



**DISCOURSE ON GANDHI'S PHILOSOPHY OF NON-VIOLENCE AS A
MEANS OF SOCIAL CHANGE IN 21ST CENTURY AFRICA**

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Abstract

The 21st century in Africa has been marked by events which have made the human mind to question the possibility of effecting any real change in our societies through the use of non-violent means. The prevalence in the use of violence and acts of terror around the world has called for a re-examination of our values, beliefs and rationality as human beings and as higher animals especially the philosophy of non violence. The philosophy of Non violence has gained worldwide acceptance owing to the work of M.K. Gandhi, M.L. King Jnr, and others who employed non violence against the colonial rule of the British in India and also against the segregation practiced against African American people respectively. Many argue that non violence has outlived its usefulness because mankind is faced with new challenges which non violent approaches cannot provide solutions to. The question remains pertinent: has nonviolence outlived its usefulness? Can this philosophy still achieve positive results in the 21st century as it did in the past? This paper adopting the method of analysis holds that non violence is as potent now as it was in the past and can even be more effective to achieve positive social change in Africa but its success depends on the considering the modern challenges in Africa states and application of its principles as defined by M. K. Gandhi.

Keywords: Nonviolence, Africa, 21st Century, Social Change, Gandhi,

Introduction

“I cannot teach you violence, as I do not myself believe in it. I can only teach you not to bow your heads before any one even at the cost of your life.” Mahatma Gandhi

It is often said that, 'it is better to be violent, if there is violence in our hearts, than to put on the cloak of nonviolence to cover impotence'. Violence is not a new concept and has been the subject of several philosophical and peace discourses. The African continent has been a victim of violence during the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras. Africa has a recorded a lot wars, and other forms of violence like genocides, terrorism, ethnic cleansing, tribal or communal clashes, etc. Violence had been widespread in Africa through the course of her history but in the 21st century, Africa has witnessed an increasing wave of violence.

Nonviolence as adopted and practiced by M. K. Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jnr., Nelson Mandela, etc. is known to have yielded positive results. The results of nonviolence are clear for the rest of the world, these includes: the independence of India from British colonial rule, the successes of the civil rights movement in the United States and the realization of equal rights for colored people, the Arab spring, etc. Although there are no countries still living under colonial rule in Africa but there are still a lot of challenges facing African nations like poverty, insecurity, corruption, authoritarianism, conflicts, etc. In Africa, nonviolence has not taken a hold as many people now employ its tactics and are tapping into its potentials to solve some of the problems that plague the continent. Wars, violent communal clashes, and even domestic violence have become a daily item in the news. The potentials for nonviolence to effect real change in Africa have not been fully exploited.

Africa has cultivated and now thrives on a culture of violence much to her detriment. The Nigerian civil war, the Rwandan genocide, the war in the D.R.C, Liberia, Sierra Leone, to recent herdsmen attacks, banditry and terror attacks in many African countries are all examples that show how deeply violence has eaten into the social and political culture of Africans. In the 21st century, many scholars have raised the question if nonviolence can still produce same or better results if it is adopted. There are concerns over the rising rate of violence by individuals, societies and even governments in Africa. African countries are plagued with many social and political problems like corruption and mismanagement of state resources, ethnic clashes, social injustice and inequitable distribution of state resources, political violence, etc. Many scholars question the possibility of nonviolence providing results like it did during the time of Gandhi who was able to rally Indians round to participate in marches and civil disobedience walks to fight injustice and effect change in their society. Nigeria like other African countries is divided along ethnic and religious lines and the cries for revolution in the country have met a lot of hitches because of these very problems. How then can nonviolence work as a tool to effect the needed change in the society? This remains a pertinent question that this paper sets out to address.

The Nature and meaning of Nonviolence

The term nonviolence was coined by M. K. Gandhi in 1920. It is the English translation of the Sanskrit word Ahimsa (a: without and Himsa: violence, harm)The originality of the term nonviolence is the immediate emphasis on its pronunciation on the 'non' (or no in French) so as to say no! to violence even the mildest form always leads to a mimetic cycle from which it is difficult to then escape.The Merriam Webster Dictionary online defines Nonviolence as the abstention from violence as a matter of principle.Similarly, the Cambridge Dictionary also defines Nonviolence as a situation in which one avoids fighting or using physical force especially when trying to make political change.

While the tradition of nonviolence can be traced back to ancient Taoist Buddhist and Jewish scriptures, as well as the philosophy of the new testament and some of the resistance movements to the imperial edicts of Rome, it is mainly in the past hundred years that it has become an integral force in shaping people's lives and the political direction of their societies. Despite the growing awareness of nonviolence, there is widespread confusion about what nonviolence is. According to Gene Sharp "this confusion extends to such related terms as pacifism, nonviolent resistance and passive resistance. Two factors which have contributed to this confusion about the phenomena are relatively little known and that clarity of thought about them has often been handicapped by highly emotional attitudes among both proponents and opponents of these approaches." Hershberger distinguishes between nonviolence and pacifism: nonresistance to him describes the faith and life of those "who cannot have any part in warfare because the Bible forbids it and those who renounce all coercion even nonviolent coercion, for pacifism, it is a term which covers many types of opposition to war.

Identifying Nonviolence with certain historical experiences such as the independence process in India, the fall of the Berlin wall or the collapse of apartheid in South Africa is a common starting point. Similarly, nonviolence has been associated with certain historical personalities such as M. K. Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jnr., Aung San Suu Kyi, Petra Kelly, Dorothy Thompson and Nelson Mandela.

Contrary to the conception about nonviolence and those who equate it to avoiding engaging or tackling issues, Nonviolence does not postulate a world without conflict but rather shows people that resolving conflicts without violence is possible. Nonviolence does not equal cowardice, inaction or refraining from taking a stand in conflict; it may on the contrary, be required in order to trigger a conflict. In this vein, direct nonviolent action was for Gandhi and Martin Luther King, a way to bring

conflicts out in the open, so as to in Kings' words "create such a crises and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to listen is forced to confront the issue"

Gandhi's Philosophy of Nonviolence

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi also known as Mahatma Gandhi was born on 2nd October 1859 in Porbandar India, and died on 30th January 1948 in Delhi, he was an Indian lawyer, politician, social activist and writer who became the leader of the nationalist movement against British rule in India. He is recognized internationally for his advocacy for the application of the doctrine of Nonviolence and Satyagraha to achieve political and social progress. Satyagraha (derived from Sanskrit and Hindi meaning "holding onto truth") was introduced in the early 20th century by Gandhi to designate a determined but nonviolent resistance to evil. Gandhi's Satyagraha became a major tool in the Indian struggle against British imperialism and has also been adopted by other activists around the world such as Martin Luther King Jr in the fight against segregation and racism in the United States. Gandhi states that truth is the means of attaining Ahimsa "without Ahimsa, it is not possible to seek and find truth." Here, nonviolence is as identical to the principle of absolute truth and the means of its realization through the complete fulfillment of all moral virtues. Gandhi holds that the pursuit of ahimsa is a way of life where constant self-examination and rigorous discipline are combined with virtues such as humility, sincerity, and selfless service to others. Ahimsa for Gandhi is the greatest weapon available to mankind, it is mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction devised by the ingenuity if a man. According to this philosophy:

Satyagrahis i.e. disciples of Satyagraha, achieve correct insight into the real nature of any evil situation by observing a nonviolence of the mind, by seeking truth in a spirit of peace and love and by undergoing a rigorous process of self-scrutiny. In so doing, the Satyagrahi encounters truth in the

absolute by refusing to submit to the wrong or to cooperate with it in any way, the Satyagrahi asserts that truth.

Satyagraha goes beyond civil disobedience; it extends from the details of correct daily living to the construction of alternative political and economic institutions. Satyagraha seeks to correct evil through conversion of the offender and in the end, there is neither victor nor vanquished but rather a new harmony. This type of Nonviolence is a lifestyle and not a tool to be used at some point and abandoned when it has achieved its aim. For Gandhi,

Nonviolence is not a coat you can wear today and take off tomorrow, living nonviolence was a practical necessity; unless one lives it, one cannot practice nonviolence. Just as we are required to create a whole culture of violence around us to practice violence, we need to create a culture of nonviolence around us to practice nonviolence.

Gandhi drew his ideas from the writings of Leo Tolstoy and David Henry Thoreau, from the bible and from the Bhagavad-Gita. Gandhi first conceived Satyagraha in 1906 in response to a discriminatory law against Asians that was passed by the British colonial government in Transvaal in South Africa, in 1917, the first Satyagraha was carried out in India, in the following years, fasting, economic boycotts were employed as methods of Satyagraha in India until 1947 when the British left India.

On the Nexus Between Nonviolence and Social Change

Social change is a general term which refers to change in the nature, the social institutions, the social behavior or the social relations of a society, community of people or the other social structures, any event or action that affects a group of individuals that have shared values or characteristics. There are many ways of creating social change: direct action, protesting, advocacy, community organizing, community practice

and political activism. The term social change refers to qualitative changes in the structure or functioning of society that help the society to realize its goals. Nonviolence has been employed as a strategy in the struggle for social change for centuries using nonviolent methods such as marches, demonstrations, boycotts and strikes as means of achieving justice. Today, in spite the odds, nonviolent movements continue to succeed against totalitarianism, bureaucracies, despotic regimes and foreign aggression. Nonviolent action rests upon the timeless idea that no ruler can govern without the cooperation of the governed and their cooperation can be withdrawn. When this is done, the leader has no more power. Gandhi wrote “even the most despotic government cannot stand except for the consent of the governed which consent is often forcibly procured by the despot, immediately the subject ceases to fear the despot, his power is gone.”

Satyagraha rests on the theory that a government only has power as long as its people consent either consciously or unconsciously to be governed therefore, the way to create political or social change is not to cooperate with the system by withdrawing all the voluntary assistance and refusing its so-called benefits. Through this withdrawal of cooperation, the people can influence the government to adopt policies that can bring about real change in the society. However, nonviolent action must be carried out with adequate planning. George-Williams argues “there is nothing intuitive about nonviolent action which is more complex in strategy than conventional military warfare because it seeks to elicit from within the adversary. The technique in nonviolent struggle often goes against instinctive reactions because humans often must be taught not to react to violence with more violence.” Nonviolent strategic action not only offers the possibility of achieving short term political objectives but it can also lead to more stable and equitable long-term results benefiting all parties to a conflict. It can improve the chances of reaching negotiations, transform a conflict into a manageable situation without discord and lay the groundwork for reconciliation.

Challenges of Practicing Nonviolent Action in the 21st Century Africa

Violence is the opposite of nonviolence. The use of violence or extreme force is not new in African political space. There have been incidences of the use of brutal force of governments against its people, citizens against each other and communities and countries against each other. The use of state machinery to perpetuate violence is not a new phenomenon in Africa. Gail M. Presbey traces this to the legacy left by the colonial government in Africa according to him:

The use of violence by governments in Africa can be traced to the colonial era, the colonial government did not lay a democratic example for their colonies in Africa, he states that this deficit was a factor in the shaky transition from colonial rule to self-rule, instead colonial governments provided an example of the use of coercive power- dictatorship instead of democracy.

Africa has had a history of state use of force against its citizens. In Tunisia, the police shot at protesters, Mubarak's regime in Egypt killed close to a thousand, Gadhafi's security forces killed protesters in Benghazi, the Buhari regime also shot at peaceful protesters at Lekki toll gate in 2020. These are just a few examples of the use of state force against protesters. In the same vein, Torsen Mix argues that,

The social conflict in Africa data base (SCAD) provides daily data on 9,354 distinct social conflict events in 48 African countries from 1990-2012 7000 events were not repressed while 1,630 were met with non-lethal and 717 events met with lethal repression. Out of 4494 peaceful protest events (organized demonstrations, spontaneous demonstrations, general strikes, limited strikes), 3261 were met with no, 938 with non-lethal and 295 with lethal repression. He further argues that repressing protests are dangerous because they push protesters to the underground and make them use other means to make their concerns heard.

A clear example of this is the creation of MEND in Nigeria which was a result of the government's unwillingness to address the issues in the oil rich Niger delta region. After years of protests and prolonged court cases with justice, the disgruntled people of the Niger Delta formed an underground group called MEND (Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta) which used bombing, vandalism and kidnapping as tactics to get government to address the problems of the region. The repression of protests always leads people who have genuine reasons to protest to seek for justice when the government cannot give them the justice that they desire. Gandhi expressed this when he stated that "superficial calm in the society does not indicate lack of turmoil or conflict. Passive violence festers in every society until it becomes unbearable and eventually explodes into physical violence. Gandhi identifies two kinds of violence: active and passive violence. The relationship between passive violence and physical violence is the same between gasoline and fire. It is passive violence that fuels the fire of physical violence." Active violence refers to physical violence e.g. beating, killing, war, rape etc. while passive violence refers to hate, prejudice, discrimination, injustice, oppression, etc.

A society which begins by being pro violent (considering state violence to be beneficial to society) can become ambivalent and then violence avoiding (predisposed not to kill but prepared to do so) to finally nonviolent (once societal conditions have been changed enough to support a nonviolent structure). In order to make these changes, there need to be revolutions in education, institutions, methods and norms. Certainly, it is understandable that new heads of states who inherited state systems that were far from this nonviolent model could not make drastic changes overnight.

Despite this violent background of most African states, there are still successes recorded by nonviolent means. The idea of nonviolence has been condemned by many as unrealistic and utopian but the successes of

nonviolence in the past and its growing influence in modern times leaves no doubt of its efficacy in effecting social change the success of nonviolent resistance in the civil rights movement in the United States showed the universality of Gandhi's nonviolence and silenced its critics who contended that it was not universally applicable. Its application with success around the world shows that it can also work in Africa. The violent precedent of African states in its use of brutal or lethal force against its citizens can be changed but it will not be without costs and will not be immediate. It is a process that will take time to effect. It doesn't also mean that nonviolent resistance will solve all problems facing African nations, it is only setting a new precedence which contends that violence is not the only way to solve societal problems because violence only breeds more violence which always has more damaging consequences than nonviolent means.

Towards Effective Application of Nonviolence for Social Change in the 21st Century Africa

Even though nonviolence has been criticized by some scholars because it is considered too utopian or idealistic to deal with contemporary problems, many other scholars hold that, nonviolence is no longer useful in the 21st century but the world cannot turn a blind eye to the many successes recorded through nonviolent means. In Africa, the possibility of using nonviolence to effect social change has suffered serious setbacks because of the use of force by totalitarian and despotic regimes. In the wake of the adoption of democracy across many countries in Africa in the 21st century, there is still doubt about how practicable nonviolence will be. Despite these doubts, the success of Nonviolent resistance of the civil rights movement proved the universality of Gandhism and silenced critics who contended that it was not universally applicable. Although there are a few similarities between Africa and India during the time that Gandhi used it successfully, there is a great possibility that employing the same means can achieve positive results in African states.

There are three (3) basic elements in the techniques of nonviolence Gandhi employed:

Creation of a human society involving no violent method of exploitation of man by man but based upon social equality, economic justice and mutual sharing and love, education of the oppressed to take positive and constructive steps through nonviolent noncooperation with the enemy and thus make it impossible for the enemy to perpetuate the evil he had been committing; development of good and harmonious relationships between the two parties once the struggle is over and objectives achieved.

There are some conditions which are necessary for the proper and effective practice of nonviolence in any country, some of these include: education, organization, unity of purpose and equality of common humanity.

It is an uncommon fact to state that effective education plays a very fundamental role in promoting nonviolence at all levels. It is very pertinent to educate people on the implications and purpose of using nonviolence as a tool of achieving their goals for a social change. In doing this, they should also know the danger of the use of violence. Gandhi realized the importance of education on nonviolence as E.P. Menan aptly captures:

Understanding well the nature of man's destructive, exploitative and impulsive characteristics, Gandhi attempt was always to experiment his ideas with utmost patience and perseverance because effective employment of nonviolence very much depends upon the level of understanding and degree of conviction that individuals possessed.

When there is a good understanding of the nature of nonviolence and the fact that it requires a lot of sacrifice on the part of the practitioners, there will be more willingness on the part of the people to participate in such actions that will create the desired change in the society. Although there have been nonviolent marches and protests across Africa, there needs to be more awareness on its benefits and potentials especially among the youth who are volatile and easily provoked to violent reaction. A good example is the #ENDSARS protests across Nigeria in 2020 which was followed by violent attacks by some ill-informed youth in Lagos state who took to the streets destroying government and private properties and looting shops and business premises across the state. The NLC (Nigeria Labor Congress) and other unions or associations in Nigeria have also used strikes and protests as a means to push the government to respond positively to their demands. The NLC have staged nationwide protests in Nigeria to prevent Government from enforcing laws or policies which are inimical to the common good. Nonviolence in Africa was seen significantly yielding results in many countries in Northern Africa in what is now called the Arab spring. Where mammoth crowds occupied the streets and changed the narrative of their countries political and social history. With better education and awareness, nonviolence can gather momentum particularly in Nigeria to push the government to be more proactive in handling the nation's problems.

Another important factor in nonviolence education is the use of ICT, with the use of social media, information and education on nonviolence and mobilization for nonviolent activities is spread very fast. Lawson aptly captures this when he stated that "The use of ICT in raising the level of participation in contemporary times is fast spreading as ICT has proven to be a useful means to mobilize protesters as well as coordinating revolutionary protests." ICT can be further exploited to capture the minds of the youth who are its most ardent users to embrace nonviolence.

Another factor and condition for nonviolence is proper organization. The deployment of nonviolence for social change requires organization. Pragmatic nonviolence is a strategic and tactical action used to effect social change by mobilizing people power while at the same time limiting and restricting the ability of opponents to suppress the movement with violence and money power. It is important that nonviolent strategies like protests, marches, sit at homes, civil disobedience, strikes, etc. are organized strategically in a way that it sends the desired message and achieves the desired results. It is also important to take steps to prevent casualties as much as possible. Gene sharp holds that strategic and skillful planning of a nonviolent struggle is useful in defining the trajectory of freedom. Without coordinated action, nonviolent action will not be effective, it can easily loose direction, and can easily be repelled by the government or her agents. In organizing nonviolent action, the organizers need to ensure that the actions planned will actually lead to realization of set goals. The entire action must be clear and comprehensive, and dissemination of information must be done adequately and ahead of time. There should also be a good number of supporters at hand, in this way the action will gather enough momentum to pull people out into the action. Actions need to be visual, clear, simple and direct. For instance during protests, organizers are expected to carry placards, signs or chant slogans to show why they are carrying out their action, this can help to pull support or sympathy and also create more awareness for their cause. The people need to unite in their numbers and act with a common understanding of their objectives in order to achieve this goal.

As it were, Unity of purpose is also key to nonviolence. In most African countries, people are divided along ethnic mostly religious lines and this has been the tool employed by politicians to divide and rule the people. In Nigeria for instance the division between tribe and religion has been a serious problem hindering the development of the country. Many people vote based on religious considerations without considering competence

and integrity and government appointments are also carried out based on tribe, religious or regional affiliations to the detriment of the country. With such divisions, the people do not agree on what constitutes issues that are worth fighting for or not. In Nigeria for instance, during the #ENDSARS protests in 2020, Nigerian youth in the south east, south west and South-South filled the streets to protest against police brutality and abuse by a special unit of the Nigerian police known as SARS. But the same enthusiasm was not shown in the North East, North West and the North Central. Without a united front, nonviolence will not produce results. Similarly, Gandhi sought the unity of Indians who were also divided,

He needed the support of the whole nation which comprised of a people 80% of whom were absolutely poor, illiterate, suffering socially disinterested and steeped in superstition and fatalism... he also tried to promote unity and remove divisions among the people because as long as they were divided into castes and classes, the enemy would take advantage of the situation and they would never achieve their objective-national freedom.

With a large population of Indians taking part in nonviolent action, Gandhi was able to achieve the desired goal. The same can work in Nigeria and any other African nation if there is unity of purpose, if there is a common understanding of the fact that nonviolence is the way to achieve the desired change in the society.

Lastly, equality and common humanity is very fundamental to nonviolence. Lawson holds that revolutionary nonviolence aims to create conditions for just, peaceful and sustainable societies that meet the needs of all the people. At its core is the recognition that we all have a shared humanity\ human identity and that life is valuable in and of itself.³³ The kind of society that nonviolence aims at creating is a society where the common humanity of all human beings in the society is a factor that binds

all living in the society together. During the nonviolent protests, there are no class or economic or gender differences, all citizens work together for the improvement of their country, and all lives have the same value. Nonviolence becomes a uniting bond that holds all citizens together without concern for their status in the society. Nonviolence also gives the common people a sense patriotism, responsibility and identity because they see themselves participating in the process of creating positive change in their society. It is not a rich or poor man's affair but the affair of every citizen.

Conclusion

In this chapter, attempts have been made to answer the question of nonviolence as a better approach to any conflict situation. This paper argues that, nonviolence is a better alternative to violence, this is because violence always creates a circle of destruction. Although violence is always thought to be powerful and faster in producing results, it also produces a cycle of violence which lasts longer and does more damage to humanity. Adopting nonviolence does not claim to provide immediate solutions to social and political problems but it is a more human and wholesome approach which considers the good of society above all else. Waging successful nonviolence involves using nonviolent protests, strikes, stay-aways and other forms of noncooperation to either change government policy, remove an incumbent government, or achieve territorial autonomy. Nonviolence is a game of numbers and to ensure success, dissidents must mobilize people in large number to participate in the cause. There is need to increase awareness of the gains of adopting a nonviolent approach to solve problems in the society and with better education and information, it will be easier to get more people involved in the practice. Nonviolence gives a people a chance to unite and speak in one voice to either push for change or resist any law or policy that is contrary to the common good.

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