



Gandhian Conflict Resolution: A Philosophical Critique

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Abstract

Conflicts are primarily an expression of opposing interests. It means a state of open, prolonged warfare, truculence, conflict, hostility, enmity, struggle, war etc. Conflicts are ineluctable and widespread elements in our society as well in the entire globe. However, human beings have been attempting conflict-resolution since times immemorial. Conflict resolution is a method of handling disputes and reaching a mutually acceptable solution. There are two ways of resolving conflicts; through violence and through nonviolence. Gandhi stood for resolving of conflicts through nonviolent means. He also underlined the need for moral conversion in which both the conflicting parties decides to end the conflict with complete cessation of violence. Shortcuts are avoided and transparency is maintained during the process of conflict resolution. There are various Gandhian approaches and methods to conflict resolution, but there is a slow pace in the approaches and methods – and may involve a limited understanding of the dynamics of the dispute. Gandhian perspective on conflict resolution also requires significant sacrifice and commitment from the practitioners. Gandhian approach to conflict resolution is commonly known as *Satyagraha* (सत्याग्रह), which is basically a nonviolent method. But, his methods and approaches to conflict resolution did not square with the principles of a universal and holistic model of resolving conflicts. And his limited philosophical viewpoint on conflict resolution may therefore prove misleading. With regard to conflicts, violence, nonviolence and peace, Gandhian approach does not provide all the answers. Nowadays, grave conflicts and disagreements between nations are attempted to be solved through war. Nations having differences of opinion between them regarding crucial matters, tend to solve the conflicts through the means of military actions rather resorting to resolutions or agreements. This paper explores Gandhian standpoint on conflict resolution and also specifically presents a generic and strategic critique of Gandhian conflict resolution and agrees while supporting a universal and comprehensive approach to conflict resolution for the contemporary world.

Keywords: Conflicts, Conflict Resolution, Gandhi, Criticism and Contemporary World

Introduction

Before I delineate the Gandhian approach, method, or technique to conflict resolution, it is mandatory to broadly comprehend the concepts of conflict and conflict resolution. Everybody desires the conflict-free world, but conflicts have characterized the entire course of human history. The conflict in any society, state or nation is as old as the society, state or nation itself. We observe numerous inter and intra-regional conflicts within nations or states. Currently almost no nation or state remains untouched by conflict or by its consequences. Whether we talk about the Middle East, South Asia, Europe or United States of America, Africa etc., all these countries have paid so much in the name of ethnic conflicts (Bawa & Singh, 2017, pp. 15-16). In fact, conflicts have been the salient features of human societies throughout the globe. Of course, in the ongoing march of society conflicts can be resolved, unless it involves a serious or life-threatening issue that is entirely non-negotiable. Conflicts

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are usually associated with groups or societies where societal pressure as well as principles does play an interactive role (Laju, 2015, p. 522).

Weber (1991) illustrated the conflicts as:

‘Whenever incompatible activities occur’, when two groups or parties wish to perform acts which are commonly contradictory, when there is ‘a state of tension among two groups or parties irrespective of how it has created or how it is terminated’, when there is ‘the active striving for one’s preferred outcome which, if achieved, prevents the achievement by others of their own preferred outcome, thereby producing antagonism’, and ‘when one individual, society, nation, or even supranational community needs something that can be achieved only at the cost of what another individual or group also needs’”(p. 20).

In every state or nation, the resolution of conflicts, and restoring normal conditions is an on-going cycle that can be managed by fostering values of co-existence among the people. Conflict is a part and parcel of life, whether it arises in interactions between individuals or groups, organizations, nations or states. Conflicts could be social, religious, regional, national or international (Haq & Dar, 2015, p. 23).

The expression “Conflict Resolution” can have different meanings to different people. This expression is frequently used synonymously with “Dispute Settlement” and “Conflict Management”, and conflict resolution also signifies “Reconciliation” (Laju, 2015, p. 521). Conflicts are solved in various ways, including; avoidance, mediation, adjudication, arbitration and negotiation. Contingent on the nature of the conflict and the situation involved, some methods may work better than others. Those attempting to conquer a conflict by unilateral means, for instance, by using coercion or withdrawing, may suffer the personal costs of either making a resolution more complex than it need be by increasing the hostility of the opponent or by absolutely failing to resolve the conflict (Weber, 1991, p. 23). However, conflict resolution is becoming more associated with incompatible disputes and cultural diversity than with two groups or parties (Laju, 2015, p. 522).

Moreover, conflict resolution can be designated as a process in which interlocuters or groups reach an agreement that settles their differences, disagreements, or problems and brings an end to all violent actions between them. A conflict exists whenever incompatible activities occur (Haq & Dar, 2015, p. 24). Weber (2001) mentions that according to John Wear Burton¹ (2nd March 1915 – 23rd June 2010):

“Conflict resolution as a problem-solving exercise that aims at the eradication of the sources of conflict, not only at the management of the conflict or the settlement of the manifest dispute. According to him, conflicts may be managed and disputes may be settled without conflicts being resolved” (p. 498).

Methodology

This study adopts a multidimensional comparative approach that integrates theoretical deliberations supported by historical, analytical, and empirical evidence from political philosophers and historians.

1 “Australian public servant and author; pioneering interpreter and analyst of the position of needs in conflict situations”.



Gandhian Standpoint on Conflict Resolution

Human history demonstrates that how remarkable men have constantly writhed social injustice and brawled to alleviate human suffering. Out of such men of destiny, the twentieth century produced one outstanding leader – *Mahātmā*² Gandhi (Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, 2nd October 1869 – 30th January 1948), who confronted the challenges of his time with a profound understanding of the historical demands of his era. He sought to address the hopes and needs of the people through his own distinctive methods and endeavored to create a transformative approach to socio-political reform. His creativity lies in the formulation of a new technique of *Satyagraha*³ for social change (Bawa & Singh, 2017, p. 16). It would not be quite accurate to associate *Satyagraha* with either civil disobedience or non-cooperation although both are related to *Satyagraha* (Richards, 1991, p. 51).

Normally, two kinds of forces are assumed: (i) physical and (ii) spiritual. According to Bawa & Singh (2017), Gandhi stated that:

“Generally, people are familiar with the physical force. Physical force is based on violence. Violence cannot solve any issue; it creates more violence. Physical force promotes only one-sided triumph and it defeats the other side. The real issue of conflict is not resolved by this approach. Gandhi was against the application of physical force” (p. 16).

The purpose of *Satyagraha* is to stop the application of physical or brute force, by the application of soul force or moral power (Haq & Dar, 2015, p. 25). For Gandhi, conflict resolution did not imply the eradication of maladjustment; rather, it is signified advancement towards increasingly meaningful forms of adjustments. This can be attained only when violent relations are changed into non-violent relations utilizing the energies of the opponents in a conflict, for the attainment of higher integration (Laju, 2015, p. 533).

Satyagraha has been explained in different ways. It has been mentioned as the weapon of the strong and not of the weak. It is not possible for those who are weak to apply this soul force for it makes great demands on those who would use it. It bars the use of violence in any shape or form, whether in thought, speech, or deed. It resists an oppressor wholeheartedly but never by applying hatred or violence. It entails self-sacrifice and the willingness to bear eternal suffering valiantly. *Satyagraha* is a direct consequence of truth and nonviolence (Richards, 1991, pp. 48, 50). Gandhian approach, method, or technique of *Satyagraha* is based on the belief that the struggle for change is the most effective method of sociopolitical struggle, but more than that Gandhi thought that it is the morally correct way to conduct conflict resolution because only through a dialectical process can truth be arrived at, or at least approached, and such quest for truth is, according to him, the goal of human life. *Satyagraha* is above and beyond a set of actions. For instance, a boycott may be part of a *Satyagraha* campaign but if the underlying principles of *Satyagraha* are not present then a boycott alone cannot accurately be described as *Satyagraha* (Weber,

2 महात्मा, great soul, venerable, noble.

3 सत्याग्रह, *Satya* means ‘truth’ and *āgraha* ‘insistence’ or ‘holding firmly to’; “holding onto truth”, or nonviolent resistance, nonviolent direct action, militant non-violence, etc.



1991, pp. 42, 44). Moreover, *Satyagraha* is explained as an endless dialectical quest for truth; it is holding on to truth. It needs no physical assistance or material aid, and is amenable to practice by men, women, and children. It is universally applicable and it 'is to violence, and thus, to all oppression, all injustice, what light is to darkness' (Richards, 1991, p. 50).

One of the original contributions of Gandhi is to assemble the nonviolence doctrines in Buddhism and Jainism with the concept of truth, the Advaitic non-dualist concept of oneness of reality as in the *Upaniṣads*. According to Gandhi, God and Truth are interchangeable terms (Bhaneja, 2007, p. 221). In accordance with Bawa & Singh (2017), Gandhi stated that:

"Without nonviolence, it is not possible to seek and find Truth; they are like the two sides of the same coin. If one has to be *satyagrahi*⁴; one has to be nonviolent. Gandhi could never admit violence as a 'cleansing force'. He maintained that 'individuals or nations, who practice nonviolence, must be prepared to sacrifice their all except honour'. As a corollary, 'where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence'. Peace is more perfect than war because the legitimate aim of war is more perfect peace. War is 'mutual violence' which must breed hatred, revenge and acrimony – a poor foundation for greater peace. Nonviolent resistance brings out the issues into the open and approaches a new settlement in accord with truth. Truth has always functioned in the form of nonviolence or love. Truth is the basic factor of Gandhian concept of *Satyagraha*. Gandhi evolved *Satyagraha* as the most pragmatic and powerful technique of conflict resolution. Truth and nonviolence as its main elements are interconnected as ends and means. In accordance with Gandhi, the aim of *satyagrahi* is to seek for 'Ultimate Truth'" (p. 17).

Various interpreters and analysts of Gandhian philosophy have examined *Satyagraha* as a Gandhian technique, approach, or method of conflict resolution. Gandhian statements voluntarily reflect these principles; 'a *satyagrahi* must never forget the distinction between evil and the evil-doer; 'the essence of nonviolence technique is that it seeks to liquidate antagonism but not antagonists themselves; 'it is often forgotten that it is never the intention of a *satyagrahi* to embarrass the wrong doer'; 'the *satyagrahi*'s object is to convert, not to coerce, the wrong doer' (Weber, 2001, p. 495).

Nonviolence is the utmost powerful tool available to mankind. It holds greater forte than even the most destructive weapon ever created through human ingenuity. Gandhi stated that I have applied nonviolence in every walk of my life; domestic, institutional, economic, and political and this method or technique has never failed (Haq & Dar, 2015, p. 24). According to Gandhi, nonviolence meant not only non-injury, but active love and the positive will to sacrifice one for the sake of others; the use of nonviolence for the redressal of grievances and the correction of mistakes would not generally provoke any unfavorable or undesirable adverse reactions in the opponent. Under the moral pressure of nonviolence there is greater probability to introspect and change one's position. A *Satyagrahi* does not aim at the obliteration of

4 सत्याग्रही; practitioner of *Satyagraha*, an exponent of nonviolent resistance, especially as a form of political protest.



the opponent; instead, he/she tries to change the opponent's heart and win them over through kindness, understanding, and self-sacrifice. For Gandhi, the basic assumption of *Satyagraha* is that human nature is fundamentally spiritual, rational and good.

Therefore, *Satyagraha* is visualized by Gandhi as a creative technique for peaceful resolution of conflicts in the midst of modern methods and ways of life. The chief mission of *Satyagraha* activists is to make peace through conflict-intrusion, conflict-regulation, conflict-resolution, conflict-transformation, nonviolent direct action and constructive efforts (Laju, 2015, pp. 526-528). Hence, an understanding of *Satyagraha* as an approach, technique, or method of conflict resolution and as a way of life, its *raison d'être* and its operation, rests upon the understanding of these concepts; faith in human goodness, truth, nonviolence, self-suffering, the relationship of the means to the end, an elimination of coercion and fearlessness (Weber, 1991, pp. 50-51).

Critique of Gandhian Conflict Resolution:

According to Gandhi, nonviolence is the most genuine, effective, and straightforward path to manage the socioeconomic and political affairs of society. Nonviolence has the power to put together societies and providing opportunities to people for their growth and prosperity (Haq & Dar, 2015, p. 26). But, Gandhian approach to conflict resolution requires a significant sacrifice from its practitioners (*satyagrahis*). As Gandhi himself brought out that the path of *satyagrahi* demands self-suffering. However, most of us do not want suffering, everyone wants happiness and prosperity. Therefore, the path of *Satyagraha* is not the universally accepted or acceptable method, approach, or technique for conflict resolution (Bawa & Singh, 2017, pp. 17, 20). Nonetheless, Gandhi found that the term *Satyagraha* is too narrowly constructed, that it is supposed to be a weapon of the weak, that it could be characterized by hatred, and that it could ultimately manifest itself as violence (Weber, 1991, p. 6).

The pertinent question to be asked is as to whether Gandhi was an epitome of Indian traditions to whom nonviolence came naturally. Bawa & Singh (2017) stated that:

“Gandhian approach appears to be attracting more and more attention at first glance, but the practicality of Gandhian standpoint of conflict resolution needs verification, on the basis of some universal parameters. By going through Gandhian method, technique, or approach to conflict resolution, we could say that his apparently inadequate theoretical stand on conflict resolution can be misleading. It can be said that in conventional sense Gandhi was not a philosopher, and he has nothing to do with highly abstract and technical philosophical speculations. Most importantly, his method, technique, or approach to conflict resolution serves as a challenge and as a catalyst for having re-thought dominant positions and having more value for significant philosophical deliberation than most mainstream academics. Gandhian approach to conflict resolution faces various significant challenges and difficulties. However, his approach has great value in challenging dominant philosophical approaches and offering creative alternatives”.



“A good approach, technique, or method would be one that does not demand beliefs and assumptions and is based on explanations that we can comprehend. But, Gandhian approach is based on his own beliefs and assumptions. An approach, technique, or method should be natural and verifiable. Being natural, it has to be acceptable in a natural way to all human beings without any force thereof. But, Gandhian approach in certain aspects is not natural and demands sacrifice from the practitioners. However, Gandhian approach to conflict resolution was successful because of his personality. Everyone can not practice these methods. Gandhian approach to conflict resolution is not complete as it doesn't address to all the dimensions of human personality. An ideal approach, technique, or method must present a resolution to problems rather than just work on the symptoms of the problems. Negotiation and mediation techniques of conflict resolution are the mere solution to the symptoms of conflict not the resolution of the root cause of conflict. Gandhian approach to conflict resolution does not present any hope to the resolution of modern kinds of conflicts”.

“Gandhi was wrong to argue that *Satyagraha* never failed and that it was effective under all circumstances. If he had stated that it was a self-chosen way of being in the world and that one would die rather than kill, his standpoint would have made moral but not political sense. To his credit he asserted that it was meant to succeed and attain results. And that subjected his claim to a different kind of enquiry. Gandhi would have been wiser to claim not on one sovereign method of action but on a plurality of methods to be used singly or in combination with others as the situation required. Different circumstances require different responses, and violence might sometimes attain results that nonviolence is either unable or can attain only at an unacceptably high price in human suffering. Gandhi's *Satyagraha* has its limitations and he was wrong to claim 'sovereign efficacy' for it though, it is a powerful, novel, and primarily moral method of social change. Not surprisingly, it has been borrowed and experimented in various countries with appropriate adjustments to local circumstances. Moreover, it seems to be the case that *Satyagraha* can be applied to smaller but not to larger conflicts occurring in various spheres of human life” (pp. 19-20, 22).

On the other hand, Gandhian approach to war and national defence have frequently strongly criticized. For instance, Raman (a former follower of Gandhi) was incensed that, as India was threatened by the menace of Japanese invasion, Gandhi could support an absolutely non-violent approach. Weber (1991) stated that at this stage Gandhi was maintaining that:

“Men can slaughter one another for years in the heat of battle, for them it seems a case of kill or be killed. But if there is no danger of being killed yourself by those you slay, you cannot go on killing defenceless and unprotesting people endlessly. You must put down your gun in self-disgust. Raman argued that this would manoeuvre the country into a state of helplessness that will and does lead to bitterness and to frustration, not to the sublime adoption of a great new method of warfare of which Gandhi dreams” (pp. 116-117).



Weber (2001) also stated that:

“Another interpreter and analyst of Gandhian thought (Tidwell Alan) maintains that not all conflicts can be or should be resolved, some should be won. Gandhian technique of *Satyagraha* on theoretical level denies this on at least two levels. Firstly, in Gandhi’s approach, attempts should be made to resolve all conflicts and to convert all opponents so that the parties finish up on the same side. Yet, if this is not possible, it presents a way of struggle for justice that minimizes the possibility of excluding the chance of later conversion taking place. Secondly, as winning is not completely denied, the major aim of conducting conflict may be something beyond winning or losing, or even beyond a win-win resolution of the dispute; it may have more to do with an existential change of the individuals involved” (p. 505).

Conclusion

The above discussion, thus, brings out that the erroneous recognition of desires and needs are intensifying in humans because of unevaluated principles and assumptions. This is the key cause for different types of conflicts around us. The needs and desires of humans are associated with the physical facilities. Conflicts are also pigeonholed by apparent differences and negative emotional states. The problems in conflict can be assumed of as tangible and intangible, as needs, desires or beliefs. Frequently, conflict results in destructive ends. Cooperation and collaboration are generally presented as alternatives in conflicting circumstances. Conflict resolution is the process of resolving a conflict and finding a solution. It is best implicit as a working model with two key elements; “conflict management” and “negotiation”. Negotiation is a communication process for altering the negative emotional states in a conflict to emotional states that allow working out a solution to the conflict. Negotiation is also a communication process for aiding disputing parties to attain a result with regard to their differences.

In a conventional sense, Gandhi was never a philosopher. He adjusted himself in everyday issues and conflicts for the humanity and postulated his standpoint of nonviolence. He was surely a political leader, an extremely religious person, and in each character, he had his merits and demerits. Nonetheless, no one can deny that he was a most extraordinary man. Gandhian approach, method or technique of *Satyagraha* or nonviolent resistance, can be summarized as: “belief in unity of life and brotherhood of humankind; non-injury in thought, word, and deed; sense of sacrifice based on the values of equability and detachment; trusteeship in public service; love of one’s opponent; empathy and forgiveness, and intended respect for the State Laws”.

Gandhi always advocates the *Satyagraha* for conflict resolution, which seeks to resolve conflicts through self-sacrifice. However, occasionally, Gandhi had failed to realize that what he considered as a course of nonviolence could be perceived by others as a form of violence. In addition, *Satyagraha* attained a gesture and definite success in belligerent the conflicts. If Gandhi has been removed from the scene, *Satyagraha* has had no future. It was only his disposition that had been responsible for the success of *Satyagraha*. There are number of disagreements and inconsistencies in the concepts and approaches postulated by Gandhi for conflict resolution. Consequently, we have established general strategies and guidelines for the evaluation



and examination of any method, technique or approach that can be applicable and practical in the contemporary world. Gandhi had developed the method of *Satyagraha* so as to turn the fury and struggle of individual into an active socio-political force. But, in the contemporary world we cannot use *Satyagraha* as a political tool to struggle against atrocities and injustice as a remedy for the grievances of the masses. Hence, non-violent rhetoric, technique, method, or approach cannot be preached in any conflict despite the cultural milieu which may or may not alienate protesters from accepting its philosophy.

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