Terrorism, Secularism and the Spirit of Peace: A Contemporary Gandhian Perspective

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ABSTRACT
The backbone of the predominant model for political violence in the modern world rests on terrorism incited in the name of religion. There can be different ways of comprehending terrorism and terrorist activities, and this very task of reflecting our understanding and interpretation of terrorism is done primarily by society. In other words, the idea of terrorism is conceptualized and constructed by the people and reflected by the media in its language. A Gandhian Satyagrahi’s chief forte is that there is something of God in every individual and that appeal can be made to the divine in man through love and conscious self-suffering. Gandhism, as a universal ideology holds that the need today is not one religion, but mutual respect and tolerance of the devotees of different religions. Gandhi was also opposed to conversion from one religion to another, especially when it took the form of mass conversions and proselytism, i.e., primarily for the sake of material ends. The present paper seeks to understand how secularism yields an understanding of spirituality and how and why spiritual terrorism is most widespread among certain repressive societies who object reforms and other expressions of dissent considering violence as the only way to completely reconfigure the social order to establish a spirit of peace which is in harmony with their faith. Against this backdrop, the paper also analyses how the Gandhian philosophy can be used to understand the nexus between secularism, terrorism and the spirit of peace in the contemporary global scenario.

KEYWORDS: Terrorism, Secularism, Spirit of Peace, Gandhian Perspective

INTRODUCTION
Peace on earth today is deluding even with all the weapons of mass destruction and the technical know-how to reach the outer space. Mighty nations of the world also find themselves in the shackles of insecurity. For instance, cases of aggressive behavior by big powers like the Chinese aggression in the South China Sea, North Korea’s unauthorized nuclear weapons programme, Pakistan’s intrusive and insurgency efforts into India, frequently emerging mass civil unrest in most of the parts of

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Middle-East and Africa are some examples of how possession of weapons generate more insecurity today than security. Further, the global phenomenon of terrorism and religious fanaticism has made us realize that international and global peace is not dependent on the deadly weapons we, as nations, possess (Vijayam 2004: 71). The spirit of peace lies in the ability of the nations to build strong international and regional relations with each other. Hence, the need for the hour is to look for an alternative to violence, and the solution naturally lies in the Gandhian methods of peace and non-violence.

Non-violence, for Gandhi, was not merely a philosophy rather a plan of action to be applied on a collective level to be treated as a potent weapon in the hands of the common masses striving for national liberation. In other words, non-violence was a means to achieve the ultimate end of discovering the truth. The truth could not be discovered, according to Gandhi, without a firm conviction based on the participation of the body and mind resulting in a change in the whole way of life and consciousness while remaining closer to nature. In brief, the identification of the individual self with the whole cosmos while subsequently retaining the individuality constituted the idea of ‘non-violence’. Religion here plays a significant role in propelling the individual to continually strive to refine his/her thoughts, action and behavior, thus working towards one’s spiritual development and the refinement of inner-self (Xaxa & Mahakul 2009: 47).

In the twenty-first century, the perverted ideology of terrorism is quickly attracting young youth to various terrorist organizations of the world, including the Islamic State that relies heavily on the thrill of violence, the seduction of sex and an assurance of a meaningful life as a Jihadi1. Besides expressing anger over perceived injustices to the religious and ethnic minorities by the majority community, most of the terrorists take immediately satisfying radical steps to obtain meaning through self-sacrifice, an eagerness to die for an incomprehensible millenarian cause (Chanda, 2015). However, the backbone of the predominant model for political violence in the modern world rests on terrorism incited in the name of religion. The present paper is thus an attempt to understand violence, terrorism and its nexus with religion and the spirit of peace from a Gandhian perspective.

The role and the activities of the Indian anarchists and Hindu militant nationalists who saw violence as the only solution to break the British rule in India, according to Juergensmeyer, a Professor of Sociology, played a significant role in sharpening Gandhi’s views about violent struggle. Gandhi challenged the logic of the militant nationalists on the grounds of political realism apprehending that the methods the militants used for sporadic acts of terrorism and guerilla warfare against the British military would become part of India’s national character. Gandhi has sketched out a non-violent approach, in his book Hind Swaraj, beginning with an example of the nature of the conflict. He always insisted on looking at the real cause of conflict rather than on a specific clash between individuals. Since for Gandhi, every conflict was a contestation at two levels, i.e., between persons and between principles. Moreover, behind every fighter was the more significant issue and every fight was on some level, an encounter between differing ‘angles of vision’ illuminating the same truth (Juergensmeyer 2007: 31-32).

GANDHI, SECULARISM AND HUMAN LIFE

Gandhi’s philosophy of life was based on a secular ideology, which he defined as ‘Sarvadharma Sambhav’ meaning equal respect for all faiths. Religion is a way of life since it binds people together by inculcating the values of equality, brotherhood and virtues of toleration. Considering religion as one’s concern, Gandhi believed in the non-interference of the state in the religious matters of the
individuals. Further, linking secularism to a way of life, Gandhi maintained that ‘love of truth is the love of God’ and that ‘service to mankind is service to God’. In other words, Gandhi believed that an individual’s religion must be expressed in ‘service to the helpless’.

However, given the contemporary trends in international terrorism, it can be rightly said that term terrorism is an ideologically contested and emotionally charged concept, where some refuse to use it considering it either hopelessly vague or carrying unhelpful pejorative implications. However, terrorism sometimes tends to be used as a political tool, a means of determining the legitimacy, or illegitimacy of a group or a political movement under consideration. This raises questions about the very nature of terrorism as to whether it is an evil in itself and beyond any moral justification (Heywood 2011: 285).

For instance, those who say that Islamic jihad was merely for the defence of the ‘homeland of Islam’ weaken the greatness of the Islamic way of life and consider it less significant than their ‘homeland’. The case of defence of the ‘homeland of Islam’ means the defence of Islamic beliefs, the Islamic way of life and the Islamic community. This, however, does not seem to be the ultimate objective of the Islamic movement of jihad. Instead, it is a means to establish the Divine authority within, making it the headquarters for the movement of Islam to be carried out throughout the world (Derian 2012: 207). Gandhi was both a reformer as well as a revolutionary, for he never compromised with anything that he thought was bad, immoral or evil in any form. He, however, was always of the opinion that by terrorizing the minds of the people, no objectives can be achieved, whether good or bad, divine or evil.

Being secular for Gandhi meant doing good of all. However, he was always disappointed at the fact that the degeneration of India’s democratic fabric has created chaos in every walk of life, resulting in frustration in every avenue of social effort. These undesirable conditions, according to Gandhi, are getting manifested in forms of increasing militancy, terrorism, communal and other riots resulting in balkanizing the country and weakening the hold of the government on the masses. Violence and frustration among the masses erupt when the state acquires the license to waste scarce resources with a profit motive. Even more disappointing is the fact that around 58 per cent of the Indian population still lives below the poverty line, and the number of educated unemployed has risen to millions. Had Gandhi been alive, he would not have allowed India to spend extensively towards the stockpiling of arms. He also would not have allowed the evils in the democracy to grow unabated seeking into every fibre of our political life. Non-violence was his cardinal philosophy and service to humanity, his religion (Mathur 1989: 52-53).

Again, while the mainstream approaches view terrorism as an attack on civilized or humanitarian values, certain radical scholars argue that terrorism and other forms of political violence may advance the very cause of political justice countering other more widespread forms of violence or abuse, implying that they are justifiable (Heywood 2011: 285). Gandhi, however, strove to build a secular society free from any religious interference, especially in the matters of the state. Considering religion as a personal matter, he believed that the reason why the term ‘secularism’ was not frequently used in the pre-independent India was that Indian nationalism was mostly secular during those days. In other words, India never wanted partition of the country on religious grounds (Vijayam 2004:72). Perhaps this was the reason why an overwhelming majority of Muslims opted to stay back in India even after the brutal phase of partition.
GANDHI, PEACE EDUCATION AND VIOLENCE

In the contemporary age of atomic power with the deadliest weapons of mass destruction, the future of humanity does not depend on any further production of deadly weapons rather depends entirely on building an alternative to violence. That, according to the Gandhian perspective is, a non-violent resistance since Gandhi always opined that weapons cannot bring peace and that peace is possible only through dialogue and goodwill (Vijayam 2004: 72).

The adoption of goodwill and moral means for the realization of the ultimate end of life, according to Gandhi, requires ‘self-purification’ and one of its chief elements is Ahimsa (Non-violence). Ahimsa, for him, meant avoiding injury in thought, word or deed, to anything on earth. In brief, it means love for all creations of God and to work selflessly for the good of his fellow beings, something that would ultimately result in the overall development of human society. The performance of such a moral role by any individual, according to Gandhi, primarily rests on and is influenced by education as received by the individual during his/her formative years. Gandhi, therefore, prescribed for a specific scheme of education known as the ‘Nayi Talim’ meaning new education wherein every child ought to be educated and trained for the realization of his/her noble goals in life and also strive for just social order (Xaxa & Mahakul 2009:42-43).

Although not a philosopher in a specialized sense, Gandhi’s philosophical affirmations through his insights into aspects such as ahimsa, satyagraha, swadeshi, peace and truth are nothing less than his reflections on peace education that have more value than the mainstream ‘academic’ philosophy, although his formulations of peace education reflect his commitment to the absolute ideals of ahimsa (non-violence) and satya (truth), they are mainly shaped by his changing and conflicted reactions to the specific yet contextualized structures of a British colonial education. For Gandhi, these influences had socialized ‘modern’ Indians to adopt western models and subsequently to look down upon their own traditional Hindu and other Indian values. The real goal of education, for Gandhi, was liberation, in so far as, it provides a means for serving the needs of others, liberates oneself from all forms of servitude and domination, and leads to one’s ethical and spiritual liberation. Thus, one of the significant contributions of Gandhi is towards peace education since his scheme of education mainly rests on simple living and the development of non-violent relations that result in the integrated training of body, mind and spirit. This approach to life through peace education would suffice to shun any form of violence in contemporary society (Allen 2007: 290-294).

The relevance of his peace education lies in his multi-dimensional analyses of the nature of violence along with the structural violence of the status quo. For instance, he believes that educational violence (violence emanating from the way the model of the education system is structured) cannot be separated from linguistic, economic, psychological and other forms of violence. The way the British colonial education in India structured the values and goals of the educational model, to a great extent, inflicted severe psychological and cultural violence on colonized Indians. Similarly, while identifying violence with human-caused oppression, exploitation, injustice and suffering, Gandhi acts as a catalyst for rethinking our views on terrorism and violence. As such, one of the most significant contributions of Gandhi’s approach to violence is to understand the multi-dimensional structures of the violence of status quo by analyzing how modern education has ‘commodified’ students as a means to some corporate end. Thus, making education an attempt to increase their market-driven exchange value. Gandhian peace education, on the other hand, can teach us to empathize with others by moulding our language and practising non-violent interventions that can break escalating causal cycles of violence that are on the brink of explosion (Allen 2007: 297-298).
GANDHI VS TERRORISM

Terrorism in the name of religion is one of the most predominant models of global political violence, and it rests on a strong belief that an ‘other-worldly’ power has ordered or instead sanctioned terrorist violence for preserving the glory of God. In this use, the use of violence is a form of communication, especially when other possible forms of communications fail.

Rejecting the notion that the goal justifies the means, Gandhi staunchly argued that since the ends and the means were ultimately the same, if we fight violently, we would establish a pattern of violence that would be part of any solution to the conflict, no matter how noble the cause may be. For instance, he once asked ‘if terrorists were successful in ousting the British from India, then who will rule in their place?’ He answered that it would be the ones who had killed in order to liberate India and that ‘India can gain nothing from the rule of murderers’. However, Gandhi was obvious in concluding that ‘Heroic violence is less sinful than cowardly non-violence’. In other words, he believed that inaction at a time of conflagration is inexcusable and that since cowardice is beneath contempt, fighting it is non-violent. What can be derived from this is a Gandhian justification of an act of violence to halt an act of terrorism (Juergensmeyer 2007: 33-34).

CONCLUSION

Terrorism for Gandhi was more of a body of ideas which necessitated a thorough examination in order to understand the attitude of those who carry out terrorist activities. Terrorists, according to him, were not to be left free but were to be treated as misguided soldiers rather than monsters. The leading cause of terrorist activities was not a religion but the ideology that succeeds in garnering the support of a large chunk of masses and thereby misleading them to believe in other-worldly desires even after death. In precise, Gandhi believed in confronting the issues/ideas behind terrorism by alleviating the conditions that inspired and motivated actors to act in inappropriate and badly chosen ways. Similarly, he was against any violent posture adopted by the state that very often turned out to be coercive, and thus he was often termed as an anarchist. In short, proclaiming a ‘war on terror’ was tantamount to another form of terrorism. Although Gandhi would not expect the state to negotiate with difficult, violent extremists, he wanted the state to be aware of the strength/potential of public support in confronting the cause of terrorism. By applying Gandhian philosophy to understanding contemporary international terrorism, one may conclude that the spirit of peace can be established partly by acknowledging the dreams of several traditional Muslims in West Asia to be free from any American or European domination and also by establishing the moral character of a society that respects people of diverse cultures and is democratically governed.

ENDNOTES

1The term ‘jihad’ is an Arabic word which occurs nearly forty-one times in the Koran and which means “to endeavour, to strive, to struggle” in an effort towards a commendable aim. In a religious context, jihad can mean the struggle against personal sin or evil inclinations, efforts to improve society morally, or the act of spreading Islam in general (peacefully or by force).
3As interpreted from the work of Gandhi titled Collected Works, Vol. 51, p. 17.

SELECTED READINGS


