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Dr. Suryakant Nath
Associate Professor in History,
National Defence Academy,
Pune, Maharashtra, India

Gandhian dialogic: Centrality of the Gandhian discourse

Dr. Suryakant Nath

Abstract

Commitment to debate and discussion as effective means of conflict-resolution and social progress has always been an integral part of Indian heritage. There is a long tradition of tolerating doubts and disagreements within Hinduism, going back to the ancient Vedas, which had room for profound criticism. Considerable credit also needs to be given to the early Indian Buddhists who convened councils to promote the tradition of open discussion on contentious issues. This tradition of heterodoxy always received understanding and support from many of the outstanding Indian leaders, the foremost among them being Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.

Gandhi's statements were highly contextualized and framed in relation to an individual or a group and always likely to fire back a reply. He never sought to provide a grand political theory and his whole ideological praxis was based on truth. His quest in life evolved constantly in relation to his and other people's experiences. Hence there was bound to be inconsistencies. For him, his method was dialogic in which knowledge arose from discussion rather than from a unified philosophical system, where there was little room for internal contradiction.

This paper would like to examine Gandhi as a figure whose life and work represented a dialogue between the many complex strands of the thought of his day, both Indian and extra-Indian, and his legacy in India and the world since his death.

Keywords: Satyagraha, ahimsa, moral activism, reconciliation, gandhism, dialogic

Introduction

All societies have divisive politics where 'self' and the 'other' are positioned as antagonistic towards each other and these differences can be religious, ethnic, racial or caste-based. All members of this so-called 'other' community which is seen to stand apart from the community to which the 'self' is perceived to belong are imagined to be culpable and in many cases are objects of legitimate attack, regardless of a particular individual's attitude or loyalty. The 'other' is perceived to belong to a group or community with whom all debates and discussions are avoided to resolve a conflict ^[1]. In a broad sense, Gandhi advocated a radical style of politics that fought the many insidious divisions of his own and other societies. He resisted such divides and was of the opinion that there were always grounds for a fruitful dialogue which could lead to resolution of the conflict and breaking down of barriers.

He opposed the 'nationalists' who propagated hatred of the coloniser and who advocated more 'masculine' individual acts of terror and assassinations. On the other hand, he endorsed seemingly harmless and feminine principles of non-violence and civility. While he adopted a method of resistance which could build bridges with the opponents, he refused to accept injustice. Whether it was the practice of untouchability by the higher castes, exploitation of the tribals or the marginalized he was extremely critical of conflicts based on the hatred of 'one' group by the 'other'. In resisting such divisions, Gandhi put his life at stake and eventually he lost his life to one who did not believe in the process of debate and dialogue. However, in the process, he forged a method which some describe as 'moral activism' and which would remain a guiding light for many men and women in later years ^[2].

In India Gandhi opened a series of dialogues with his many opponents and rivals. In trying to establish a common ground as a basis for agreement, he was often found willing to alter his views if he found them to be inadequate to the situation. He was thus involved in a series of long-running debates with Indian thinkers, such as the leader of the Indian untouchables, Dr B R Ambedkar, Congress Socialist Jay Prakash Narayan, the Bengali sage Rabindranath Tagore, the left-wing liberal J L Nehru and Marxist leaders like M N Roy.

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Suryakant Nath
Associate Professor in History,
National Defence Academy,
Pune, Maharashtra, India

These debates were sustained over decades and in many cases both sides moved considerably in their positions as a result of the dialogue. For instance, M N Roy who was an outspoken critic of Gandhi from a Marxian perspective gradually came to appreciate the Gandhian methods, the emphasis on the ethics of the struggle in particular ^[3].

Gandhi kept his mind open towards his socialist critics and towards the final years of his life moved towards a more socialistic understanding of the need for an element of class conflict in the struggle for greater social equity.

Gandhi's writings also demonstrated a similar dialogic nature. Rather than providing an authorial and clear-cut linear statement of sort, he presented both sides of the case in a manner which might lead both himself and the adversary towards a resolution, which he considered as truth. This is seen very clearly in the work that is often taken as seminal, *Hind Swaraj*, which is set out in the form of a debate between the editor (Gandhi) and the reader (adversary). The book seems to reflect the actual debates which Gandhi engaged in with fellow-nationalists at that time. ^[4] *The Death and Defence of Socrates*, is a book that finds a mention as a recommended book at the end of the work, suggests that Gandhi was probably in part influenced by the work. However, as widely understood and believed, he appears to have been guided by the debates between Krishna and Arjuna in the *Bhagavat Gita*, which veers around morality and higher truth.

The same style of writing also can be seen in his autobiography, where the debate is more of an inner one, where he documents his personal struggles to arrive at guiding principles in life through his continued experiments in living. Gandhi followed a method which was essentially dialogic—a method in which knowledge is seen to arise from discussion rather than from a unified philosophical system which is provided in the form of a treatise, from which internal contradictions have been removed. As V N Volosinov argued: “Any true understanding is dialogic in nature.” ^[5] Through such dialogues, systems of knowledge are both challenged and enriched. Gandhian knowledge was set forth as a debate between people with opposing points of view, but there was always a search for a common ground allowing a compromise and going forward.

On the issue of Rational debate and coercion Gandhi understood that different people have their own definition of what is ‘rational’ and to insist on the universality of one form of rationality over ‘another’ and to thereby justify the imposition of one’s will on others, represented nothing but coercion by another name. In the process, alternative rationalities are silenced. He thus insisted that we should always try to be open to the voice of the adversary. A classic example of this quality of Gandhian belief comes through a statement which he made at a conference in East Bengal in 1940, when he was faced with hostile slogan shouting by supporters of Subhas Chandra Bose.

“I just heard some people shouting ‘Down with Gandhism.’ Those who want to put down Gandhism have every right to say so. Those who have come to hear me will please keep quiet and not get excited by hostile slogans nor shout counter slogans of ‘Gandhiji ki Jai.’ If you are non-violent you should calmly tolerate such slogans. If there is any trace of untruth in Gandhism it must perish. If it contains truth, lakhs and crores of voices clamouring for its destruction will not destroy it. Allow freedom to those who want to say anything against Gandhism. That will cause no harm. Do

not bear any grudge or malice against them. You can not realise ahimsa unless you can calmly tolerate your opponent” ^[6].

He constantly distanced himself from Gandhism. He stated: “I love to hear the words: ‘Down with Gandhism. An ‘ism’ deserves to be destroyed. It is a useless thing. The real thing is non-violence. It is immortal. It is enough for me if it remains alive...I do not belong to any sect. I have never dreamt of establishing any sect. If any sect is established in my name after my death, my soul would cry out in anguish” ^[7].

Gandhi never sought to provide a grand political theory, i.e., an ideological system. He worked out his theory as his version of ‘truth’. He believed that there was a universal truth which he equated with God. But this absolute truth he thought no human being could ever comprehend in an adequate way. These ‘human truths’ for him were contingent and contextual, being reached through experience, praxis and dialogue. His truth was thus evolving and changing constantly. He was opposed to certainties, preferring debates and disagreements to unthinking assent. One of his followers Rama Chandra Rao once said, ‘Gandhi was bored by those who always agreed with him. He always enjoyed discussion and argument when there was a basis of agreement which made the exchange of differing ideas meaningful’ ^[8].

Ashish Nandy has pointed, in this respect, how Gandhi did not attempt to provide a strongly systematised theory or ideology or utopia. Rather he provided a vision of a society that stood in constant opposition to oppressions, hierarchies and technologies that prevailed in the world of his day. His approach represented a state of mind rather than a clear-cut theoretical system ^[9].

Conflict has been a constant phenomenon in the history of the human race. Heraclitus declared, “War is the father of all things”, by which he implied that evolution in the universe was due solely to its conflicting elements procreating new things in turn ^[10]. American writers, Louis Fischer and Joan Bondurant, have said that Gandhi was already influenced by ideas which were later confirmed by the teachings of the modern writers like Tolstoy, Ruskin and Thoreau.

To Gandhi, co-operation and harmony rather than conflict and struggle constituted the fundamental law of the universe. Conflicts occurred more as temporary irregularities in the even and ordered flow of life, rather than as universal and ceaseless phenomena. Gandhian dialectic considers man as the centre of reason and provides for a technique of conflict resolution whereby one or both sides of a conflict can resolve the antimony into a re-interpretation. This is what is known as ‘creative resolution of conflict’ ^[11]. Gandhi believed that a conflict could be creatively resolved only when peace was taken to be a positive concept rather than a negative one.

However, Gandhi went beyond the standard western interpretation of the concept of conflict resolution by taking it a notch higher. Gandhi did not regard conflict as an antagonism between two individuals or groups, but takes it as a product of a faulty system. The means therefore, had to be developed to change the system itself thereby eliminating any possibility of conflict in future. When violent relationship was transformed into non-violent one and the energies of the adversaries were harnessed to achieve a higher goal then a creative resolution of conflict was

reached at ^[12].

Corroborating Gandhian method of using non-violence against violence, Blanche Watson wrote, "Repression has never worked. I challenge anybody to point me to a single episode in either ancient or modern history, which proves that repression has even once achieved the end to which it has been directed. This policy has certainly been no success in English hands. It failed in America in 1775; it failed in English domestic affairs in the 20's and the 40's of the last century; it failed in South Africa after the Boer War; it failed in Ireland yesterday; and it will fail in India tomorrow. If repression succeeds in anything, it is in advertising the cause of the enemy" ^[13].

Repression provokes conflict and retaliation and does not encourage an easy solution. However, the Gandhian attempt to bring about a synthesis of two opposing claims does not necessarily imply partial surrendering of original claims but reaching at reconciliation where none of the contenders felt compromised.

But Gandhi was after all, a human being. He did not always practice his principles adequately. He closed himself to dialogue on many important aspects. In his own family, he often acted as a high-handed patriarch, compelling his wife and sons to follow what he considered to be 'true'. He ran his ashrams in an authoritarian manner and disciplined members who did not accept the norms. He was neither very generous towards Ambedkar nor towards Bose who differed from him on the issue of untouchability and functioning of the Indian National Congress respectively. Similarly, he did not fully trust many of his followers who had a propensity towards violence. Thus an analysis of Gandhi's dialogue with truth is also difficult and problematic.

In politics, Gandhi consistently took a stance that forced matters to a head: provoking a crude or violent counter-attack or an embarrassed and shame-faced retreat. Eventually, the colonial system was compelled to make a strategic withdrawal providing him with an uneasy equality with the Englishman.

But Gandhi also understood that truth was reached through a complex dialogue, in which reasoned argument had often to be reinforced with emotional and political pressure. He knew that, in many cases, reason by itself would not win an argument, for people tend to be swayed as much by emotion as by rational argument. This is where self-inflicted suffering, such as fasting could be important. A Large majority of Gandhi's fasts were directed against those over whom he believed he had a strong emotional bond. He never used fast as a tool against the British to get any political concession. Rather he claimed that he fasted so as to make those who loved him reconsider their actions ^[14].

In 1937 Gandhi stated: 'I myself have always believed in the honesty of my enemies, and if one believes in it hard enough. My enemies took advantage of my trust in them and deceived me. They deceived me eleven times running; and with stupid obstinacy, I went on believing their honesty. With the result that, the twelfth time, they couldn't keep keeping their word. Discovering their own honesty was a happy surprise for them and for me too. That is why my enemies and I have always parted very pleased with each other' ^[15].

Some Indian nationalists were not happy with Gandhi's emphasis on winning over one's enemies. It was objected to more so because some thought it appeared to be like collaborating with the colonial masters. But for Gandhi

conscience of the individual came before the will of the majority. Thoreau believed that principled resistance of even one person could make a great difference. His Writings on Civil Disobedience and Non-violence which were keenly read by Gandhi laid emphasis on the imperative for the individual to act according to conscience, regardless of the consequences ^[16].

Even in matters of *Satyagraha*, Gandhi emphasized on individual choice. But India being a country where people were more powerfully swayed by the fear of social excommunication and the general censure of their fellows than by the written law, individual freedom counted very little in the society. A large majority of the people were considered to have no moral presence separate from their kinship or community group. In words of Partha Chatterjee, this 'communal mode of power' created conditions of oppression, particularly of women ^[17].

About the issue of non-violence, Gandhi held the view that since none could know the absolute truth, nobody had a right to commit violence on others lest they be in the wrong. An individual's truth should be asserted 'not by infliction of suffering on the opponent but on one's self.' ^[18] Of course, in the colonial context in India, non-violence made a strong tactical sense. It was critical in achieving a moral advantage for nationalists ^[19].

Today there is a renewed interest in Mahatma Gandhi. Political leaders, Social activists, environmentalists, cinema makers, educators, development economists, social scientists, human-rights groups and a host of others are either advocating or innovatively using Gandhian ideals to address various issues emerging in the present globalised-world. New light and new focus is being directed towards placing him and his ideas in the shifting context of time and fast-changing value systems. Increasing globalisation, neo-capitalism (crony), issues of development, ethics, equality and social justice have again made Gandhian ethics relevant. Gandhism is no longer being considered as an exclusive theory impossible to emulate. Many essential Gandhian principles are being put into practice (without the fads) without use of Gandhi's name. Relevance of Gandhian techniques in reconciliation and conflict-resolution can never be wished away. When truth becomes definitive and singular, it invariably becomes territory- a battlefield. It is not about either/or in new world order. If we want to believe in a diverse world, we have to make room for diversity, and diverse views ^[20].

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