

THE FUTILITY OF COMMON SENSE: AN ESSAY ON AHIMSA

Dilip Simeon

Upon hearing that I was to be the advisor for a documentary film on non-violence, one of my respected erstwhile teachers remarked that it was "the richest irony". He had good cause to say so. In my student days I was convinced that the only way any real social and political change could be brought about was by means of revolutionary violence. I became an activist in this cause in 1970, and after the first phase of "extremism" as it was then called, came to an end, I set aside this question as of tangential importance, not deserving of philosophical or theoretical consideration. Years later, when I was severely physically assaulted in the context of a struggle against corruption in the college where I worked, I became aware of the intense significance of this question - for this realisation at least, I am beholden to my assailants.

The Ubiquity of Violence

The most striking feature of the murder of Rajiv Gandhi was not the suicide of a young woman, but the fact that a man calmly watched the entire event, in the knowledge that it was being recorded on camera. There are now young people all over the world, for whom the sight of human flesh and blood is an ordinary experience. As a teacher, I was horrified to learn that many students had witnessed people being burnt alive in the Delhi carnage of 1984 and some had even participated in the violence. Should I have been surprised? Some members of the child murder-gangs of Colombia are not yet in their teens, and child-Mujahids were sent into battle by Iran in its war with Iraq. For Palestinian refugee children, destruction wrought by Israeli jets or warring militia are still part of everyday life, while the schoolchildren of Israel live in a perpetual climate of tension to which their government contributes as much as embittered Palestinians. Generations of black children in South Africa have known violence all their lives. Visual media have helped reduce to nil the distance that separates us from manifestations of human brutality. Violence has become part of everyday life.

Systemic violence is the lubricant of all oppressive social relations. Part of its baggage is the negation of reason, equality and respect for humanity. Violence directed at labourers and at women and children is the substratum of patriarchy and exploitation. In the months of April and May 1997, two cases of young women being murdered by their caste-panchayats have been reported from north India. Both were in their teens. They committed the "crime" of falling in love

and making their own decisions about a life partner. The fact that both belonged to backward castes and that there is no hue and cry over the atrocities by the political representatives of the backward classes shows that those who portray themselves as politically progressive have scant commitment to individual liberty or the human rights of women. It would seem that instances of "domestic" violence are accepted as normal, when the victims are women. The social conscience of the articulate middle-classes is far more exercised over financial matters than the loss of human life or the humiliation of weak and helpless citizens.

Social relations upheld by violence are the basis of all state structures. The ubiquity of domestic violence and social degradation accustoms people to physical intimidation. This kind of "training" psychologically prepares people for violent experiences later in life, whether these arise out of paramilitary service or work in the informal sector. All over the world, armed bodies of men have trained themselves to kill for the sake of power and the subordination of others. It might seem ironic, but progressive developments such as the industrial revolution and the growth of democratic politics exacerbated this trend, with entire societies being mobilized for war. The first World War cost 20 million lives and the second 55 million. (Over 20 million in the latter figure were Russian). Today the advanced capitalist countries spend 500 billion dollars annually on the military of which a third is spent on arms purchases and development. There are about 100 million land mines scattered in 69 countries which kill or maim 500 persons every week, 26,000

***Violence signals the
end of conversation,
blurs our sense of
time, cause and effect
and feeds upon itself.***

every year, mostly civilians. (Manufacturing a mine costs a few dollars, de-activating one 200 to 1000 dollars). Vast resources are expended on war preparations - comparative estimates tell us that even a 20% reduction in military budgets would bring 189 million children into school, the cost of one Seawolf nuclear submarine (\$2.5 billion) would pay for an immunization program for all the world's children, and the cost of one Stealth bomber, for family planning services for 120 million women in the developing world. Despite a decline in arms trading since the end of the Cold War, arms merchants and military industries still exercise a powerful influence over governments. Social priorities in today's world can only be described as deranged.

Violence signals the end of conversation, blurs our sense of time, cause and effect and feeds upon itself. As an instrument of liberation, it has a tendency to become illusory, as the oppressed begin to speak the language of oppression. It produces a spiral of justifications for brutality, enabling its perpetrators to take on the guise of

victims. In the minds of those who killed Sikh citizens in 1984, their targets were not "innocent", rather, they shared the blame for the murder of Indira Gandhi and the violence indulged in by Bhindranwale. For their part the Punjab terrorists had convinced themselves that they were only responding to the victimization of their community by the Indian state. Violence also has the unique quality of legitimising itself retro-actively. Terror in the Punjab in the late 1980's seemed to justify terror in the nation's capital in 1984. (Till this day the Lok Sabha has not seen fit to pass a resolution of condolence for the thousands of persons killed in those blood-stained 72 hours). Similarly the hatred directed at Indian Muslims by a certain political tendency has tended to produce a post-facto justification for the two-nation theory of Jinnah upon which the Partition was based. In turn, that hatred appeared to those possessed by it as a consequence of the "separatism" of Muslims in general and retribution for the pain and trauma suffered by Hindu and Sikh refugees in 1947. Who is to blame? This a question fraught with ambivalence. But for those who have succumbed to communal ideology, it is a very simple question indeed, and the easy answer is always - They -.

Let us consider the prevalence of the idea of victimhood. An examination of instances of mass animosity will reveal that the sense of being victimized is central to an explanation of violence. The Nazis invented the Final Solution (i.e. mass extermination) in order to deal with a so-called Jewish conspiracy which they claimed had victimized the German people. Of course, the question of social oppression is a highly charged political issue. Thus, although it is generally accepted that the so-called low castes were the victims of the Brahmanical social order, upper-caste Indian society feels itself victimized by them for having obtained affirmative action in state policy. "These SC-ST's are the most privileged people in India", is a sentiment often heard in private conversations - it becomes public on occasions like the anti-Mandal agitation of 1990. Relations between Hindus and Muslims are even more complex, because of the deep-rooted conviction in Hindu society that the advent of Islam in India was accompanied by widespread manifestations of intolerance towards non-Muslims. Such perceptions are based partly on facts, but they also involve simplifications and tend to leave out memories and instances of their opposite. Howsoever we choose to look at it, the fact remains that this is a common perception. For their part, elite Muslims experienced the growth of a popular national movement as the gradual development not of democracy but of a Hindu majoritarian polity which would swamp them in due course. Each community felt itself victimized by the other and leaders marshalled arguments to prove their point. Here then, is a case of the circular logic that overtakes the dialogue of antagonistic communities.

Those of us concerned with social change must think seriously about the patriarchal and reactionary nature of violence. Why, for instance, did the militant patriot Bhagat Singh in his last days write

However, no society can be held together solely by means of force, if only because of the complete social disruption that would entail.

that non-violence was a must for mass movements? Perhaps he understood instinctively that the politics of terror could only be practised (in the main) by organizations of young men, whereas democratic movements required the participation of millions of people, including women, children and the elderly, most of whom would not want to die for high ideals but live in the hope of a better future. However, non-violence is not merely a matter of tactics. Rather, it is connected to fundamental issues of the nature of power and the kind of liberation we may seek.

With God on Our Side...

Even more than the matter of physical harm, violence manifests the desire to humiliate the opponent and subjugate his or her dignity. This emotion has deadly and debilitating effects. Society will always pay a price for the humiliation of any of its constituents -even if these effects take centuries to work themselves out. The relations between Armenians and Turks, African-Americans and White Americans, Black and White in South Africa, the Irish and the English, carry with them a legacy of bitterness rooted in a centuries-long history.

However, no society can be held together solely by means of force, if only because of the complete social disruption that would entail. Even the powerful require some peace in order to enjoy their power. Because of this, the products of the intellect, such as Reason, Philosophy, Religion and Art, have had a tendency to be harnessed to the needs of the State. Moreover, acts of violence always seem to need ethical justification, as if in implicit acceptance of their status as wrong-doing.

Hence the persistent relation of violence to ethical issues and the development of structures of organised violence into ideological systems specialising in the alteration of moral sensibilities to produce versions of the "just war", or *Dharmayuddha*.

To take one example from history of the spiralling effects of violence I will draw the reader's attention to events that took place nine centuries ago. I refer to the Crusades undertaken by medieval Christianity to "liberate" Jerusalem from the suzerainty of the Seljuks, a Turkish dynasty which conquered Palestine in the middle of the eleventh century. Historical evidence suggests that the project was part of a Papal scheme to subjugate Byzantium (Byzantine was the ancient name for Constantinople, which later became Istanbul and was the centre of the flourishing Eastern Orthodox Church). Pope Urban II launched the First Crusade (1096-99 AD). His slogan "God Wills It", was a means of uniting western princes and overcoming any priestly aversion to violence. Armed with ethical authority, the crusaders convinced themselves of the need to exterminate the Turks. Their blood-lust was displayed in the five-week long siege and capture of Jerusalem, when, maddened by victory after years of travail they rushed into houses and mosques, killing men, women and children alike on July 15, 1099. The Jews were held to have assisted the Muslims and were burnt alive in their

synagogue. Western sources put the number of Arabs killed at 10,000, Arab ones at 100,000. After this, Arabs began referring to the westerners (Franks) as "Christian dogs". Here is what a historian has to say:

The massacre at Jerusalem profoundly impressed all the world... (and) emptied Jerusalem of its Moslem and Jewish inhabitants. Many even of the Christians were horrified by what had been done; and amongst the Moslems, who had been ready hitherto to accept the Franks... there was henceforward a clear determination that (they) must be driven out. It was this bloodthirsty proof of Christian fanaticism that re-created the fanaticism of Islam. When, later, wiser Latins in the East sought to find some basis on which Christian and Moslem could work together, the memory of the massacre stood always in their way.

During the Third Crusade (1191) King Richard the Lion-Hearted ordered thousands of prisoners slaughtered and their corpses burnt to search for hidden gold. Horrified at this atrocity, the Islamic world became ineradicably suspicious of the West. The contemporary Arab poet Mosaffer Allah Werdis composed these pain-stricken lines:

We have mingled our blood and our tears
None remains who has strength enough to beat off
these oppressors
The sight of our weapons only brings sorrow to us
who must weep while the swords of war spark off the
all-consuming flames...
Oh that so much blood had to
flow, that so many women
were left with nothing but
their bare hands to protect
their modesty !
Amid the fearful clashing
swords and lances, the faces
of the children grow white with
horror.

**and how generations of
victims stagger through
the centuries victimising
one another...**

In contrast to the sword-blessing popes of medieval Catholicism, the Eastern Church believed that faith ought only to be propagated by spiritual means. Although Turkish pressure had pushed Byzantine Christianity towards compromise with the Latins, the behaviour of the crusading armies en route to Palestine created a gulf between the two traditions. The turning point was marked by the vandalism let loose in Constantinople in 1204 during the Fourth Crusade by men whose fathers had promised to defend it from the Turks. From this time onwards, Byzantine Christians referred to the crusaders as "Frankish barbarians". Incidentally, the Persian word *firingi*, meaning "French, Italian or European", originated in the colloquial Arabic word *franj*, which carried a connotation of barbarism from the time of the crusades. Given the experiences described above this is not surprising. Thus, our own Hindustani term *firangi* was coloured from the start by a hateful usage steeped in the violence of the massacres of Jerusalem.

I leave it to the reader to consider whether mythic memories of these events might have any bearing on contemporary relations between Palestinians and Israelis, Arabs and the West, and Muslims and Christians in a part of the world that still transmits its violent tension all over the Middle East and beyond.

However, there also existed a more down-to-earth attitude among the Christian public, who began to support pacifist movements in the aftermath of the crusades. This attitude was expressed in the writings of (for example), the French poet Rutebeuf, who had some very sensible things to say about holy war and holy places:

Am I to leave my wife and children, all my goods and inheritance, to go and conquer a foreign land which will give me nothing in return? I can worship God just as much in Paris as in Jerusalem. One doesn't have to cross the sea to get to Paradise. Those rich lords and prelates who have grabbed... all the treasures on earth may well need to go on Crusade. But I live in peace with my neighbours... I am not bored with them yet and so I have no desire to go looking for a war... as long as (the Sultan) leaves me alone, I shall not bother my head about him. All you people... who go on pilgrimage to the Promised Land, ought to become very holy there: so how does it happen that the ones who come back are mostly bandits?... God is everywhere: to you He may only be in Jerusalem, but to me He is here in France as well.

Why do lines penned by a Frenchman seven centuries ago strike a chord in contemporary India? Is it because just four and a half years ago lakhs of Indians were sufficiently motivated by revengeful fervour to destroy a mosque? And that this act was seen by them as justifiable retaliation for acts of destruction which had taken place in mid-16th century? Is it because a town called Ayodhya has been emptied of its Muslim inhabitants? A bystander in the long corridors of time might well wonder about how the thirst for revenge is never quenched, and how generations of victims stagger through

the centuries victimising one another...

Gandhi's Truth

It is impossible to address the theme of non-violence without taking into account the attitude of its greatest practitioner. As a young man I treated Gandhi's pacifism with contempt - young men in particular are prone to associating violence with masculinity and non-violence with weakness. The thought that ahimsa could actually represent courage was alien to me. Our movement treated the Gandhian tradition as an obstacle to revolution and his leadership of the national movement as a gigantic failure. Apart from the personal experience of violence that I mentioned at the start of this essay, it was the failures of the revolutionary movement and the growth of communal hatred that gradually brought home to me the continuing relevance of Gandhi's life and the manner in which he left it. I remember being upset by an

essay on Gandhi by a leftist Hindi literateur who ended his diatribe with fulsome praise for Gandhi's assassin Nathuram Godse. This awakened me to the disconcerting potential similarities which attend doctrines of violent political change. The main currents of leftism in India have still not come to terms with Gandhi, (a lacuna which is parallel to their failure to theorise the question of violence), but the rapid growth of communalism in the past fifteen years has alerted them to his commitment and sacrifices for the cause of communal harmony. This realisation culminated in a demonstration in Delhi on Gandhi's death anniversary in January 1993.

Gandhi's ideas are sometimes misconstrued because of his refusal to countenance the separation of religion from politics. It is easier to understand this matter if we simply substitute the word "ethics" for "religion", and "power" for "politics". Does any of us seriously believe that the exercise of power ought to be devoid of moral considerations? Gandhi saw himself as a *karmayogi*, and regarded selfless worldly action directed towards the attainment of self-knowledge and collective salvation as his spiritual duty. He saw political activity as the supreme sphere of social action, but he insisted on imbuing this action with ethical imperatives such as ahimsa and the abolition of untouchability.

In search not of personal power but sovereignty for the Indian people, he exercised tremendous moral influence emanating from his renunciation of selfish goals - the hallmark of the traditional Hindu *tyagi*. Truth for him was the catch-all for the supreme goals of spirituality, including *moksha* and self-knowledge, as well as values such as justice and integrity.

Non-violence was implicit in his Truth: "Truth is its own proof, and non-violence is its supreme fruit". His motives were at once spiritual and political - he did away with the separateness of their definitions, as he overcame the distinction between means and ends. Religion was not an instrument to be used tactically for the pursuit of political power, rather, political activity had to be virtuous and transparent in order to attain sound goals.

For all Gandhi's apparent conservatism it is clear that he subjected both tradition and contemporary spiritual authority to the test of his own conscience. Even if it were true that Tulsidas used to beat his wife, he remarks, "the Ramayan was not composed in order to justify men beating their wives". And despite the scenes of carnage described in the Bhagwad Gita, Gandhi insists that Vyasa wrote his epic "to depict the futility of war", that the struggle described in it was a metaphor for the inner struggle between good and evil encountered by all human beings. If the purest form of action was devoid of desire for reward, then violence and untruthfulness were taboo, for selfishness was implied in them. Language and meaning changed and expanded over the centuries, argued Gandhi, and "it is the very beauty of a good poem that it is greater than its author". Despite the warlike metaphors of the Gita, he insisted that "after forty years unremitting endeavour to enforce the teaching of the Gita in my own life, I have in all humility felt that perfect renunciation is

impossible without perfect observance of ahimsa in every shape and form". Gandhi's conscience impelled him towards human equality and the peaceful resolution of political and social conflict. He rejected the violence inherent in caste-oppression and the potential justifications for violence contained in various religious texts and traditions. It is a mark of his theological creativity that he managed to speak in a conservative voice whilst advocating a radical break from existent traditional practices.

It is even more remarkable that among the people most affected by Gandhi's message were two of the most militant communities in India - the Sikhs and the Pathans. Few might remember today that the Akali party originated in a successful non-violent movement for the liberation of *gurdwaras* from corrupt pro-British *mahants*. The Guru-ka-Bagh agitation in 1922 involved the peaceful violation of a ban on woodcutting for religious purposes by Akali jathas, whose members (many of whom were ex-soldiers who had fought for the British Empire in the first World War) were mercilessly beaten with metal-capped lathis by English police officers and their Indian underlings. Some 1500 were injured and 5000 imprisoned in a campaign which shook the country. Gandhi's associate C.F. Andrews witnessed this "ultimate moral contest". The sight of the brutalities, he reported, was "incredible to an Englishman". "Each blow (was) turned into a triumph by the spirit with which it was endured". Similarly the activity of the red-shirted Khudai Khidmadgar (Servants of God) movement in the North West Frontier Province manifested one of the most staunchly Gandhian campaigns for national independence and social upliftment in pre-1947 India. Their leader Abdul Ghaffar Khan came to be known as the Frontier Gandhi, and preached a version of Islam

If the purest form of action was devoid of desire for reward, then violence and untruthfulness were taboo, for selfishness was implied in them.

which emphasised peace, forbearance and self-restraint. The Khidmadgars were in the forefront of the civil disobedience campaign in 1931 when they seized control of Peshawar and even ran a parallel administration for a few days after a regiment of the Garhwal Rifles (all Hindus) refused to open fire on Pathan satyagrahis. A Turkish scholar who visited the Frontier in the 1930's suggested that the Pathans had developed a new interpretation of force. In her words, "non-violence is the only form of force which can have a lasting effect on the life of society... And this, coming from strong and fearless men, is worthy of study".

Gandhi's understanding of violence sprang from his spiritual convictions. The fact that in the Mahabharata the wrong-doers had good men like Bhishma and Drona on their side was for him a sign that, "evil cannot by itself flourish in this world. It can do so only if it is allied with some good". He wrote this in 1926 and remained consistent in his belief. In 1940, he said, "Goondas do not drop from the sky, nor do they spring from the earth like evil spirits. They are the product of social disorganization, and society is therefore responsible for their existence... they should be looked upon as a symbol of corruption in our body-politic". Confronted by riots in 1946 he said, "I deprecate the habit of procuring a moral alibi for

ourselves by blaming it all on the goondas. We always put the blame on goondas. But it is we who are responsible for their creation as well as encouragement". And at the height of the violence of 1947 he said, "it is time for peace-loving citizens to assert themselves and isolate goondaism. Non-violent non-cooperation is the universal remedy. Good is self-existent, evil is not. It is like a parasite living in and around good. It will die of itself when the support that good gives it is withdrawn..". These insights were the products of his interventions in places which had witnessed some of the worst instances of communal violence in pre-independence India - the villages of Noakhali and the city of Calcutta. For contemporary observers, it was nothing short of a miracle that Hindus and Muslims in their thousands attended Gandhi's prayer meetings and even celebrated Eid together in August 1947. Viceroy Mountbatten sent him this telegram: "My dear Gandhiji, in the Punjab we have 55 thousand soldiers and large-scale rioting on our hands. In Bengal our forces consist of one man, and there is no rioting... As a serving officer may I be allowed to pay my tribute to the One Man Boundary Force...". The Muslim League party in the Constituent Assembly in Delhi passed a resolution expressing its "deep sense of appreciation of the services rendered by Mr Gandhi to the cause of restoration of peace and goodwill between the communities in Calcutta". Less than a month later, Gandhi went on fast against a renewed outbreak of violence and the city witnessed the unprecedented scene of the European-commanded police force observing a 24 hour fast in sympathy with Gandhi and blood-crazed goondas surrendering their weapons to him. The staunchly anti-Congress English editor of The Statesman made a point of announcing that henceforth "Mr Gandhi" would be referred to in his columns as Mahatma. If we were to use Gandhi's logic to describe the situation he confronted in 1947 we could say that the struggle between violence and ahimsa was going on in every soul, and was not merely demarcated by the social distance between goondas and polite society.

Gandhi was not the hopeless idealist that many consider him to be. He recognised that complete non-violence implied total cessation of all activity, and that this was incompatible with the need for it to be practised by the common people. He also made a distinction between the violence of the oppressors and that of the oppressed - defensive violence, in his view, was morally superior to the offensive variety. Violence, in Gandhi's definition, lay in causing "suffering to others out of selfishness, or just for the sake of doing so". He distinguished between self-interest and selfishness - the former meant securing those conditions necessary for leading a human and dignified life, the latter, putting oneself above others and pursuing one's interests at their expense. Violent ideas were dangerous, since they created conditions for their realisation. Humiliating others was also a form of violence. Gandhi recognised that the state was an institutionalized and concentrated form of violence, and was convinced that this was due in great part to the need for maintaining an unjust and exploitative social system. In extreme situations he

argued, violence was preferable to cowardice - he was against using ahimsa as a means of rationalising passivity in the face of grave injustice and wrongdoing. He favoured physical resistance by victims of rape if there was no possibility of resisting non-violently.

Ultimately however, as the scholar Bhikhu Parekh puts it, Gandhi was convinced that of "the reign of violence could not be overthrown by adding to it". Great danger lay in deriving common-place justifications for violence, such as the violation of nature in the name of human self-interest, the need to maintain the coercive apparatus of the state, revolutionary violence practised in the name of resistance to oppression. He was (again, in Parekh's words), "deeply worried about the way in which the limited legitimacy of violence in human life was so easily turned into its general justification", making it the rule rather than the exception. Once this happened, "men kept taking advantage of the exceptions and made no effort to find alternatives". This for him was the main reason for stressing the need for social and political activists to train themselves in the ideal of ahimsa, which in his definition was not merely the absence of violence but included the positive value of *karuna*, or compassion. By elevating ahimsa to the level of a moral ideal, he hoped to minimise the violence which was inevitable in the process of social and political transformation. Even if it could never be fully realised,

ahimsa functioned as a kind of utopia, without which human society would have no standards of perfection towards which to strive and against which we might judge our actions.

...ahimsa functioned as a kind of utopia, without which human society would have no standards of perfection towards which to strive and against which we might judge our actions.

Mandela's Long Walk to Freedom

In the contemporary world, there is no statesman with as high a stature as Nelson Mandela, and no real-life story so dramatic as his role in the dismantling of apartheid. This is manifest in the outpouring of genuine affection which he evokes among people everywhere and of all races and communities. There is no doubt that without him the struggle against the racist system and the dangerous circumstances arising out of its eventual collapse would have been accompanied with far greater disruption and violence than actually took place. In this sense, Mandela has contributed to a (relatively) non-violent resolution of a potentially explosive situation. So his views on this matter are of no small significance. In his acclaimed memoir, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela repeatedly says that for him, non-violence was an issue subject to pragmatic rather than ethical principles. "For me, non-violence was not a moral principle but a strategy; there is no moral goodness in using an ineffective weapon". His positions arose out of his compulsions, but at the level of ideas, they may be characterized as utilitarian - and usefulness as a standard of goodness is no standard at all. Mandela also made a contrast between the White supremacist state which permitted no political freedom whatsoever to the African population, and the British Raj, which he saw as a system which did not confront peaceful protest with violence. Here he is mistaken, because from Jallianwala Bagh to the Civil Disobedience campaigns of the early 1930's, instances abound of the British rulers of India doing

precisely that. Nevertheless it could be argued that aspects of the apartheid regime such as segregation and the attempted ghettoisation of the entire Black population were certainly worse than the Indian polity under British imperialism.

However, this is not the place for a comparative discussion about the British Empire and South Africa under apartheid. What I am concerned with is Mandela's manner of dealing with the means used to fight against an unjust system. Despite his stated belief in a tactical rather than ethical approach to this question, Mandela's passionate belief in the need to avoid a racial civil war in South Africa and his focus as commander of the MK (the military wing of the African National Congress), on the sabotage of installations rather than on terror directed at human beings indicate his deep-rooted ambivalence with regard to the use of violence. He recounts an incident in his memoir about an occasion when he shot a sparrow with an air-rifle at a hide-out in the countryside. The five year old son of the house-owner looked at the dead bird with tears in his eyes and asked why he had killed the bird, adding, "its mother will be sad". Mandela remembers his sensations at hearing this - "My mood immediately shifted from one of pride to shame; I felt that this small boy had far more humanity than I did. It was an odd sensation for a man who was the leader of a nascent guerrilla army". Only a politician with deeply pacific instincts (and mind you, he was quite clear that he was not a pacifist) would derive a philosophical lesson from the shooting of a sparrow.

Mandela's memoir is full of such ambivalences - but they enhance rather than diminish his stature. Why is this so? It is because like Gandhi, his life activity speaks more than his words and theories. He rose to become chief executive of the state he fought all his life, but would it not be grossly unjust to him to say that he devoted himself to the pursuit of power? His complete lack of rancour towards those who ran a vicious police state, kept him in prison for nearly three decades and disallowed him even from attending the funeral of his mother, show him up to be a man whose dignity would always remain unimpaired. To my mind, it is this quality that enabled him to transcend the impulse to retribution, which is one of the roots of violence. He did not need to humiliate his opponents in order to achieve his ends. This is why, after all is said and done, the struggle against apartheid did not succeed on account of revolutionary violence and terrorism but the political and ethical collapse of its institutions in the face of universal antipathy and opposition.

Today, the struggle to overcome the bitter legacy of racism is being carried out in the same spirit. Mandela's government has instituted the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a unique body with statutory authority to grant amnesty to perpetrators of gross human

rights violations who confess their misdeeds. Great problems have and will inevitably affect its work - not least of which is the sense of alienation which attends any interposition of the administration between perpetrators and victims of violence. Nevertheless, the

commissions's work is an unprecedented effort to heal wounds on the basis of human reconciliation. I am reminded of a statement which occurs in a controversial Russian film critical of Stalinism (entitled Repentance) made in the Gorbachev era - where the protagonist makes a distinction between a mistake, a crime and a sin. Mistakes may be rectified, he says, and crimes punished, but there is only one antidote for a sin, and that is repentance. That this is a feasible and (compared to revenge and retribution) potentially satisfactory procedure for coping with ethnic bitterness is shown by an incident which took place in Gujarat in January 1994. A newsreport described tens of thousands of citizens in Sidhpur, Mehsana, (affected by riots in the aftermath of the Babri Masjid demolition), taking a public pledge of peace, with killers acknowledging their guilt and the families of the victims declaring their forgiveness. The remarkable maturity displayed by the citizens of Sidhpur is an object-lesson for people all over the world caught in a similar predicament. Justice and social order are a matter of balance - between means applied and ends obtained, the need for punishment and the need for reform, the conscience of the individual and the interests of society. These sometimes conflictual elements can only

be reconciled on the plane of a social ethic, although the kind of ethic invoked and the nature of the reconciliation effected will differ in each polity. And it is the ethical terrain upon which Palestinians and the Nationalist Irish, to take only two prominent examples of populations currently involved in violent conflict, may obtain their desired ends, if only they have the courage to reconcile ends and means on the pattern of ahimsa.

Justice and social order are a matter of balance - between means applied and ends obtained, the need for punishment and the need for reform, the conscience of the individual and the interests of society.

As You Sow...

That is the truth of the matter? In an age whose common sense has it that everything is exchangeable with money, where images are valued more than the things they represent, religious and cultural values appropriated and used as instruments for the pursuit of power, the concept of truth seems to have become redundant. For example, cigarette advertisements portray smokers having a good time, in the pink of health, whereas the truth of the matter is that smoking tobacco causes cancer and heart disease. To take another example, in May 1992 national television telecast an adulatory portrayal of V.D. Savarkar, the militant Hindu nationalist, without mentioning that he was an accused and main conspirator in the murder of Mahatma Gandhi. We may also note the linguistic transformation of Babri Masjid from a mosque into a "disputed structure". At the best of times, advertisements (and propaganda) convey a mixture of fact and fiction, communication and misinformation. Where is the concern for truth in all this? What matters is whether the image is credible or incredible, not whether it is true. Nonetheless, society cannot dispense with the concept of truth. Physical laws are not subject to political manipulation, even if they may be put to nefarious uses, and in the social realm, brute facts such as oppression and exploitation have a habit of surfacing after decades. Popular democratic aspirations and transparent institu-

tions are another guarantor of the social value of the concept of Truth.

Truth is a term which admits of many meanings. At the very least, it can mean Reality as well as Ideality. In any case, it implies a search, an ideal and a standard. It may never be attained as a whole, but can still be worth striving for. However for a certain cast of mind, truth does not imply a search, but a revelation. If one Revealed Truth does not set itself against others like itself, no conflict arises. But if in real life, its followers cannot bear to co-exist with followers of other beliefs, they are already in process of arming themselves, converting their belief into the Absolute Truth. And it is in the very nature of absolutism that it reacts violently to difference. Enlarging on Gandhi's arguments against violence, Parekh observes that "irreversible deeds require infallible knowledge to justify them". I would add that those possessed of infallible knowledge will sooner or later take recourse to irreversible deeds. If we think about this carefully, we might understand why political tendencies (whether of Right or Left-wing persuasion) with an overt or covert belief in the efficacy of violent methods are generally constructed around authoritarian principles. This is why Gandhi always spoke of experiments with truth, and insisted that the search be conducted upon the basis of an explicit commitment to non-violence. Appearing before the Disorders Inquiry Committee at Ahmedabad in the wake of the agitations of 1919, Gandhi was asked by Lord Hunter to consider the position of the Governors, who were obliged to uphold the law and punish those whose stated object was to violate it. Gandhi replied that non-violent satyagrahis protesting unjust laws were "the best constitutionalists". Hunter told him that opinions might differ as to the justice or injustice of laws, to which Gandhi replied that this was the reason he insisted on non-violence - a satyagrahi, he said, gives the right of independent judgement to his opponent. Sir Chimanlal Setalvad, another member of the committee, sought to trap Gandhi on his stated objective of the pursuit of truth: "However honestly a man may strive in his search for truth, his notions of truth may be different from the notions of others. Who then is to determine the truth?". Once more Gandhi made his point by insisting that it was precisely because there were differing versions of the truth that "the non-violence part was a necessary corollary" to his struggle.

Here, in my opinion, is a profound yet simple contribution to one of the most turbulent philosophical debates of our age - fascinated as it is by plural identities, the many-sidedness of meaning and the rejection of universals. Gandhi was not a speculative philosopher, but his position offers a way out of the conundrum created by contemporary (post-modern) relativism, viz, the fate of standards of judgment once we accept the many-sidedness of meaning. Gandhi accepts this multiplicity, but insists that there is an ethical standard by which all relative "truths" may be judged - their contribution to the attainment of ahimsa. In this sense he was a profound egalitarian humanist - he refused to use cultural, religious and political differences among people to stereotype them as less than human, as

worthy of discrimination, injustice and violence. This did not mean that he suspended his rational intellect or refrained from making his own assessment of religious practices, cultures and systems of thought. He kept his own counsel, made his own judgements, and remained a practising Hindu till the moment of his death. But it is difficult to fault him for demeaning or ridiculing the beliefs of others. All he asked was that a way be found for resolving disputes, pursuing arguments, overcoming (or indeed, living with) difference in a manner consistent with human dignity.

When we stop to consider the scale of destruction that society has unleashed upon itself and still prepares for, the need for a non-violent culture stares us in the face. According to one estimate, our century has seen some 250 wars and nearly 110 million deaths related to war and ethnic conflict. Over the decades an increasing proportion of these losses have taken place among civilians. The explosive energy yield of the current (reduced) global nuclear weapons stockpile is 8000 megatons (the equivalent of 8000 million tons of TNT). This is 727 times the total yield of all the explosives used in World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War put together. Between 1960-94, the developing countries spent 775 billion dollars on arms purchases, which made up 69% of the total world arms trade. In 1995 there were 22.4 million men and women in uniform - 65% of whom belonged to the developing world, whose populations are paying the price for the distorted social perspectives of their rulers. By any sane standard, it would appear that the human race is hypnotised by the death wish.

Restraint and compassion are qualities which will always be necessary for human society to survive.

Ultimately ahimsa is another name for restraint. Gandhi's devotion to it has had a significant effect on our society, even though it remains true that democracy in India still has a long way to go. It is fashionable these days to bewail the fate of the Indian republic and to ascribe all its ills to its

founders. It is worth considering that factors such as the pressure of Great Power interests, the consequences of rampaging global capitalism and the selfishness of our ruling elite may well be the factors more responsible for our problems. We should remember that India has not yet succumbed to the authoritarian vision of communal politics, nor to the jackboots of military rule. One reason for this lies in the impact of a mass democratic movement for national liberation which despite all its weaknesses, did achieve sovereignty on the basis of a non-violent political programme. Of the several thousand daily visitors to Gandhi Smriti in Delhi (the place of his assassination), a large number are village folk who treat the memory of the Mahatma with great reverence. The elite may have reduced him to an icon and the urban middle-class might treat him with ignorance and disdain, but it would seem that humbler Indians have not yet forgotten the man. He touched a chord which I believe has acquired a permanent place in the conversation of humanity. Restraint and compassion are qualities which will always be necessary for human society to survive. If we aspire to a more humane, less brutal and more civilised state of existence, the spirit and optimism required to attain it will in no small part have been generated by the life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and his message of ahimsa. ■