the following message to the country:

Everyone is free to go to the fullest length under Ahimsa to complete deadlock by strikes and other non-violent means. Satyagrahi's must go out to die not to live. They must seek and face death. It was only when individuals go out to die that the nation will survive. Do or Die (Kaarenga ya Marenga).

The government had gathered all its forces to suppress the popular upsurge. Arrests, detentions, police firings, burning of congress offices were the methods adopted by the government. The Quit India movement collapsed, but not without demonstrating the determination of the masses to do away with the British rule.

Religion has often been used as a convenient means to arouse an indigenous and popular brand of nationalism and it has usually led to unfortunate consequences. On the other hand communal propaganda was full of fervor, fear, contempt and bitter hatred. Their predicament was aggravated when Gandhiji disallowed communalists from working within the congress organization.

Madhan Mohan Malaviya's place was now taken by the leaders who were willing to take their parties in a fascist direction.....V.D.Savarkar of the Hindu Mahasabha and M. S. Golwalker of the RSS. Golwalker's book "WE" became the manifesto of Hindu communalism. Muslims were vilified and congressmen condemned for supporting, "Hindus most inveterate enemies". The Muslims were told that they could stay on in India with respect if they ceased to be foreigners *i.e.*; become Hindus, otherwise they would not be given any privilege or special treatment as minorities.²⁶

As communal riots spread and congress was unable to stall them, or stem the drift towards Pakistan, Hindu communalists expanded their influence by posing as the saviours of the Hindus. They accused the congress leaders and Gandhi of emasculating the Hindus by their talk of non-violence and communal unity. When their hope of overthrowing the government was not realized (by creating a state of disorder by fermenting communal riots), they turned to the slander of congress leaders. Even Gandhiji was not spared of the charge of treason to Hindu Nation, because of his alleged softness to minorities, especially to Muslims and cries of DEATH TO GANDHI were raised in Hindu Mahasabha and Rashtriya Swamsewak Sangh meetings and Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated by an Rashtriya Swamsewak Sangh activist Nathuram Ghodse on 30th January, 1948²⁷.

The Father of Nation who wished to live for 125 years was silenced completely.

Conclusion :

Gandhi extended the practice of *ahimsa* and *satyagraha* in all fields related to the day-to-day life of the individual men and women. In the active use both *ahimsa* and *satyagraha* stand as social and political weapons in fighting against evil and injustice; in inspiring masses with self-confidence in the matter of fighting with their own strength against all tyranny; and in proving many successful experiments to show that *satyagraha* is a workable method and can be a substitute for violence and even violent war. Gandhi wielded the moral weapons of *ahimsa* and *satyagraha* to end domestic, social, political, economical, religious and cultural problems and conflicts. Removal

of untouchability, communal harmony, solution of unemployment and illiteracy, non-possession, India's independence, economic and religious equality were the social, economic and political targets to be achieved through this great weapon. Even though we feel that nothing new or unique is there in Gandhian *ahimsa* and *satyagraha*, on a deeper analysis we find that there is much newness and meaning in them. His philosophy of *ahimsa* and *satyagraha* transcends all regional, religious and cultural barriers. It is global and it comprehends not only humanity but the whole living world.

REFERENCES

1. Agnihotri V. K, Indian History, Allied Publishers Pvt. Ltd.,Ballard Estate, Mumbai, pp.,C-73,74
2. Grover B.L and Grover S., S. Chand and Company Ltd. Ramnagar New Delhi-2002, pp.,72,73
3. Jha K. N, Modern India, Cosmos Book Hives Pvt. Ltd. Udyog Vihar, Gurgaon, p.,121
4. Agnihotri V. K, Indian History, Allied Publishers Pvt. Ltd.,Ballard Estate, Mumbai, p.,C-151
5. Sarkar Summit, Modern India 1885- 1947, Macmillan India Limited, Ansari Road Daryaganj, New Delhi, pp.,187,188
6. Jha K. N, Modern India, Cosmos Book Hives Pvt. Ltd. Udyog Vihar, Gurgaon, p.,329
7. Ibid., p.,329
8. Agarwal R.C., Constitutional development, Acts and Indian Constitution, S. Chand and Company Ltd,Ramnagar, New Delhi, pp., 98,99
9. Sarkar Summit, Modern India 1885- 1947, Macmillan India Limited, Ansari Road Daryaganj, New Delhi, pp.,188,189
10. Jha K. N, Modern India, Cosmos Book Hives Pvt. Ltd. Udyog Vihar, Gurgaon, p., 330
11. Bari S. A, Gandhian Doctrine of Civil Resistance, New Delhi, Kalamkar Prakashan Pvt. Ltd, 1971
12. Thakur, Gauri Kant, Mahatma Gandhi's Philosophy of Satyagraha, Varanasi, Kishore Vidya Niketan, 1988
13. Jha K. N, Modern India, Cosmos Book Hives Pvt. Ltd. Udyog Vihar, Gurgaon, p., 332
14. Dhawan, G. N., The Political Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi., Bombay, The Popular Book Depot., 1946
15. Agarwal R.C., Constitutional development, Acts and Indian Constitution, S. Chand and Company Ltd,Ramnagar, New Delhi, pp.,15,16
16. Johnson, Richard L (2005), Gandhiji's Experiments with Truth; Essential writings by and about Mahatma Gandhi. P., 36
17. IGNOU Booklet EHI-01, Modern India (1857-1964); Nationalism: Interwar Years-1, pp., 32,33
18. Gandhi, Gopalkrishna, "The Great Dandhi March- Eighty years after", The Hindu, 5th April,2010
19. "Nehru, who had been sceptical about Salt as the primary focus of the campaign, realized how wrong he was...." Johnson,p.,32
20. Habib Irfan (1997), Civil Disobedience 1930-1931, p., 57
21. Sarkar Summit, Modern India 1885- 1947, Macmillan India Limited, Ansari Road Daryaganj, New Delhi,pp.,308.309
22. Agnihotri V. K, Indian History, Allied Publishers Pvt. Ltd.,Ballard Estate, Mumbai, p.,C-244
23. Ibid. pp.,c-244,245

ROLE OF MAHATMA GANDHI & HIS NON-VIOLENT TECHNIQUES IN INDIAN NATIONAL MOVEMENT

24. Mohammad Yonus and Parmar Aradhana, South Asia a Historical narrative, Oxford university press, Oxford. P.,234
25. Jha K. N, Modern India, Cosmos Book Hives Pvt. Ltd. Udyog Vihar, Gurgaon, p.,440
26. IGNOU Booklet-EHI-01, Modern India (1857-1964); Towards a sovereign State,pp., 43,44
27. Chandra, Bipin; Communalism in Modern India, Vikas Publishers, New Delhi, 1984
