

**MAHATMA GANDHI AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF NON-VIOLENCE:
A PARADIGM FOR INTER-GROUP TOLERANCE IN NIGERIA**

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Abstract

There is upsurge in oppression and injustice in Nigeria. This has been a source of worry and great concern to many well-meaning people I ad outside the country. A society where corruption has almost become institutionalized definitely has no moral standing to contend with high level of violence. There is an indication that violence in Nigeria has been on the increase and needed to be addressed sociologically. The thrust of this work, therefore, is to draw out lessons the Apostle of non-violence, Mahatma Gandhi, could have had for Nigeria. Primary and secondary data were collected and interpreted descriptively and analytical. The social issues associated with non-violence showed that political, economic, social, psychological, religious, spiritual and moral lessons point to the reality that under an atmosphere of non-violence, love, peace, unity, progress, transformation and harmony are achievable. These socio-religious and ethical values will then be responsible for sustainable development in Nigeria. There is therefore a prevailing need for all Nigerians irrespective of gender, creed, ethnicity and political affiliation to join hands in embracing non-violence as a social index for growth and development in the country.

Keywords: Mahatma Gandhi, Philosophy, Non-violence, Lessons, Nigerians

Introduction

Every human being aspires to live a fulfilled life, devoid of attack, oppression, subjugation, suppression, intimidation, aggression etc. Humankind wants to live freely and happily in every society he finds himself. Man intends living in a society or a community of individuals with different quests, visions, prospects and dreams and as such does not require or willingly accept any breach on his freedom, personality, interest, integrity and aspirations. Man aspires for an environment with a friendly situation in order to live fruitfully, peacefully and satisfactorily in the world. This enabling environment encourages human, material and spiritio-moral development. However, it is this aspiration of man that gives him the opportunity or atmosphere to experience peace as a vital dream of mankind in the world all over. Nevertheless, this butchered dream seems to have

elicited several responses from the side of the oppressed, marginalized and the down-trodden especially in developing countries like Nigeria. These marginalized attribute their fate to situations of injustice and corruption. Against this background, Achebe (1983) laments the Nigeria situation as he writes:

Nigeria is not great country. It is one of the most disorderly nations in the world. It is one of the most corrupt, insensitive, inefficient places under the sun. It is one of those places that give least value for money and life. It is dirty, callous, noisy, ostentatious, dishonest, and vulgar. In short, it is among the most unpleasant place on earth. (p. 11).

Achebe laments the Nigerian situation, as the most horrid environment to live in the entire globe. He underscores the fact that corruption, injustices, oppression, moral bankruptcy, integrity deficiency are the bane of Nigerian society; the consequence is that the ordinary citizen lives in a state or status of less than human. They more or less live as orphans, slaves, outcasts, without personal values in their own country. Achebe (2012) asserts that:

Nigerians are corrupt because the system they live under today makes corruption easy and profitable. They will cease to be corrupt when corruption is made difficult and unattractive... corruption in Nigeria has passed the alarming and inferred stage, and Nigerian will die if we continue to pretend that she is only slightly indisposed (p.249).

The unruly behavior of the ruling class to the ruled has resulted into painful death of many people and has drowned the visions of many others. The masses suffer wholesome vulnerability, such that the legal system, being avidly corrupt cannot protect the poor and the oppressed. In fact, the legal system in Nigeria has become an instrument of oppression and victimization against the poor and the oppressed masses. The system of government in Nigeria can be likened to what Odey (2001) would call “Denofaccism”; a government that glorifies the state and promotes its control by a powerful and over all aspects of national life without regard to the rights and capacity of the people to determine their own fate. The institutional framework of Nigeria is democratic while the practice is fascistic. The ruling class regards the masses as subordinates who must belong to the opportunistic clique to be useful. However, Achebe (2012) notes that some developed nations including America, China, and Germany etc have in one time or the other passed through the experience of Nigeria. Therefore the situation is not a private property of Nigeria and as such, he charges Nigerians to fashion a way to surmount the seemingly hydra-headed, multidimensional problem.

Certain attempts have been made by the masses to ameliorate the rate of suffering but instead of getting the expected results, they still sink deep into the abyss of hopelessness

and futureless society. Martin Luther King Jr. (cited by Odey, 1995) underscores the fact that violence exacerbates violence as he writes:

He who fights with the sword will not only perish by the sword. He will also provide an occasion for universal conflagration of hate and a vicious spiral of violence. Violence brings temporally victories, violence by creating many more social problems than it solves. It never brings permanent peace. (p. 3).

Martin Luther King Jr, has aptly described the Nigeria experience of how corruption, oppression, subjugation etc have taken over the centre stage of Nigerian society and the attempt to solve the problem through the violent method has not yielded any meaningful result. The case of Niger Delta is a ready example of spiral violence which violent method brings. Thus according to Okoro (2008), this part of the country even in a democratic regime has experienced genocide, kidnapping, killing, wholesome destruction of life and property and yet solution seems to still be a mirage. It is against this background that the researcher have undertaken to study the non-violent method attitude of Gandhi as couched in his twin philosophy of Ahimsa and Satyagraha to see its lessons for Nigeria.

Sharp (1973), defines non-violence as:

A generic term covering dozens of specific method of protest, non-cooperation and intervention, in all of which the actionists conducts the conflict by doing or refusing to do certain things without using physical violence. As a technique, nonviolence action is not passive. It is inaction. It is action that is non-violent (p.64).

Richard (1971) sees nonviolence act as a sort of moral “Jiu Jitsu” on the opponent, contending that when one person attacks another with physical violence, and the victim hits back, the violent response of the victim will give the attacker a certain reassurance, moral support and a stimulus to go ahead. However, when the victim refuses to respond with counter violence, but at stake, the attacker’s first reaction might be that the victim is afraid of him. However, the victims’ readiness to endure his attack without showing signs of fear will soon put him in an awkward position, curiosity and wonder and this is called non-violent. Therefore, philosophy of non-violence is an ideology of resisting or challenging an oppressive situation with the intention of converting the oppressor to see his deeds and change from it without the use of violence. This philosophy was made popular by Mahatma Gandhi and equally used by Luther King Jr.

Historical Background of Gandhi

Mahandas Karamch Gandhi popularly known as Mahatma Gandhi was born on October 2, 1869, in the town of Porbanda in the state of Gujarat in western India. He was the sixth

and youngest child of the family. Gandhi belonged to the merchant caste. His mother, Pufibai, was the fourth wife of Gandhi's father, Karamchand Gandhi. He was born when the father was 48 years old and his mother in her early twenties. The highest level of education his father attained was grade three. The family was moderately wealthy and vegetarian. Gandhi's mother was an illiterate. Karanchad Gandhi, the father of Mohandas has been described by Odey (1996) as being "truthfully, brave and generous. He was incorruptible and impartial in his dealings; unlike many people in his position, he had no ambition to accumulate wealth" (p.20). The family was of Hindu religion that the lasting impression that she left in his memory was of saintliness. This juxtaposition of his father's leadership acumen, transparency, honesty, loyalty, and truthfulness were to be effectively combined in Mahatma Gandhi who later became a political genius and a saint.

After Gandhi had completed his high school education, he joined the college but fared very poorly and consequently dropped out of school just about three months of the inception of the academic programme. The family was desperate in his education, that Gandhi should obtain a Barrister's title from England which was a life easier then and as well as more lucrative. The family concluded that the young Gandhi will go to England and attain his educational feat. In order to actualize this dream, Okoro (2008) notes that "Gandhi's brother had to sell part of the family's landed property to raise money and Gandhi's wife gave her will to Gandhi's dream by selling her Jewelry for the same purpose" (p.3). It was Odey (1996) who notes that when almost everything was ready for Gandhi to travel, the community made a decision that anyone, who crossed the sea or anyone who assist someone to cross the sea would be made an outcast. Though, the family pleaded with the community to abrogate the law, but to no avail. Therefore Gandhi took the risk of being an outcast and travelled.

In 1891, Gandhi returned to India with the barrister's title and tried to build a law practice after being called to bar of England and Wales by the Inner Temple. Nonetheless, Gandhi's efforts in spite of his entire attempt could hardly earn enough to sustain himself in Bombay in India. Before he became frustrated, he luckily, received an invitation to come over to South Africa and assist a senior Lawyer. Without delay, Gandhi accepted the offer, not only for the remuneration, but mainly for the experience which law practice requires.

Thus Gandhi left for South Africa at the age of 23. On his way, he had his first experience of racial discrimination. Just three hours into his Journey, the conductor came to examine the tickets. Although Gandhi had a first class ticket, he was asked to move to the couch, because the Rail Authority does not allow coloured people to travel first class. Gandhi refused to move, and was eventually thrown out of the train at night on a small station up

in the mountain, during the peak of winter and Gandhi spent the whole night at that platform alone, shivering in the cold. The next morning, he filled a protest but it was ignored. He then took the next available train and managed to reach his destination. This horrid experience created in Gandhi, the consciousness of the discrimination as well as the humiliation of the coloured people, not only in South Africa, but also in the whole world. Before this incident, Okoro (2008) notes that, “he was so much concerned with personal affairs and his family, but; after this time, he was compelled to think globally and think about the plight of the poor and the oppressed in an oppressive society” (p.5).

The Philosophy of Non-violence

Non-violence is the greatest force at the disposal of mankind. It is mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction devised by the ingenuity of man. Destruction is not the law of the humans. Man lives freely by his readiness to die, if need be, at the hand of his brother, never by killing him. Every murder or other injury, no matter for what cause, committed or inflicted on another is a crime against humanity. Gandhi though according to Borman (1986), was not “the originator of the principle of non-violence, but he was the first to apply it in the political field on a large scale” (p.253). Odey (2005) also notes that “Gandhi is certainly the most renowned practical model of non-violence resistance human nature can boast of, but he was not the author of non-violence” (p.105).

As a man who advocated religious tolerance, and the brotherhood of all mankind, he studied all the major religions of the world and blended together their teaching on non-violence. Okoro (2008) having studied Gandhi’s philosophy, notes that “it is in the twin concept of Ahimsa and Satyagraha that the entire Gandhian philosophy of non-violence was couched” (p.6)

Ahimsa

Ahimsa is a “Sanskrit” (it means the primary sacred language of the Hinduism) term, meaning non-violence, (literally, the avoidance of violence which is ahimsa). It is an important tenet of the religions that originated in ancient India, (Hinduism, Buddhism and especially Jainism). Ahimsa is a rule of conduct that bars the killing or the cause of injury to living beings. However, in its comprehensive meaning, Ahimsa connotes entire abstinence from causing any pain; harm whatever to any living creature by thought, word, or deed. It therefore require according to Okoro (2008), “harmless mind, harmless mouth and harmless hands; it does not only mean negative non-injury but also cosmic love. It is the development of mental attitude in which hatred is replaced by love. Ahimsa is true sacrifice, it is true forgiveness. Ahimsa is “Sakh” (power), it is true strength” (p. 7). The philosophy of life (Ahimsa) is not peculiar to Hinduism, rather applicable in most of the

world religions. However, it is mostly fundamental to Jainism; Gandhi was influenced by this Jain philosophy and practice at his early age.

Commenting on this “Sir Swami” as Okoro (2008 notes, Gandihi, living with a devote mother and surrounded by Jain Influence at GuJarat, learnt from an early age the tenet of non-injury to living beings, vegetarianism, fasting for self-purification and mutual tolerance between members of various creeds and sects” (p.8). While expounding the doctrine of Ahimsa, Gandihi as presented by Nanda (1989) Says:

If you practice Ahimsa, you should put up with insults, rebukes and assault you never retaliate nor wish to offend anybody even under extreme provocation. You should not entertain any evil thought against anybody. You should not curse. You should be prepared to lose joyfully even your life in the cause of truth. (p. 6).

Accordingly, the ultimate truth can only be attained through Ahimsa. Gandhi maintained that Ahimsa and by extension Satyagraha cannot be practiced by weak persons. It is not possible without fearlessness. In Gandhi’s own words as presented by Jack (1965):

When thoughts of revenge and hatreds arise in the mind, try to control the physical body, and speeches first; do not utter evil and harsh words; Do not curse. Do not injure others. If you succeed in this practice for some months, the negative thoughts of revenge, having no scope for manifesting outside, will die by themselves. (p. 332).

Gandhi, in teaching this philosophy acknowledges the difficulty of practicing Ahimsa in a selfish society like Nigeria, but he opines that the true test of the validity and viability of such unpopular philosophy is in hostile societies like contemporary Nigeria. For Gandhi, he who must practice Ahimsa must have a full control of his thoughts, body and speech.

Satyagraha

Satyagraha is a philosophy or principle coined by Gandhi to describe the form of non-violence techniques he used and practiced. It is a philosophy and practice of absolute non-violence resistance to injustice, oppression and dehumanization. This concept of Satyagraha was conceived, developed and used by Mahatma Gandhi alongside Ahimsa to fight for the liberation and reformation of India society. The Plight for the Indians in South Africa was the factor that necessitated the concept and the development of Satyagraha. It is a weapon for social change. Though the concept of Satyagraha was conceived and used initially at South Africa but its full or wholesome use was for the independence of India.

Satyagraha is derived from two Sanskrit word-“Satyr” which means truth and “Agraha” which means to grasp or holding fast. It is “truth”. In the struggle for India independence, Gandhi (1935) described the concept thus:

Its root meaning is holding unto truth, hence “truth-force” or “soul force”. In the application of Satyagraha, I discovered in the earliest stage that the pursuit of truth did not admit violence being inflicted on one’s opponent but that he must be weaned from error by patience and sympathy, for what appear to be truth to one may appears to be error to the other. Here patience means self-suffering. Therefore, the doctrine came to mean vindication of truth, not by infliction of suffering on the opponents but on oneself. (p. 206).

In describing the process of developing his concept, Gandhi underscores the fact that Satyagraha was developed in the heat of liberation struggle in South Africa. Here there was no clear name to describe the idea of this new liberation option; therefore, it was called “Passive Resistance” but the name did not give a clear description of his idea. As the struggle advances, the idea of the method became clearer and as such “Passive Resistance” was dropped and then Gandhi Suggested a Sanskrit term “Sadagraha” which means firmness in good cause. Though this new idea did not quite represent Gandhi’s idea, but it gave the insight through which Gandhi came up with his idea of Satyagraha.

Satyagraha is a two-sided coin; the non-violence side and the non-cooperation side. Though most times, people emphasize only the non-violent side to the detriment of the non-cooperation aspect. But without the good working knowledge and application of the non-cooperation to the non-violence, the whole scheme will seem to be a mere escape route for the weak and fainthearted. It seeks to confront all dehumanizing forces, as well as to promote justice in all realms of human association. Satyagrah underscores the equality of all human persons. Okoro (2008) notes that the general aphorism among Satyagraha which says that “It is better to die a free man than to live a slave” finds its relevance in the contemporary political history. To King Jr. (1989) Love is the central and essential ingredient of non-violence as he opines thus:

Our method will be that of persuasion, not coercion. We will say to the people “Let your conscience be your guide....” Our actions must be guided by the highest principles of the Christian faith. Love must be our regulating ideal. Once again, we must hear the voice of Jesus echoing across the centuries: “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, and pray for them that despitefully use you”. If we fail to do this our protest will end up as a meaningless drama on the stage of history and its memory will be shrouded with the ugly garment of shame. (p. 15).

He proposed that in spite of violence, hatred, abuses and insults, a non-violence activist should not be bitter in the course of struggle, rather, he should strive to turn their bitter

experience into an asset and then use them to bequeath to history and to humanity an enduring legacy.

Lessons for Nigeria

Though hopeless as Nigeria may seem today, it is not absolutely beyond redemption; critical, yes, but not entirely hopeless. It is based on the above assertion by Achebe that the researcher has come to present the derivable lessons for Nigeria from Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence which will be of great help in redeeming Nigeria. The lessons include political lessons, economical lessons, social lessons and psychological lessons.

Political Lessons

Nigeria is known for corruption, injustice and marginalization. It is a state where the political leaders who were elected for the representation of the electorates will abandon their expected duty in pursuit of selfish goals. It is a situation such that if the oppressor discovers that he cannot forcefully silence a human right activist, he will try to use money and political appointment or even contracts to silence him. Most Nigerians will accept the offer and then keep quiet from their fight, even though their original aim has not been achieved. Gandhi lived up to his conviction about an ideal society where the weakest will have the opportunity with the strongest. In buttressing this fact, Odey (1996) notes:

When he was fighting for the abolition of the social injustice of segregated schools in south Africa, the whites who built separate elite schools for their children and confined the blacks and Indians to make-shift and ram shackles schools, asked him (Gandhi) to send his own children to the elite schools at their own expenses to let him stop fighting for the poor masses. He refused and told them that his own children would only go to such schools if the poorest black and Indian children, in South Africa had got the same opportunity. (p. 19).

In Nigeria today, when such a situation arises, the person who seems to be defending the masses, all of a sudden will relent and then enjoy his newly given position, while the fight automatically dies down. In his broadcast to the nation on October 1st, 2000, the fortieth anniversary of the nation's political independence, the then president of Nigeria, Olusegun Obasanjo lamented that instead of becoming a just, disciplined and humane African society, Nigeria has become the shame of Africa. Odey (2001) presents Obasanjo's speech thus:

Nigeria is now perceived as the most corrupt nation in the world, and so list by an organization which co-founded because of my belief in fundamental human moral value. Our society has degenerated into a kleptomaniac culture, where everyone

entrusted with any funds, public or cooperate, everyone but a few, steals at every stage of the way, from paper clips, through ghost workers proceeds and contracts stealing, to outright plundering of nations resources? How can everyone deny the unfathomable shame? (p. 51).

At this point, the president of the country describes the rate of political corruption in Nigeria as something that has entered into our mental perception which requires extra carefulness. In situation like this, what should people do? If the ruling class can stand as the pillar of “corruption”, should the masses not join, and if allowed, eat their own share of the “national cake”. Some who may seem good may decide now to segregate and hate the ruling class and the so-called politicians because they are said to be corrupt. But Gandhi as presented by Odey (2001) will always say: “man and his deed are two distinct things. Whereas a good deed should call forth approbation and a wicked deed always deserves respect or pity as the case may be; “Hate the sin and not the sinner” (p.78).

So, in degenerating society like Nigeria, threatening to kill the corrupt or choosing to join the corrupt; if you cannot beat them is to make situation worst. Rather, we should see how we could let them see the ills they have caused through the use of “passive resistance” and then show them the better way so as to enhance our country for better.

Economic Lessons

The weekly start of 15 May, 1983 according to Achebe (1998) has this on its front page under the title “the Nigerian and corruption”. Keeping an average Nigerian from being corrupt is like keeping a goat from eating yam” (p. 48). From the forgoing, one will easily deduce that every facet in Nigeria is corrupt. The economy of Nigeria is nothing to write home about. Corruption has become so persuasive that Nigeria which is supposed to be the giant of Africa has degenerated to become the shame of Africa. Nigeria which is supposed to have surplus food for her indigenes has become hungry zone that even the indigenes live from hand to mouth. Poverty has become the lot of the Nigerian majority due to the economic ills of Nigeria. Commenting on Nigerian economy, Odey (2001) laments:

Economically, the situation becomes so bad even in the midst of plenty that for those who could afford it, there was apparently only one exit from the pervasive destitution. A country which has been blessed with abundance of human and, natural resources capable of making it the pride of Africa was no longer able to provide daily bread for its citizens because all that we needed to live and survive were currently concentrated in the hand of the military vampires that were sucking the blood of the nation. (p.41).

From the above, one can see that though, Nigeria is blessed with massive human and natural resources, her citizens are dying of hunger and abject moral deficiency, consequently, the traditional ethics and values are swept under the carpet. The only observable code of conduct in modern Nigeria is survival. In the bid to survive, we survive on the blood of other citizens considered more vulnerable, powerless and voiceless. Consequently, most businesses are done without morality, having fake, adulterated and goods of lesser qualities for our markets. Achebe's (1998) description of the modern Nigeria state succinctly captures the real state of affairs as he says "corruption in Nigeria has passed the alarming and entered the fatal stage, Nigeria will die if we keep pretending that she is only slightly indisposed" (pp. 47-48).

In handling this situation, Gandhi does not prescribe war or violence like it was in Niger Delta, and in the north now (Boko Haran), rather he advised that we should confront our oppressors by proving to them that they have no divine right to exploit or oppress us. This, we will do following his principle of non-violence as he says: "we think you are doing an injustice, but instead of seeking to punish and make you suffer for that, we will take the suffering and punishment on ourselves, to persuade you of our good will, sincerity, and truthfulness. "This is a method of confronting our "enemy" to alert him of his deeds and tell him that we should be liberated without violence (Passive Resistance).

Social Lessons

The social life or situation of Nigeria has so much declined that tribalism and god-fatherism determine appointment and opportunities. Let us take a hypothetical case where two candidates "A" and "B" apply to fill a very important position. "A" has the right qualification of competence and character but is the "wrong" tribe and has no godfather. While "B" less qualified belong to the "right" tribe, with god father in that office, so gets the job. "A" goes away embittered. "B" throws a party and messes up the job. The greatest sufferer is the nation itself which has to contain the legitimate grievance of wronged citizens; accommodate the incompetence of a favoured citizen and, more importantly, endure a general decline of moral and subversion of efficiency caused by an erotic system of performance and reward. For Gandhi', in situations like this, just going home to die in silence and of inward torture is not the best, rather, Mr "A" may, through writing or peaceful demonstration, alongside others who have also been cheated so as to convict the employers and the ruling class of their evil. In doing this Gandhi in Odey (1996), views that though the government may employ the forces to stop, but people should be ready even to pay with their blood in order to bring about justice. However, in doing this, Gandhi, advised in the following words that we should hate the wickedness of

man and not the people themselves. In encouraging mass protest against injustice, Gandhi in Odey (1996) notes that “nothing but organized non-violence can check the organized violence of the British government” (p. 140). Mahatma Gandhi was selfless, and even identified with the ordinary citizens of India. He did this without considering his social status in the society.

Psychological Lessons

By psychological lessons, this work recommends non-violence as championed by Gandhi in the minds and mental dispositions of people. Gandhi came to South Africa, the Indian people there seem to have lost all hope of being liberated from their oppressive situation. But Gandhi summoned courage and remained determined that things can still change. Thus, Nigerians should learn from this mental disposition of Gandhi that their situation can still be transformed. Achebe (1983) supports this position as he asserts” I also believe that hopeless as she may seem today, Nigeria is not absolutely beyond redemption; critical yes, but not entirely hopeless” (p.12). Nigerians should join Achebe with the aspiration of being redeemed from every dungeon even as we labour to actualize it. Douglass (1968) admonish that one who embrace non-violence method needs to have in mind that long life is not the correct yardstick for assessing the worth of a man, rather the achievement of a man is in liberating the oppressed. Similarly, though Gandhi vehemently opposed the oppressive situation of his time, yet, he never laboured to be called a winner while the oppressors are called losers. Instead, he aimed at making the oppressor see his evil deed and change from it while they still become friends. Gandhi fought to convert the people in love, though hating their evil deeds. Therefore, Nigerians should learn not to fight against injustice in order to bring out victors and victims. Rather we should hate evil and love the perpetrators of evils in our society.

Conclusion

This work has noted that freedom in all ramifications is an inherent aspiration of every human being, irrespective of tribe or creed. Yet, the world by practice is very oppressive consequently; the work has opined that the only solution to this oppressive situation of this present world, especially Nigeria, is the philosophy of non-violence. This is because several attempts made to curb the situation like through legal and violence means have proved abortive. But this principle of non-violence has yielded greatly as used by Gandhi, King Junior and others. Following this position, this work has presented reliable lessons from the life of Gandhi and his application of non-violence. This lesson ranges across social, political, economic and psychological as can be applied to transform the Nigerian society and the world at large.

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