

---

## **Reconciliation Ahimsa and Gandhi**

---

**Dr. Seema Rohmetra,**

Sr. Assistant professor, University of Jammu, J&K, India

The contemporary era of twenty first century is being shaped by three major forces namely globalization, fragmentation and religious fundamentalism. Whereas, the emergence of globalization has contributed to a more hedonistic perception of life, fragmentation has led to the emergence of identity-based conflicts. Besides, fundamentalism has also resulted in the shaking of man's faith in the notion of divine sovereignty. Consequently the entire mankind is caught in a multidimensional crisis being showcased through conflicts of different types and at different levels. These conflicts have directly or indirectly contributed to the scaring challenges before mankind today. The issues like terrorism, population explosion, hedonism, human rights violations, socio-economic disparities racial discriminations, vanity of cultural superiority, , religious intolerance, poverty, exploitation of natural resources, oppression of weaker sections of the society, ecological imbalance are the major ones draining out the humanity and the human values from the global society . So today we are living in an age that is stained by cruelty, torture, conflict and violence, which are not natural conditions but are the scourges to be eradicated. Hence global ethics expound s that peace may be achieved by resolving various conflicts. Therefore a search is on for different mechanisms that can handle the conflictual situations in the best possible ways. In handling the different conflictual situations taking place at different levels, the approaches generally being adopted by the leaderships of different countries have been 'violence against violence'. But of the late it is being acknowledged that trying to handle violence with violence is further leading to violence and moreover if at all the peace is achieved, the peace is the negative peace that is peace of the graveyard or peace backed by sanctions. The purpose is therefore to break the cycle of violence by helping both victims and perpetrators heal. A strategy of reconciliation involving forgiveness and a commitment to nonviolence is the only hope that can immensely contribute towards healing relationships. The present paper firstly seeks to provide an understanding of the process of reconciliation from a western perspective. Secondly it would present key Gandhian concepts of truth and non-violence with their eastern moorings. Third, it aims to provide us the

intrinsic relationship between Reconciliation and The key Gandhian concepts of truth and Non-violence being the significant driving forces behind the process of faith based reconciliation .

### **1. Reconciliation : Western Perspective**

**Reconciliation is a rich and complex concept that cannot be explained by a single definition. It is a multifaceted , whose each face showcases a part of totality. However the essence of the concept deals with the healing of relationships at different levels - individual, societal, national, international and cosmic as well. As such, reconciliation is an amalgamation of socio-political and spiritual worlds , at the core of which lies the healthy inter personal relationships, providing a unique balance between individuality and collectivity. This faith based Reconciliation finds its essence in Abrahamic tradition<sup>1</sup>**

Reconciliation is an approach that promises the complete reformation of the existing conflictual relationships among the people. The commitment in this strategy can be attributed to the amazing power of this approach in contributing towards the process of self-healing through self-introspection which eventually leads to the healing of relationships, thus culminating towards a condition of positive peace. In this context, it is important to note that faith based reconciliation finds its roots in the values of pluralism, inclusion, peacemaking, social justice, forgiveness, healing collective wounds, sovereignty and atonement with God. **The principle of pluralism is the first basic requisite towards realization of a healthy relationship.**

**The principle of pluralism requires due respect for distinctions, while at the same time focusing on the basis of certain common ground. In other words, it is grounded in a respect for the dignity of every human being. Needless to mention that when the common ground is defined on the basis of ethnicity, culture, religion or language, it can never lead to unity, rather it leads to the ‘clash of civilizations’ ( term used by Samuel Huntington to describe an emerging post-Cold War world). The common ground therefore has to be constructed on the basis of certain core values like truth, love, non-violence, tolerance, justice and forgiveness. Whereas, pluralism**

---

<sup>1</sup> Brian Cox, *Faith based reconciliation: A Moral Vision That Transforms People and Societies, USA, Xlibris Corporation, 2007, P.19*

**constitutes the foundational aspect of faith based reconciliation ,the important healing component behind this transformational process is Forgiveness . Forgiveness is quite often used when one of talks about religion. In context of religion it is generally understood in terms of individual sinners trying to make peace with God, however in the present day discourse, forgiveness has assumed a societal role, whereby people or the nations forgive others or receive forgiveness. Hence forgiveness in the contemporary scenario has got shifted from a private to public sphere, where it has come to perform a role in healing relationships. The more vivid understanding can be received from the Greek notion of forgiveness which means ‘to release from liability to suffer punishment or penalty; to let go, release or remit: and to cancel a debt in full means that you absorb the liability someone else deserves to pay. Forgiveness means to bestow favor freely or unconditionally that is undeserved and cannot be earned.**

Further, many psychologists identify forgiveness as an intentional and voluntary process, driven by a deliberate decision to forgive thus leading to decreased motivation to retaliate or maintain estrangement from an offender and also requires letting go of negative emotions towards offender. Forgiveness is a unilateral act, an act of the will and not the emotions, which liberates both the offender and the victim from an interdependent bondage. It does not mean to keep waiting till one feels like forgiving because if one keeps waiting, one can never forgive. Rather it’s a choice and a deliberate act on part of the victim. Through the process of forgiving not only is the victim released from his /her hurt, even the offender is also liberated from his/her guilt. It therefore involves both forgiveness and repentance as individuals and communities to create the possibility of a better future together.

Being a strong driving force behind reconciliation, the process of forgiveness is enriched by four important attributes namely memory, forbearance, empathy and healing of relationships. Donald Shriver in his work has eloquently focused upon the attribute of forgiveness.<sup>1</sup> His multidimensional description suggests that an act of forgiveness begins first with moral judgement, secondly, it abandons vengeance and subscribes to forbearance. Thirdly, it elicits empathy for the enemy’s humanity and finally it aims at repairing a broken human relationship.

---

<sup>1</sup> Donald Shriver Jr., *An Ethic For Enemies: Forgiveness In policies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pg. 6-9

In this context it is important to mention that earlier forgiveness was generally associated with forgetting as its important attribute. “Forgive and Forget” was a very common phrase applied in re-building relationships. But of the late, especially after having witnessed and heard the forgiveness stories from South Africa to Latin America, the phrase “Forgive and Remember” seems like a wiser safeguard. This can be attributed to the assurance that lies at the root of the entire process of forgiveness using memory attribute. The assurance is that we are working towards building process in the light of past events and traumas without defying and denying them. In fact the attribute of Memory helps us to interpret and introspect the past episodes in the light of present situation and future perspectives. This process subsequently leads to an evolution of a liberating experience which not only makes us feel that we need not be obsessed by the misdeeds, or the injustice done in the past, but also generates empathy towards the opponent and that is what is required for a non-violent peace practitioner.

## **2. Reconciliation : A process towards Restorative Justice**

The healing process involved in Reconciliation based on forgiveness thus calls for a hermeneutical exercise requiring dialogue with the ‘self’ and application of interpretive skills essentially aiming at healing of the relationships not only at the individual level but also at the societal level. The ultimate purpose of such an exercise is restoration of harmony and achievement of justice. One of the important implications of social reconciliation is its emphasis on realization of justice not in the conventional legal terms (which requires the conduct of the trials ,identification of the guilt and administration of punishment without paying much heed to the healing of the hostility involved between the parties) but to identify the mechanisms which can rebuild and reconstruct the harmonious relationships between the parties involved. The entire process of restorative justice emanates from an understanding of the common good that forms the base of a healthy positive society. Following the Abrahamic tradition Divine has revealed some codes of conduct in every religion and these codes regulate our relationship not only with the ‘self’ but also with others. These codes constitute the basic fabric of harmonious societies. Rooted in the philosophy of interdependence and interconnectedness , they showcase the ethic of “being there for each other” They believe self as a part of greater whole and that is society at large thus strengthening the dictum ‘*I am because we are*’ rather than the individualistic axiom of “*I think therefore I am*”.

Restorative Justice is essentially a process with an aim to heal the relationships with a complete focus upon three pertinent elements : the offenders, the victims and the community.<sup>1</sup> In that sense it is an inclusive and holistic process aiming at reconciliation in a society. While it seeks justice for the victim, it also explores the ways to restore harmony between the three parties. In other words, In this process, the victims take an active role, the offenders are made to realize the wrong deeds on their part, thus encouraging them to repair the harm they've done by apologizing, and then moving ahead for restitution and rectification. The process of restorative justice not only leads to the healing of the present relationships but also aims at ensuring welfare of all.

In the ultimate analyses the process of restorative justice takes place in different stages .First, the encounter of both parties. This step involves the offender, the victim, the community and any other party who was involved in the initial crime. Second, the amending process takes place, wherein, the offender(s) will take the steps necessary to help repair the harm caused. Third, reintegration begins. In this phase, restoration of both the victim and the offender takes place. In addition, this step also involves the community and others who were involved in the initial crime. Finally, the inclusion stage provides the open opportunity for both parties to participate in finding a resolution.

### **Reconciliation : Mechanism Involved**

A society comprises of certain essential elements namely systems, structures, relationships, hearts, principalities.<sup>2</sup> Systems refer to the basic foundation of a given society, the ideology based on certain values, world view and purpose for its corporate life. Structures refer to the organizational set-ups and institutions which make the system workable. Relationships refer to the the complex interplay of socialization, voluntary association, power sharing and so on and so forth. It is in this backdrop of relationships that the dynamics of collective identity asserts themselves and regulates how we look at “us” vs. “them”. In this context it is pertinent to mention that where as the secular models of social justice focus only on the systemic and structural changes, thereby overlooking the need to heal human relationships, the faith based social justice aims at the spiritual transformation of the hearts of the entire society through the exercise of the twin processes of self healing as well as social healing. In the words of

---

<sup>1</sup> Howard Zehr, *Changing Lenses*, Scottsdalepa, Herald press, 1995,p.181

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, no.1,p.70-71

Brian Cox, “Transforming the soul of community also involves prophetic voices touching the moral consciences of the privileged group that leads to genuine repentance on their part : a change of heart leading to changed thinking, leading to changed behavior. Transforming the soul of the community also involves spiritual renewal through Divine intervention that converts peoples hearts and motivates them to overturn systemic injustice and seek God’s ancient vision for the political order and civil society. It recognizes that , more often than not, the greatest barrier to the common good is not unjust structures but hardened hearts. In conclusion, Social Justice is the fourth core value of faith- based reconciliation, and the means to implementation is transforming the soul of a community that leads to the common good”<sup>1</sup>

What makes this approach different from other conflict handling mechanism is the methodology in approaching the problem. Whereas in other conflict handling mechanisms, like adjudication, arbitration, and for that matter even negotiation and mediation, the approach used for establishing responsibility is adversarial. In these processes the parties defend their sides without owning any responsibility to themselves until the opponent proves the guilt to his or her satisfaction or to the satisfaction of the third party involved. Whereas on the other hand faith based reconciliation involves voluntary effort to own and acknowledge the responsibility and guilt, self introspection leading to self-correcting measures thereby healing the relationships thus evolving a condition of positive peace.

According to Hizkias Asefa, The faith based reconciliation is based on certain fundamental ingredients<sup>2</sup>

The important ingredients of this moral approach are:

1. Honest acknowledgement of the injury each party has inflicted on the other.
2. Sincere regrets for the wrong done.
3. Readiness to opologize for ones role in inflicting the injury.
4. Readiness of the conflicting parties to ‘Let go’ of the anger and bitterness caused by the conflictual situation.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid

<sup>2</sup> Hizkias Assefa ‘The Meaning of Reconciliation’, Available on [http://www.gpac.net/documents/pbp/part1/2\\_reconc.htm](http://www.gpac.net/documents/pbp/part1/2_reconc.htm).

5. Sincere effort to redress the past grievances that led to the conflictual situation and then compensating the damage done.
6. Lastly, entering into a new positive relationship

### **Gandhian Model of Reconciliation Based on Truth and Ahimsa**

A little less than hundred years, Mahatma Gandhi of India rose on to the world's stage and challenged the people of India to fight British colonial power and regain the country's independence. However, his call was not a call to armed militancy, rather it was a call to army based upon the principles of truth and non violence. The reconciliation approach of Mahatma Gandhi based on the twin principles of truth and non-violence which he not only preached but also experimented with in the soils of India and South Africa left a message and hope for all the times to come. So much so that people across the globe later have followed his strategy on protecting the human races from exploitation and in restoring peace in different parts of the globe .Infact, the Gandhian vision of reconciliation has proved itself as an approach going a long way in restoration of the interpersonal bonds between the conflicting mindsets.

The concept of truth or 'satya' was most close to Gandhi's heart. The word Satya (truth) is derived from the word Sat which means 'being'. So anything that exists is truth. The ultimate aim of man is the realization of that truth. Gandhi's truth is not about the accuracy or falsehood of any statement, rather its something to do with the attunement of the soul to the ground of divine being which means rising above the vested interests and thinking about in terms of the righteousness. That is why the other name Gandhi gave to truth is God. He often used the two interchangeably but preferred to say Truth is God rather than God is Truth.<sup>1</sup>

This was indeed the basic tool which Gandhiji used to galvanize his people into action. Another important aspect of truth which Gandhiji touched upon was the multidimensional nature of truth, because of which no one is able to know the absolute truth.

This can be owed to the fact that what one perceives as truth may not be perceived in the same manner by other .The way each one of us

---

<sup>1</sup> Young India, july 30,1931, 196, as quoted in Joan Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict*, (Princeton: N.J. Princeton University Press, 1958,pg.17).

interprets a reality is different from one another. Each one of has a different perspective to look at the same issue. In other words humans are limited in the way they perceive reality and this makes them vulnerable to errors and therefore in need of change. Therefore no man has any right to blame and punish others and do violence to them simply because men are constantly seeking and interpreting truth from their own perspective. Gandhi made use of this human relativity and multi-dimensional nature of truth in developing his thesis that the pursuit of truth does not admit of violence being inflicted on the one's opponent but that he (the opponent) must be weaned from error by patience and sympathy. It is from this multidimensional nature of truth that led to the evolution of Gandhian concept of Ahimsa which is an important step towards realization of truth in as much as it directs our attention from supposedly an external enemy to an internal one and enables us to conquer the later in order to win over the former. For Gandhi Ahimsa and Truth are so intrinsically connected to each other, that it is impossible to separate the two from each other. Whereas truth is constitutes the end, ahimsa is the means towards its realization. To quote Roy Ramashray, "For Gandhi, the knowledge of the highest truth is the aim of self development. But the quest of this highest truth can be pursued through non violence, which for Gandhi, is the means par excellence of the attunement of the soul to the Divine. But this is a means which is beyond the calculations of instrumental reasoning. In other words, it is not an object that can be possessed and made one's own. It is a psychological condition, a mental state, which develops through the process of self-transformation."<sup>1</sup> The other name which Gandhi gives to such a process of self-transformation, based on non violence is 'Satyagraha'. The name Satyagraha itself means holding on to truth.(satya means truth and agraha means insisting on something, without becoming obstinate and uncompromising). In so far as it is concerned to discover truth, the theory of Satyagraha is an integral part of his theory of truth: in so far as it is an attempt to insist on and hold on to truth and realize truth it forms a significant rather inalienable part of his theory of Non-violence. Thus Gandhi's theory of Satyagraha is simultaneously both epistemological and political: an ideal combination of knowledge and action, which very often is misunderstood when seen as either alone. Satyagraha is the mechanism devised towards the conflict reconciliation. It is inclusive of both discursive and persuasive constituents. As every single individual has his own way of looking at an issue i.e. the partial truth with

---

<sup>1</sup> Roy Ramashray, *Understanding Gandhi*, New Delhi, Ajanta publications, 1996, p.38.



himself which is different than the others point of view, the discursive constituent is to get into the others shoe and understand his way of interpretation, thereby trying to appreciate the force of each others arguments and arrive at a platform on the win-win situation for the two In this context it can be said that the Gandhian methodology is Hegelian in nature that is drawing the partial truths of the conflicting parties ( thesis and antithesis) and reaching at the ultimate Truth which is whole(synthesis) based upon the insights of both and acceptable to both.<sup>1</sup> This process is based upon certain assumptions:

Since neither party represents the absolute truth each must enter a rational discussion in spirit of humility and with an open mind.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, as each party sees the truth differently, a sincere effort must be made by each one in looking at the issue from others perspective. Though there is every possibility that the opponent may not at all get convinced with the others point of view and might ultimately disagree with him, but at least an element of sincerity and respect towards other point should be there. And, although they are always ready to negotiate and to reach an honorable settlement, their posture is not that of a bargainer. They put forward proposals that they genuinely believe in and stick to them or modify them in the light of their understanding of what truth and love demand in the developing situation. Hopefully, what they seek through the conflict is a deeper realization of the truth, a new level of understanding, by both parties. Even if the rational discussion fails in resolving the conflict at least it serves an important purpose of deepening the mutual understandings thereby reducing their hostilities towards each other. Satyagraha therefore as a non-violent tripartite strategy is a blend of rational discussion, self-imposed suffering and political pressure. The first makes an appeal to head, the second to the heart. and third is directed towards conditions.

The truth which forms the basis of this non-violent strategy therefore not only excludes violence but also is fuelled by the force which is not external but internal spiritual force. Satyagraha thus is also named as the “soul force” or “truth force”. Raghavan Iyer quotes Gandhiji saying, “Satyagraha is not physical force. A Satyagrahi (Person involved in nonviolent resistance) doesnot inflict force pain on the adversary: he does not seek his destruction. A Satyagrahi never resorts to fire arms. In the use of Satyagraha there is no ill will whatever...Satyagraha is pure soul-force.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid

<sup>2</sup> Young india 19<sup>th</sup> March 1925

Louis Fischer comments: “ For Gandhi satyagraha was “ the vindication of Truth not by infliction of suffering on the opponent but on one’s self ...The opponent must be ‘weaned from error by patience and sympathy’, weaned not crushed, converted not annihilated. You cannot inject new ideas into a man’s head by chopping it off: neither will you infuse a new spirit into his heart by piercing it with a dagger”<sup>1</sup>

Emphasizing upon the role of non-violence, Mahatma Gandhi once said, “It is the acid test of non-violence that in a non-violent conflict there is no rancor left behind, and in the end the enemies are converted to friends that was my experience in South Africa with General Smut. He started with being my bitterest opponent and critic. Today he is my warmest friend”<sup>2</sup>

### **3. Reconciliation East and West : Points of Convergence**

Though the term reconciliation has a strong Christian religiocultural rootedness, it is reassuring that the Gandhian concepts of Satyagraha and ahimsa share some remarkable similarities:

- Nonviolence and Reconciliation are deeply rooted in God. They both get their dynamism and strength from the eternal belief that all beings are a spark of divinity. Love of God demands harmony in all the relationships that exist on earth, and this harmony and balance in nature can be realized through the practice of divine principles of love and forgiveness.
- Although the Gandhian concept of Satyagraha has eastern moorings, yet the process of self-transformation based on the soul force and intention to heal the relations and reconcile showcase clearly the western perspective of reconciliation which relies on the principle of forgiveness and social justice. Reconciliation through the self reformatory process of Satyagraha is very much akin to the four aspects of forgiveness mentioned by Shriver, that is moral judgement forbearance, empathy and repairing of the broken relationships.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Gandhi Marg*, Quarterly journal of Gandhi Peace Foundation, Volume 31, Number 3, April-June 2009, pg391.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Attenborough, *The Words Of Gandhi* ,NewMarket Press,1982, Pg.45

## *Reconciliation Ahimsa And Gandhi*

- The realization of the multi-dimensional nature of truth plays a vital role in the 'satyagraha strategy' of Gandhi which again reflects the core principle of faith based reconciliation that is 'pluralism'. As the application of the principle of pluralism is based upon giving due respect and recognition to all the distinctions existing ,it fully co-incides with Gandhian philosophy which also gives importance to presence of certain core values which need to be recognized, respected and followed by one and all.
- Finally, the assumption of human interdependence and interconnected that forms the essence of application of Ahimsa constitutes an important part of reconciliatory process that intends to bring together the victim, perpetrator and the community through restorative justice.