

RTA THROUGH AHIMSĀ A GANDHIAN INTERPRETATION

Augustine Thottakara*

One of the most valuable and most original contributions of Indian thought and spirituality to the corpus of universal wisdom and to the reservoir of spiritual sciences of humanity is the concept of *ahimsā*. Hinduism proposed and practiced it as the supreme duty of humans (*ahimsā paramo dharmah*); Buddhism and Jainism refined and made it the most sublime spiritual principle; great souls like Ashoka and Mahatma Gandhi rigorously practised and powerfully preached it as a dynamic force that would guarantee peace and harmony in societal life and as an antidote to the culture of violence, discord and disharmony. *Ahimsā* was considered by the majority of Indians as a religious doctrine, a spiritual *sādhana*, a moral value and a social law of India. All the above mentioned great religions of India accept it as an integral part of their social, religious and spiritual life and belief system. Peace loving individuals and organizations all over the world, imbibing inspiration from the *ahimsā*-ideology, have launched numerous peace movements, movements against cruelty to animals, movements for the protection of environment, movements for social, political and economic liberation, etc. But the sad fact is that *ahimsā*, it seems, is no more at home in India today. It has gone hiding. One should not wonder at this sad state of affairs. Along with this ennobling, elevating and life-enhancing principle of *ahimsā*, there had always been a streak of violence and aggressiveness, even a hankering and appetite for brutality and bloodshed, in the religious-cultural history of India. This dark and rotten dimension of the Indian psyche has surfaced with savage vengeance and unprecedented barbarity in these days. The present Indian political, religious and communal scenario is bipolar: on the one side there are the earnest efforts and meaningful programmes to promote, propagate and establish peace, harmony, mutual trust and dialogue between religions, communities, castes and cultures. On the other hand there are also pernicious and venomous movements engineered by biased religious fanatics, corrupt political bigots, unscrupulous caste protagonists, and vicious feudal lords, which threaten the secular, democratic and inter-religious fabric of the Indian society.

*Dr. Augustine Thottakara, cmi, is the chief editor of *Journal of Dharma*. He serves also as the Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy of Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore, and as the director of Dharmaram Publications.

This essay has two parts. In the first part I try to delineate the development of the principle of *ahimsā*, the greatest protagonists of which were non-Brahmins. In the second part I try to interpret Gandhian *ahimsā*, and propose it as a means to re-establish peace, harmony and universal brotherhood in the societal life of the Indian peoples.

I

1. Introduction

Rta is one of most important and central concepts of *Rgveda*. *Rta* in the Vedic literature means an established order, law, harmony, rhythm, sacred tradition, truth, etc. Primarily the concept 'ṛta' is associated with the sacrificial ritual. It is the correct order and harmony within the sacrificial act. It is the uninterrupted rhythm and flawless flow of the rituals performed in the correct manner and in the auspicious time. A sacrifice performed in the prescribed rhythm is always effective. Secondly, *rta* means the fundamental and intrinsic law of nature. It is the cosmic harmony. According to this law of harmony, the powers of nature – the elements, the heavenly bodies like sun, moon and stars – function in an orderly manner; the seasons of the year appear in the appointed time and manner. This *rta* dictates the sun, moon, stars and planets to follow their courses in the correct prescribed order. "From the ascetic fervour (*tapas*) cosmic order and truth came into existence. From this cosmic order the dark night was born, and from that the ocean that billows with its waves" (*Rgveda* X.190.1). Thirdly, the word 'ṛta' also means the law and order in the recurring agricultural activities in tune with the recurring seasons of the year. There is an inner law and dynamism in the earth, in the seeds and plants, process of cultivation, in the growth and fruit bearing of the plants. If there is a harmonious blending of all these elements the harvest is abundant which in turn gladdens the lives of the people. This is the ontological extension of *rta* in the daily life and activities of humans. *Rta* here alludes to two things: it is the inner dynamism and equilibrium which are intrinsic to the powers of nature; and it is also the harmonious way of manifestation of these cosmic powers, and effects of these powers in nature. The last verse of the famous *Bhūmi-sūkta* of *Atharvaveda* says: "O mother earth, graciously set me down that I may be established in prosperity. O thou wise one, in harmony with the powers of nature, settle me in happiness and in good fortune" (*Atharvaveda* XII.1.63). Fourthly,

ṛta may also denote the harmonious inter-relationship between gods, men and nature. All these three are equally co-responsible to safeguard and keep up the *ṛtas* in other realms. Man protects and nourishes the animal- and plant worlds, these in turn produces sustenance for people; people offer these things in sacrifice to gods, and gods in turn protect the other two realities. None of these three entities is superior or inferior to another in the triad. Only the unified and goal oriented involvement and activities of these three guarantee the universal harmony. Fifthly, in the later classical period of Indian philosophy this term is used to denote Brahman as truth. In the Upanisads *ṛta* is used as the manifestation of Brahman as truth which is revealed in the scriptures and is inferred by reasoning. *Ṛtam vadiṣyāmi* (*Taittirīya Up.* I.1): "I shall declare him to you as the truth manifested in the scriptures and inferred by reason"¹. Usually in classical Sanskrit *ṛta* is used as a synonym of truth (*satya*).

In the *Ṛgveda* god Varuna is considered as the god and patron of *ṛta*. He oversees and guides the harmonies in different levels and spheres. Varuna is also god of the moral order in the world. He is the supreme judge of morality, and he punishes severely those who break the prescribed spiritual-moral order, those who do evil; and he rewards the righteous. Nothing escapes his alert eyes. It is believed that he watches over the deeds of the people through the sun and moon. This fact hints at another dimension of the concept of *ṛta*: it also means the moral order and harmony among the people. Moral order in the personal lives of individuals, and harmony between individuals, families and societies.

2. *Ṛta* and Dharma

In the later periods of classical Indian philosophy and thought this word '*ṛta*' is substituted by dharma. In this transition, the concept of dharma emphasized more on the moral order and law in the society, in the family life and in the life of each individual. Basically this also is harmony: harmony in society, in family and in personal life. Derived from the Sanskrit verbal root '*dhr*', which means to support, to sustain, to maintain, to hold, etc., the word 'dharma' has a variety of meanings like religion, religious observance, righteousness, duty, law, virtue, justice, morally correct usage, conformity to traditions and customs, ethically

¹This is how Sankara explains this passage.

legitimate way of living, and essential characteristic of an object. Virtually the underlying principle and criterion of all these meanings is harmony, the *ṛta*. In personal life this harmony is to be sustained in thoughts, words and deeds, in the inner life and external activities. A righteous person is defined as the one 'who harmoniously blends his thoughts, words and deeds'². Religion provides a golden thread that binds together the believing and worshipping individuals into one community. A society is healthy when the spiritual-moral order and physical-material set-up of societal life are rightly coordinated and maintained, that is, when the dignity and rights of the persons are protected and when the persons carry out their duties and obligations honestly.

In the post-Vedic Indian society the ideal of dharma is very much associated with the four castes of societal life (*varṇa*), the four stages of individual life (*āśrama*) and the four values or goals human life in general (*puruṣārtha*). Castes divides the society into four sections in a hierarchical structure in a descending order, stages of life divides the lives of individuals into four equally important states, and values of human life propose four aims of embodied human existence in an ascending scale. Each caste and each stage of life has its own particular dharma known as the *sva-dharma*. Then there were dharmas, that is, duties and obligations, virtues and values, common to all, to be practised by all, known as the *samānya-dharma*. The orderly and conscientious performance of *varṇāśrama-dharma* was essential for securing the goals of life, especially the ultimate supreme goal of human existence, namely, liberation (*mokṣa*).

3. *Ṛta* and *Ahimsā*

Moral-spiritual harmony in the lives of the individuals, in the life in the family and in the society is, as has already been stated above, an important meaning and scope of *ṛta* or dharma. This *ṛta*/dharma is supported, sustained and safeguarded, according to the ancient wisdom of Indians, through the practice of five basic virtues or values, which in later periods were known as the five great vows. They are non-violence (*ahimsā*), truthfulness (*satya*), non-stealing (*asteya*), celibacy (*brahmacarya*) and non-attachment or renunciation (*aparigraha*). The older Upanisads mention these values together with austerity (*tapas*), study

²*Citte vāci kriyāyām sādḥūnām ekarūpatā /*

of the Vedas (*svādhyāya*) and faith (*śraddhā*) as means to purify the mind so that the seeker may eventually be enlightened through knowledge of Brahman. The Jain monks observe these as the great vows (*mahāvratas*) and Jain laity observe them as simple vows (*anuvratas*). The Buddhist monks too observe these, with slight variations, as their basic vows. These vows or virtues definitely have a social dimension and connotation; they are not mere private virtues for personal perfection and sanctification. They are proposed and practised for peace, harmony and concord in the society and for the overall spiritual and moral excellence of societal life, and for just and righteous interpersonal relationship. The *Yoga-sūtra* of Patanjali is more explicit in this regard. His eight-membered Yoga proposes a spiritual path for the seeker in an ascending scale. The first thing the spiritual aspirant has to do is to regulate his/her social behaviour and harmonise his/her interpersonal relationship (*yama*). Then the *sadhaka* should discipline his personal life (*niyama*). Then comes the control of body (*āsana*), followed by control of breath (*prāṇāyāma*) and control of senses (*pratyahara*). This will eventually lead the yogi to the total control of mind (*dhāraṇa*), which in turn would empower him/her for uninterrupted meditation (*dhyāna*). Meditation is the immediate means for *samādhi*, the goal of Yoga. Therefore, the basis of Yoga spirituality and the foundation of Yoga edifice consist in an ordered and harmonious social life. Patanjali called it *yama*, which could be translated as abstention. There are five abstentions (*yamas*) for such a righteous and peaceful life in the humans society. They, as mentioned earlier, are: [a] Abstention from violence and injury (*ahimsā*). Positively it means showing love and mercy to all living-beings. [b] Abstention from falsehood (*satya*). Positively it means to be truthful in thought, words and deeds. [c] Abstention from stealing (*asteya*). It also means not to hoard material things which are not essential for life. [d] Abstention from lust and bodily passions (*brahmacarya*). It demands a life of celibacy and sexual restraint. [e] Abstention from avarice (*aparigraha*). This is detachment from and renunciation of possessions and bodily comforts. This demands to accept and use material objects which are absolutely necessary for life. The observance of the *Yamas* is the remote preparation for Yoga. These were also the first five of the eleven vows of Gandhian Asram.

In a way these five could be further reduced to the two most basic principles, namely, *ahimsā* and *satya*. The famous verse of *Mahābhārata* is worth quoting here: "Non-violence and truthfulness are for the ultimate

good of all living beings. Non-violence (*ahimsā*) is the supreme duty/virtue, and it is established in truth (*satya*)³. It is well known that these two, namely, non-violence and truth, are the two pillars of Gandhian philosophy and spirituality. For him Truth is God, and the only way to reach God is non-violence.

4. *Ṛta*, *Ahimsā* and Castes

It was mentioned in the beginning that *ṛta*, harmony, is a key concept of the Vedic culture, religiosity and spirituality. Harmony and concord should reign in all realms of cosmos and of human existence. But there was a brutal rupture to this healthy worldview and vision of life during the second stage of the history of Indian philosophy and spirituality, namely, during the Brahmanic period [1000-800 BCE]. Brahmin priests, members of the first caste, were the authors of these texts. Man is depicted as the sacrificer (*yajamāna*). Brahmanic literature produced by these priests developed only the cultic and liturgical dimension of religion and spirituality. Ritualism takes the place of religion. Sacrifices and external rituals become all-powerful, and minute rules and regulations were prescribed for the performance of these sacrificial acts. These rituals, often stereotyped and meaningless, become very elaborate and expensive and involved different types of priests. Consequently only the rich could afford to perform them. This period could be considered as a time of degeneration. The elaborate sacrificial rituals always involved killing of animals. Eating meat, including beef, was also common practice among the Brahmins and other castes. There were strong and strident reactionary movements against Brahmanic priestly craft and their religion of sacrifices.

5. Non-Brahmins as Protagonists of *Ahimsā*

There were mainly three movements that revolted against the Brahmanic priesthood and ritualism. They are the Upanisadic movement, Buddhism and Jainism. We may single out mainly three reasons for these revolts: (i) People at the lower strata of society were shut out from the practice of religion, and consequently from the eternal happiness after their bodily existence in this world, because these sacrifices, which were

³*ahimsā satya-vacanam sarva-bhūta-hitam param /*

ahimsā paramo dharmah sa ca satye pratiṣṭitah // (Mahābhārata III.200.4.)

supposed to be the means for eternal happiness, were too expensive for them. (ii) People detested the hegemony and dominance of the Brahmin priests. (iii) Killing and bloodshed in the context of religious worship were also abhorrent for the general populace.

The Upanisads very strongly criticized the killing of animals in sacrificial context and consuming meat. They very zealously and earnestly exhorted people to interiorize and spiritualize the sacrificial ritualism. Enlightened seekers argued that killing and hurting life could never be the right way to secure one's own happiness. Violent destruction of life can never sublimate one's life, and can never be pleasing to gods. Real sacrifice should take place within oneself. Thus control of passions, practice of asceticism, contemplation, strict practice of *ahimsā*, etc. are the real rituals that purify the mind and enlighten the consciousness. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* in fact, begins with the description of the sacrificial horse. This horse, however, is not a live animal, but the entire universe. "Om. The head of the sacrificial horse is the dawn, the eye of the sacrificial horse is the sun, the vital force the air, the open mouth the fire named Vaisvanara, the trunk the year, the back is heaven, the belly is the sky, the hoof the earth, the flanks the four directions..." (*Bṛ.Up.* I.1.1). The Upanishad suggests that this cosmos is the manifestation of the supreme Brahman, and the meditation on this cosmos is the real sacrifice.

The Upanishads powerfully propagated the concept of the all pervading *ātman*-doctrine. *Ātman* is one and it resides in all lives, be it humans, animals, birds, insects or plants. And therefore, hurting another life, in effect, is hurting oneself. This too was a great incentive to the spread of real *ahimsā* practice. The dynamics of the doctrine of the transmigration of the self too inspired the strict practice of the ideal of *ahimsā*.

Now the question is: who were the authors of the older Upanisads? There are scholars who are of opinion that the Upanisadic wisdom was first taught by the Kṣatriyas, the second caste of Hinduism, and not by the Brahmins, who were considered to be the teachers and priests of the society. There are explicit internal evidences and strong sociological reasons to believe and accept this line of thought. King Janaka (*Br.Up.* IV.1-4) was a great Upanisadic philosopher, second only to Yajñavalkya. King Pravahana (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 1.8.9) was a learned

Kṣatriya, who presided over Vedānta discussions of Brahmins. King Asvapati (*Ch.Up.* V.11-24) teaches *brahmavidyā* (knowledge about Brahman) to six seekers who were themselves learned men. Ajatasatru, King of Benares, (*Br.Up.* II.1-3) was a great knower of Brahman and teaches it to the Brahmin Balaki. This is one of the reasons why the Upanisadic teachings were considered to be secret. Later the Brahmins also adopted this new trend of thought. There were also women, who were great scholars and teachers of the Upanisadic wisdom. Gargi, daughter of sage Vachaknu (*Br.Up.* III.1-9), whose knowledge and debating skills were a threat even to Yajnavalkya, and Maitreyi, wife of Yajnavalkya (*Br.Up.* II.4 & IV.5) are two examples.

Therefore, it would seem that the first advocates and practitioners of the principle and virtue of *ahimsā* were non-Brahmins, and most probably they were Kṣatriyas.

The second movement that disagreed and revolted against Brahmanic religion of *himsā* was Buddhism founded by the Buddha who was a Kṣatriya by birth. Needless to say that Gautama Buddha was one of the greatest votary, defender and promoter of *ahimsā*. He firmly believed, practiced and preached that the *ṛta* in human life, human society and in nature can be guaranteed only through the scrupulous practice of *ahimsā*. Buddhists, especially the Mahayana Buddhists, made *ahimsā* an eminently positive principle. *Ahimsā* is *maitrī* (loving friendship) and *karuṇā* (mercy). The *Bodhisattva* ideal of Mahayanists is a supreme example of the practice of *maitrī* and *karuṇā*. A *Bodhisattva* willingly and unreservedly postpones his own salvation and liberation, which he has merited through the personal interiorization of the four noble truths and the meticulous practice of the eight-fold path. He vows that unless and until all beings are enlightened and are freed from chain of existence, he would not enter into the state of *nirvāṇa*. This, in fact, is the noblest form of *ahimsā*; a true altruism built on self-negation and self-sacrifice. Speaking about the practice of *ahimsā* of the monks the *Vinaya-piṭaka* states:

Whatever Bhikku shall knowingly deprive of life a human being, or shall seek out an assassin against a human being, or shall utter the praises of death, or incite another to self-destruction, saying, 'Ho! my friend! what good do you get from this sinful, wretched life? Death is better to thee than life!' - if, so thinking, and with such an aim, he, by

various argument, utter the praises of death or incite another to self-destruction - he, too, is fallen into defeat, he is no longer in communion.⁴

Thirdly, the reaction of Jainism to the Brahmanic religion was very radical. Here again the founder (or, re-founder) of Jainism, Lord Mahavira, was a Kṣatriya. *Ahimsā* becomes more than a virtue and moral principle in Jainism. It is the very foundation and essence of Jain religion, spirituality and way of life. The cult of *ahimsa* is given so much importance in Jainism that the *Jaina dharma* could be characterised as the *ahimsā dharma*. Jainism advocates extreme and exaggerated forms of non-violence that even normal life is rendered impossible. Its reaction to Vedic religion was vehement and radical that it called the Vedic religion as *himsā-śāstra*, the doctrine of violence. It asked: 'If animal sacrifice is not violence, and if in such sacrifices the sacrificed animal and the sacrificer attains *mokṣa*, then why not kill one's own parents? Can the gods who take pleasure in violence and blood be called benevolent?' About the great vow of non-violence of monks the *Acāraṅga sūtra* II.15.11 says:

I renounce killing all living beings, whether subtle or gross, whether movable or immovable. Nor shall I myself kill living beings, nor cause others do it, nor consent to it. As long as I live, I confess and blame, repent and exempt myself of these sins in the thrice threefold way (in acting, commanding, consenting, either in the past, present or future) in mind, speech and body.⁵

From all this it would seem that *ahimsā*, the great Indian spiritual principle and social value was proposed and propagated by non-Brahmins.

Let me cite the example of another great Indian who held fast on *ahimsā*, and thought that peace and harmony between different belief-systems and ideologies can be brought about only through non-violence, mutual respect and friendship. The great emperor Ashoka, a non-Brahmin,

⁴*Vinaya Texts*, transl. T.W.Rhys Davids & H. Oldenberg, *The Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. XIII, Part I: *The Patimokka*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1974, *The Parajika Rule 3*.

⁵Cf. J. Peringamala, *Jaina View of Ahimsa from a Christian Dialogical Perspective*, Unpublished thesis, Rome: Urbaniana University, 1990, pp. 131 ff.

was an eminent champion and great promoter of the principle of *ahimsā* and inter-religious harmony. One of his edicts proclaims:

King Priyadarsi honours men of all faiths ... The faiths of others all deserve to be honoured for one reason or another. By honouring them, one exalts one's own faith and at the same time performs a service to the faith of others... Concord alone is commendable, for through concord men may learn and respect the conception of dharma by others⁶.

Finally I do want to turn to the greatest votary of *ahimsā* of modern times, Mahatma Gandhi, who was a Vaiśya by birth. The two pillars of his philosophy of life and spirituality were truth and *ahimsā*.

Brahmins, who were supposed to have born from the mouth of the sacrificed primordial Pūrusha, were assigned the duties of teaching, preaching and offering ritual worship. Traditionally six duties are ascribed to Brahmins: "Teaching, learning, organizing sacrifice, offering sacrifice, giving gifts and receiving gifts are the six duties of the first-borns"⁷. Members of the first caste were known for the nobility of their character, kindness to all living being and purity of life. Traditionally the eight virtues of Brahmins are said to be: "Kindness to all living beings, peace, absence of envy, cleanliness, pleasantness, auspiciousness, dignity and desirelessness"⁸.

However, one has to contend that this is only one side of the picture. Parallel to this great longing for the practice of *ahimsā*, surprisingly, we do have also a trend diametrically opposed to it, namely, a penchant for violence, intolerance and injury, that of *himsā*. Of course, as mentioned earlier there were sacrificial killings, and there were killings in a just war, in the attempt to protect *ṛta* and dharma. Thus the basic story of *Ṛgveda* is in fact the killing of Vrtra by Indra, the greatest of all *Ṛgvedic* gods. The

⁶N.A. Nikam and Richard KcKeon (eds.), *The Edicts of Ashoka*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1959, pp.49-50.

⁷*Adhyāpanam adhyayanam yajanam yājanam tathā /
dānam pratigrahaś ceti śadkarmāny agrajanmanah //*

⁸*Dayā sarvabhūteṣu śāntih anasūya śaucam /
anāyasah maṅgalam akārpaṇyam asṛṣṭha ca //*

Indra-Vrtra enmity was a prototype for the later literature. In the Epic and Puranic writings these relentless *sura-asura* conflicts continue. The central theme and kernel of *Mahābhārata* story is the Kurukshetra war. The *Gītā* condones violence and killing for the sake of *varana-āśrama dharma*, for the purpose of protecting dharma.

Apart from this, there had always been a streak of violence, bloodshed and killing in India of the past and present. One of the most important hymns of *Ṛgveda* is the famous *Puruṣa-sūkta*. The innocent and blameless Puruṣa was killed and sacrificed by the gods for the sake of creation. The specific parts of the body of the sacrificed Puruṣa became corresponding objects in the cosmos. Besides serving as a prototype of all sacrificial killings of later times, it also paved the way and gave the first impulse of killing for gains.

Later Epics and Puranic literature abound in such incidents of unjust cruelty, violence and unfair killing, also by Brahmins. Take the example of Drona. He was a Brahmin, son of sage Bharadvaja. But *Mahābhārata* depicts him as a bloodthirsty, vengeance seeking wicked soldier. Some of his deeds were not becoming of a honest man. The story of the tribal or *ādivasi* boy Ekalavya is often quoted as an example of uncompromising devotion of a disciple to his guru. In fact, it is also a story of cruelty and treachery of Drona. To appease his royal clients he brutally mutilated and incapacitated Ekalavya, who adored him as his guru in martial arts. Drona's vicious and rancorous vengeance to Drupada is also well known. Though a Brahmin, he wielded weapons in the Kurukshetra war and killed thousands of soldiers, it is said, of the Pandava army, knowing very well that he is fighting against the spirit and dictates of dharma.

Drona's guru is Parasurama, also a Brahmin, son of the famous sage Jamadagni. Parasurama, though Brahmin by birth, and that too a son of a sage, he lived like a soldier, and a merciless one at that. At the behest of his irascible and petulant father, he beheaded his own mother. Later, his father was killed by a Kshatriya called Kartavīrya. To avenge this he not only killed Kartavīrya, but 'thrice seven times' went around the country and killed all the Kṣatriyas. Another legend narrates that in order to resettle the Brahmins from the blood stained country, he created a new territory for them, and that is Kerala.

Even the story of Mahabali and Vamana is now being interpreted, especially by advocates of Dalit cause, as a cruel manifestation of brahmanic hegemony and unjust dominance over the down-trodden and marginalized. Being jealous of the immense popularity and success of this righteous and virtuous tribal king Mahabali, the upper castes did away with him by outright treachery and hideous deceit. Also think of those sages of ancient times who took pleasure in using their *tapo-dhana* to curse people at the slightest provocation, cruelly killing or mutilating the victim of their unjustifiable wrath. Think of Ahalya, one of the five chaste holy women of old, who, due to no fault of hers, was cursed by her husband sage Gautama to become a stone. The killing of innocent defenseless widows in the ritual act of *sati* was none other than murder. In the Vedas the Purusha was offered in the sacrificial fire by gods of the sake of creation (*sṛṣṭi*), but in *sati* women were killed in the funeral fire just for the sake destruction (*samhāra*).

As is evident, in most of these instances of violence and killings one factor is clear: the victims were subalterns – Dalits, women or outcastes.

This streak and trend of intolerance and trail of murder continued, and in a way culminated in the murder of Mahatma Gandhi, the greatest proponent of *ahimsā* in modern times.

II

1. Introduction

Having shortly described the notion of *ahimsā* and its evolution in the religious-philosophical history of India, I now would like to shortly delineate how Gandhi tried to use this wonderful spiritual instrument and 'soul-force' to bring about peace and harmony in the Indian society. Truth and non-violence are the two pillars of Gandhian thought and spirituality. For Gandhi Truth is God and God is Truth. One attains this God primarily by the practice of non-violence. Therefore, sometimes Gandhi sees non-violence as equally important as Truth. He says: "Non-violence is the first article of my faith. It is also the last article of my creed."⁹ He adds:

⁹Young India, March 23, 1922.

Though my views on *ahimsā* are a result of my study of most the faiths of the world, they are now no longer dependent upon the authority of these works. They are a part of my life and if I suddenly discovered that the religious books read by me bore a different interpretation from the one I had learnt to give them, I should still hold to the view of *ahimsā* as I am about to set forth here.¹⁰

Gandhi widened the perspective of non-violence and took it beyond spirituality. He successfully applied it to the social, educational, political and economic spheres of human life.

Gandhi in our own times comes as the great apostle of *ahimsā*. He had drunk from the fountains of ancient wisdom and tried to revive the principle of *ahimsā* as a dynamic soul-force in modern India. His innovation lies in extending the application of *ahimsā* in political life on a mass scale.¹¹

2. Ahimsā is Universal Love

Buddhists and Jains designated and explained *ahimsā* with positive terms like 'benevolent friendship' (*maitrī*), 'loving kindness' (*karuṇā*), etc. Truth (*satya*), forbearance (*kṣānti*), self-gift (*dāna*), morality (*śīla*), and energetic action (*vīrya*), are expressions of non-violence. Gandhi perceived and practised non-violence in the same manner. He said; "In its positive form, *ahimsā* means the largest love, the greatest charity."¹² He affirms that *ahimsā* is a "positive state of love, of doing good even to the evil doer."¹³ Gandhi viewed *ahimsā* as the golden thread that binds all men together, and that unites the humanity with God. He states: "*Ahimsā* binds us to one another and to God. *Ahimsā* and love are one and the same thing."¹⁴

¹⁰R.Iyer, *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, 3 Vols., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986-87; Vol.2, p.212. HEREAFTER CITED AS MPWMG.

¹¹H.M.Jha, "The Concept of Ahimsa in Indian Ethics", *Indian Philosophical Annual* V (1960), p.108.

¹²N.K.Bose, *Selections from Gandhi*, Ahmedbad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1950, p.156.

¹³*Young India*, August 25, 1920.

¹⁴M.K.Gandhi, *Truth is God*, Ahmedbad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1959, p.17.

Explaining non-violence in relation to Truth he states elsewhere: "I do not believe in a personal deity, but I believe in the Eternal Law of Truth and Love which I have translated as non-violence."¹⁵ Gandhi believed that the basis of non-violence or love is the oneness of life. "When one feels that 'others' are himself, he is bound to love them."¹⁶ Consequently to be true to one's being, one has to love all.

3. Ahimsā is Active Resistance to Injustice

Non-violence is one of the most active forces. Non-violence does not mean passivity in resisting evil. "(Non-violence) does not mean helping the evil doer to continue the wrong or tolerating it by passive acquiescence. On the contrary, love, the active state of *ahimsā*, requires you to resist the wrong-doer by dissociating yourself from him even though it may offend him or injure him physically."¹⁷ A votary of non-violence should possess the courage to face violence for the sake of justice, human dignity, and human right and safeguard harmony in the society. It is this ideology that enabled Gandhi, who was otherwise a very frail, shy and timid man, to pocket insults, calumny, violence and punishment with tranquillity and without entertaining any ill feeling and animosity against the wrong doer. Devotion to truth and faith in non-violence gave him the 'soul-force' which was far superior to any physical powers of the world. Gandhi believed that "no man could be actively non-violent and not rise against social injustice, no matter where it occurred."¹⁸

4. Non-violence: A Virtue of the Heart and Mind

The noblest form of non-violence is that state of mind which wishes well to all living beings including the enemies. It demands to respect the opinion of others even if it is diametrically opposed to one's own ideals and ideologies. Gandhi practised it in his life. He patiently listened to all, even to the opinions of children. He recalls in his autobiography an incident of his childhood. To finance his smoking, once he stole a piece of gold from

¹⁵MPWVG, Vol.2, p.192.

¹⁶R.R.Diwakar, *Satyagraha: Its Technique and Theory*, Bombay: Hind Kitabs, 1946, p.25.

¹⁷N.K.Bose, *Selections from Gandhi*, p.33.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p.31.

his brother's chain. Understanding the gravity of the mistake, he confessed it to his father in a letter. He expected punishment for the crime. But his father, reading the confession, only cried. Gandhi says that his father's attitude to his sin was the purest form of *ahimsā*. Gandhi fought against the unjust measures of the government of South Africa and the British Raj in India. But he whole-heartedly supported them in all just and right matters. He said: "In its essence *ahimsā* is the powerful emotion of the heart which finds expression numerous forms of service."¹⁹ "*Ahimsā* is not the crude thing it has been made to appear. Not to hurt any living thing is no doubt a part of *ahimsā*. But it is its least expression. The principle of *ahimsā* is hurt by every evil thought, by undue haste, by lying, by hatred, by wishing ill of anybody. It is also violated by our holding on to what the world needs."²⁰ Gandhi expresses the same idea in still stronger words:

But the trouble with our votaries of *ahimsā* is that they have made of non-killing a blind fetish and put the greatest obstacle in the way of the spread of true *ahimsā* in our midst. The current (and in my opinion, mistaken) view of *ahimsā* has drugged our conscience and rendered us insensible to a host of other and more insidious forms of *himsā* like harsh words, harsh judgements, ill-will, anger and spite and lust of cruelty; it has made us forget that there may be far more *himsā* in the slow torture of men and animals, the starvation and exploitation to which they are subjected out of selfish greed, the wanton humiliation and oppression of the weak and the killing of their self-respect that we witness all around us today than in mere benevolent taking of life.²¹

Gandhi once even wrote that the fifteen minutes he wasted on useless conversation was a violation of *ahimsā*, because he could have used this time to alleviate the sufferings of the people.²²

5. Bodily Ahimsā: Service to Others

Bodily non-violence means more than refraining from injuring others bodily. It positively means service to all living beings in need. It is in fact

¹⁹MPWVG, Vol.2, p.236.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p.230.

²¹*Young India*, 4 October 1928.

²²Cf. MPWVG, p.228.

measured according to the quality and quantity of service done in a spirit of non-attachment and according to the genuineness of compassion and love the non-violent crusader shows to others. Non-violence is also non-exploitation of all sentient creatures. Therefore, destruction of property or means of sustenance of other living beings are against the principle of non-violence.

Suffering is a constant companion of and a necessary consequence for the non-violent persons. *Ahimsā* is charity, and charity without the willingness to suffer is dead. Hindu spirituality is very often accused that it does not ascribe any positive value for suffering. Misery and suffering are seen as necessary results of past *karman*. Gandhi however, advocates that a non-violent person should readily undergo privations and inconveniences, suffering and even death, for the convenience and benefit of others. "Suffering is the law of human beings; war is the law of the jungle. But suffering is infinitely more powerful than the law of the jungle for converting the opponent and opening his ears, which are otherwise shut to the voice of reason."²³ "*Ahimsā* consists in allowing others the maximum of convenience at the maximum of inconvenience to us, even at the risk of life."²⁴

6. Non-violence and Bread Labour

Gandhian concept of *ahimsā* demands that every one should earn his daily bread by physical labour. The law of nature demands that man should work to live, and nobody, also intellectuals, students, leaders, *et alii*, is exempt from this universal law. Unjust and parasitic enjoyments of the fruits of the other's labour are against the spirit of the rule of non-violence. Besides, by physical labour one identifies oneself with the poor, which too, is a demand of *ahimsā*. Gandhi considered work as an act of worship and even attributed to it a sanctifying sacramentality in the spiritual life of man. For Gandhi disinterested bodily work was also an act of sacrifice (*yajña*). A votary of *ahimsā* disciplines the body, sacrifices the comforts of the body and, like the poor and lowly, earns the sustenance of the body by labour. Gandhi believes that the *Gītā* teaches the same lesson. He says: "Where we are told that he who eats without offering sacrifice eats stolen bread.

²³*Young India*, February 20, 1930.

²⁴*Young India*, December 2, 1926.

Sacrifice here can mean only bread labour."²⁵ He himself did physical labour every day, either by spinning or by working in the field. In fact, together with the *Gītā* one should also consider the spinning wheel as his constant companion. Gandhian idea of bread labour was influenced by the *Gītā*, but especially by Tolstoy's writings.²⁶ Therefore, one of the most important practices of *ahimsā* for Gandhi is common body labour. The spirit of non-violence is to be sustained and nourished by conscious and constant bodily work.

7. Truth and Non-violence

Truth and non-violence are the two pillars of Gandhian philosophy, religion and spirituality. Sometimes Gandhi conceives *ahimsā* as an absolute value and believes that perfect *ahimsā* is the goal of human life, namely liberation. In this sense Truth, which he identifies with God, and *ahimsa* equal to this Truth. He says: "*Ahimsā* and Truth are so intertwined that it is practically impossible to disentangle and separate them. They are like two sides of a coin, or rather of a smooth unstamped metallic disc. Who can say which is the obverse and which is the reverse?"²⁷ Elsewhere he asserts: "*Ahimsā* is my God, and Truth is my God. When I look for *ahimsā*, Truth says, 'Find it out through me.' When I look for Truth, *ahimsā* says, 'find it out through me.'²⁸

But Gandhi basically sees *ahimsā* as a means to reach Truth. Truth is the ultimate reality, and non-violence is the only means to reach it. Therefore, Truth is superior to non-violence. He advises that we, "should ever repeat one *mantra*: 'Truth exists, it alone exists. It is the only God and there is but one way of realizing it; there is but one means and that is *ahimsā*. I will never give it up. May the God that is Truth, in whose name I have taken this pledge, give me the strength to keep it.'²⁹ For the correct practice of Truth and non-violence the seeker needs extreme care and

²⁵ *CWMG*, Vol.44, p.149.

²⁶ T.M. Bondaref, the Russian philosopher, used the term 'bread labour' for the first time.

²⁷ *MPWVG*, Vol2, p.230.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.216.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.231.

attention. Gandhi compares the treading of the narrow path of Truth and non-violence like 'balancing oneself on the edge of a sword.'³⁰

8. Ahimsā and Sarvadharmā-samabhāva

To promote peace, harmony and brotherhood between peoples of different religious persuasions and spiritual traditions Gandhi proposed and propagated the concept of *Sarvadharmā-samānātva*. *Sarvadharmā-samānātva*/*Sarvadharmā-samabhāva* means 'considering and respecting all religions, dharmas, as equal', equal respect and reverence for all religious traditions of the world. This is one of the eleven vows Gandhi and his fellow pilgrims practised in his *āśram*. The theological and spiritual foundation of Gandhian concept and vision of inter-religious dialogue and harmony between ideologies and religious traditions is basically the practice of this vow.

8.1. All Religions are True

Though he was not a very religious minded person in his younger days, he slowly developed respect and regard for other religions, mainly through the influence and example of his father. His house was a kind of 'dialogue centre'. Hindus, Jains, Parsis, Buddhists and Muslims used to visit his father for religious discussion and spiritual conversation. It was during his stay in England [1888-1891] for studies and in South Africa [1893-1914] for work that he really deepened his knowledge of Hinduism and refined his acquaintance with other religious traditions, and thus finally became a deeply religious and spiritual sage. He became a convinced Hindu and the *Bhagavad-gītā* became his constant companion, in joy and tribulations, in doubts and conflicts. But at the same time his respect and veneration for other religions, other sacred scriptures and founders and great teachers of other religions also became unshakeable. He learned reverently the scriptures of other religions, like the Bible, the Qur'an, Zend Avesta and Buddhist texts.

Gandhiji considered all religions as equally valid and as different paths to the same God and realization of this God. Respect and reverence for other religions and religious founders and thirst and inner urge to study the tenants of other religions were in the very nature of Gandhi. He said: "All

³⁰Cf. *Ibid.*, p.228.

religions are divinely inspired, but they are imperfect because they are products of the human mind and taught by human beings. Hence the necessity of tolerance which is as far from fanaticism as the North Pole is from the South. True knowledge of religion breaks down the barriers between faith and life."³¹ On another occasion he said: "The divine Light having been vouchsafed to all religions through an imperfect medium of flesh, they must share in more or less degree the imperfection of the vehicles."³² Again: "I have come to the conclusion within my own experience that those who - no matter to what faith they belong - reverently study the teachings of other faiths, broaden their own [...]. Personally, I do not regard any of the great religions false."³³ He considered religions as the different beautiful branches of the same tree. All receive life and inspiration from the same stem, God. "Various religions are like the leaves of a tree. No two leaves are alike, yet there is no antagonism between them or between the branches on which they grow. Even so there is an underlying unity in the variety which we see in God's creation."³⁴ Reverential study of the sacred scriptures of other religions and ready acceptance of the positive elements of these religions into his own life were considered by Gandhi as his sacred duty and obligation and persistently advised others to do the same. "I hold that it is the duty of every cultured man and woman to read sympathetically the scriptures of the world. If we are to respect others' religions as we would have them to respect our own, a friendly study of the world's religions is a sacred duty."³⁵

8.2. Ahimsā and Sarvadharmā-samabhāva for the Establishment of Rta

Perhaps the finest and noblest expression of *ahimsā* is epitomised in the Gandhian principle and practice of *sarvadharmā-samabhāva*. Gandhi's sense of equality of all religions and friendly rapport with other ideologies were not a political technique to keep together all the warring religious factions of India to fight against the colonialism, nor a device to entice

³¹ MPWMG Vol.I, p.543.

³² *Young India*, 21 March 1929.

³³ MPWMG Vol.I, p.523.

³⁴ *Harijan*, 26 May 1946.

³⁵ *Young India*, September 2, 1926.

people of all sections and religions to work for social and economic well-being of his fellow citizens, nor was it a way of secularized socialisation and making friends from all sections of the society. His dialogical attitude with members of other religions grew out of his deep spirituality, respect for humanity and sense of brotherhood with all men. All his activities, whether political, social, religious or literary were outward expressions of his inner spirituality. Gandhi was primarily a saint. As somebody mentions Catholic Church may not take up his cause for beatification. But he will ever be venerated by believers of all religions as a saintly man, who through his practice of *ahimsā* and attitude of *sarvadharmā-samabhāva* wanted to bring about peace and harmony (*ṛta*) in the society. The practice of *sarvadharmā-samabhāva* implies some important principles:

Dharma is Supreme: Each religion is the expression of the same dharma, preached by great teachers of humanity, adapted to a particular time, place and culture, and suited to the salvation of the followers of that dharma. Before God all dharmas - religions - are equally, valid, valuable and worthy. One's own dharma is best for him/her. There should not be any comparison and competition among religions. Rootedness in, devotion, reverence and commitment to one's own religion/dharma, demands also reverence for other dharmas. Gandhi said: "Inherently we are all equal. The differences of race and skin, of mind and body, and of climate and nature are transitory. In the same way, essentially all religions are equal. If you read Bible, you must read it with the eye of a Christian, if you read the *Gīāa*, you must read it with the eye of a Hindu."³⁶

Common Search for Truth: As it is very often said, for Gandhi Truth is God. We are all seekers of this Truth, pilgrims walking together to the realization of this Truth. Unity of humanity is in this Truth, and the search for this Truth should also unite us in a common *sādhana*. He said: "Progress towards Truth, towards God, is possible only because of such evolution. And if all faiths outlined by men are imperfect, the question of comparative merit does not arise. All faiths constitute a revelation of Truth, but all are imperfect and liable to error. Reverence for other faiths need not blind us to their faults."³⁷

³⁶ *Harijan*, 13 March 1937.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

All Life is One: Brahman alone is really real, and consequently all life and existence is united and unified in this one ultimate Reality. As all the neo-vedantins of the turn of the century, like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Vivekananda, Aurobindo, Ramana Maharshi, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, and others, Gandhi too believed in a kind of modified non-dualism. He believed in the unity of Being, that the ultimate reality is the only true reality. But these saintly men also advocated the devotional aspect of the theistic Vedanta systems too. As a result there is always a certain amount of confusion when they speak about God, life, etc. Gandhi believed that all human beings share the same life, and therefore all are one, and the distinctions of colour, caste, creed, class, etc. in the embodied existence are only accidental. A seeker of Truth, the ultimate reality, has to transcend these apparent differences and consider as a humble member of an organic whole, and strive with other in a common *sādhana* for the Truth-realization.

Self-effacing Humility: "The one who renounces to attain *mokṣa* must humble himself so much that he must become humbler than the dust of the street so that the people may walk over him. He must reduce himself to nothing. So long as a man does not of his own free will put himself last among his fellow creatures, there is no salvation for him."³⁸

Peace, Harmony and Fellowship: The urgent and essential need of today's India, which is being mercilessly marauded by vicious malaise like communal violence, religious fanaticism, caste bigotry, etc., is the emergence of the sense of oneness. As responsible citizens who love this country and all county-men, we should be able to say no to mutual animosity, and should also be able to transcend the levels of mere co-existence and tolerance. A healthy climate of peaceful and harmonious co-existence, fellowship and mutual respect should be our aim. Spirit and spirituality of dialogue demands not mere co-existence with or tolerance of other religious traditions and followers of those traditions. The concept of 'tolerance' contains an inherent superiority of the one who tolerates. From Yervada Central Prison he wrote: "I do not like the word tolerance, but could not think of a better word. Tolerance may imply a gratuitous assumption of the inferiority of other faiths to one's own, whereas *ahimsā* teaches us to

³⁸ *Autobiography*, p.383.

entertain the same respect for the religious faiths of others as we accord to our own, thus admitting the imperfection of the latter."³⁹ Gandhi said:

In spite of my being a staunch Hindu, I find room in my faith for Christian and Islamic and Zoroastrian teaching. [...] To some my Hinduism seem to be a conglomeration and some have even dubbed me an eclectic. Well, to call a man eclectic is to say that he has no faith, but mine is a broad faith which does not oppose Christians and Muslims. It is based on the broadest possible toleration. I refuse to abuse a man for his fanatical deeds, because I try to see them from his point of view. It is that broad faith that sustains me. It is a somewhat embarrassing position, I know - but to others, not to me.⁴⁰

Let me conclude this essay with a peace invocation from the Vedas:

*OM śāntir, antarīkṣam śāntih, pṛthivī śāntir/
 āpah śāntir, oṣadhayah śāntir, vanaspatayah śāntih/
 viśvedevāh śāntih, brahma śāntih, sarvam śāntih/
 śāntir eva śāntih, sā mā śāntir edhi/
 om śāntih śāntih śāntih//*

Om peace! May there be peace unto heaven, unto the sky let there be peace, unto the earth may there be peace, peace unto the waters, peace unto the herbs and trees. May there be peace unto all gods, and unto Brahman may there be peace, may there be peace unto all beings. Peace verily the peace. Om peace, peace, peace! (*Śukla-Yajurveda,XXXVI.17*)

³⁹M.K.Gandhi, *From Yervada Mandir*. tr. V.G.Desai, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1957, p.40.

⁴⁰*Young India* 22 December 1927.