

## Exploring Aspects of Violence: Revisiting Gandhian Thoughts

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### Abstract:

*In the current geo-political system, violence in the form of war, crime, terrorism, hatred, discrimination, prejudice and environmental destruction all impede development and are raging unabatedly. One of the most ardent advocates of peace, harmony, non-violence and brotherhood is Mahatma Gandhi. In contemporary times, Gandhi and his beliefs have once more gained attention. Even if it would be challenging to return to the way of life he recommended, awareness and awakening to this path is crucial to developing a holistic and sustainable perspective on the intractable challenges facing us today. The present study, therefore, is an attempt to make a systematic exploration of the aspects of exploitation exercised through violent means, specifically categorising them into the four most common kinds: Social, Economic, Environment and Physical (SEEP). It is crucial to take immediate and effective steps to reverse the moral deficit, safeguard India's credibility in the world and improve its position in the Global Reputation Index.*

*Keywords: Gandhian Ideas, Non-violence, Exploitation, Inequality, Environment*

### Introduction

Violence is most simply described by the World Health Organization as “*the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation*”(WHO, 2020). It is obvious that acts of violence in society violate basic human rights, and that they waste time, lives, and property as well as pose a threat to the attainment of sustainable development. The rise in domestic violence against women during the pandemic, which has been widely reported (Piquero et al. 2021), has a detrimental effect on the growth and development of children in a household. All of these taken together have a devastating impact on the growth and development of the nation (Buvinic and Morrison, 1999).

Thus, these problems continue to be a significant development challenge that expose the moral bankruptcy of society. Gandhian principles are in direct opposition to violence and exploitation of any kind. Mahatma Gandhi's beliefs sometimes elicit derision or are disregarded because they are extremely idealistic and simplistic. The fact that these ideals continue to exist and are the sole way to bring about non-violence and world peace, however, shows that they are indisputable in reality. The most ardent advocate of peace and nonviolence—whose crusade is summed up in the phrase Sarvodaya—was also a victim of hatred and wrath. He received five nominations for the Noble Peace Prize in 1937, 1938, 1939, 1947, and 1948 (Kapoor, 2017). His passing in 1948, when no one was honoured by the committee, may have prevented him from receiving the peace prize.

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The present study, therefore, is an attempt to make a systematic critical review of aspects of exploitation exercised by violent means, specifically classifying it into the four most common kind, summed in the acronym SEEP: Social, Economic, Environment and Physical. The discrimination by society based on caste, gender, age, etc. is the first form of exploitation. The second encompasses economic exploitation where the poor and marginalized are exploited by the rich and powerful. The subject of the first two is man's exploitation by man. The third form of violence is against the nature, one in which the rich and poor and the developed and developing world together exploit the environment, inhibiting the goal of sustainability. The last one is based on its literal definition, which is the use of non-violent tactics in speech or action. These are explored, as well as the supporting literature and arguments.

### **A Glimpse into Past**

A glance back at the nation's turbulent past reveals how Britishers denigrated Indians in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. A description of the anti-Indian sentiments can be found in *The History of British India* (1817), published by the Scottish historian, economist and philosopher, James Mill, father of John Stuart Mill (who propounded the philosophy of Utilitarianism). Surprisingly, this perception was formed without having ever visited India or possessing any knowledge of native Indian languages. But, he wasn't the first one to belittle Indians. Thomas Babington Macaulay also didn't think much of the academic output from India. Charles Wood's educational dispatch, known as the Woods Despatch since he issued it in 1854, likewise made the case that exposure to European culture would strengthen moral character of Indians. Therefore, the question of whether Indians lack morality automatically emerges. Are Westerners more moral? It is difficult to attempt to provide a response to this issue, and further research is required to compare people from other places. The scant research on Eastern and Western ethical systems indicates that there is little evidence to claim that Westerners are more moral or ethical (Hwang, 2001). Further, India is not ranked very favourably in several indicators such as the Corruption Index. The corruption index for India according to Transparency International in 2013 was 41, somewhat higher than in 2015 (38), but still below the (43) average for the world. The *BhagwadGita*, *the Ramayana*, and other ancient books, however, embody the divine and noble ideas upon which Indian morals and ethics are firmly based.

Mahatma Gandhi has been considered as one of the biggest votaries of morality, peace, non-violence and brotherhood. He is known to have defeated the Britishers during India's independence struggle solely using the weapon of non-violence, "*Non-violent work is then the only means for winning freedom*" (CWMG, 82:88). Ironically, he was a victim of violence, "*On 30 January 1948, he - as Ramachandra Gandhi has so evocatively described - stopped three bullets in their path of hate. It was iccha mrityu - a death that he had hoped for and willed in the last years of his life. It stunned the new nation into silence.*" Suhrud (2010: 17).

### **Exploring Aspects of Violence: SEEP**

According to Gandhi, "*The principle of non-violence necessitates complete abstention from exploitation in any form*" (CWMG 54:131). While there are other forms of exploitation as well, violence is perhaps the most horrifying. Allen (2019:6) praises Gandhi's concept of non-violence, emphasising "*the multidimensionality of violence*" and extolling that, "*he broadens and deepens our understanding of violence and nonviolence*". The study focuses on exploitation exercised through violent means and explores its several facets, specifically classifying them into four: Social, Economic, Environment and Physical (SEEP).

## Social

The first and foremost is social exploitation, which might be based on caste, gender or age (such as child labour or child marriage). Needless to say, women are more impacted by violent acts. According to data from the World Bank, 22% of Indian women (aged 15 to 49) reported experiencing physical or sexual assault (2016). Comparable statistics in the nearby nations reached as high as 28.8% for Bangladesh (2015) and 11.2% for Nepal (2016). Comparable statistics were unavailable for Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan<sup>1</sup>.

## Economic

Gandhi has described poverty as the deadliest form of aggression in his writings. In words of Allen, *“Gandhi sometimes writes about poverty as the worst form of violence. In most of his uses, economic violence is synonymous with exploitation.”* (Allen, 2019:155). Economic exploitation, in which the rich take advantage of the poor and marginalized, is included in the economic violence. Long recognized as an exploitative system whereby capitalists take advantage of the labor force, it is also widely known that this system is unequal because the market process distributes without taking social welfare into account.

More concerning is the public disquietude on the inequality in incomes translating into inequality in wealth and hence power. The process of *“oligarchic inequality”*, or the *“fusion of economic and political power”* (Streeck, 2017:28) has been described as *“the rich countries would come to be owned by their own billionaires or, more generally, in which all countries, including China and the petroleum exporters, would come to be owned more and more by the planet’s billionaires and multimillionaires.”* (Piketty, 2017:588). All this will lead to erosion of democracy.

Gandhian methods offer a remedy for these problems. Gandhi reaffirmed the *use* or *need* principle. He encouraged self-control and lived an austere lifestyle<sup>2</sup>. Contrarily, capitalism thrives on materialism, excessive spending, self-indulgence, and advertising. *“The idea that less could be more is not a principle capitalist society could honour; it must be imposed upon it, or else there will be no end to its progress, self-consuming as it may be ultimately be”* (Streeck, 2017:65). Additionally, widespread corruption in the system has made it vital to find ways to elevate the standard of ethics in society because official policies are highly unlikely to be able to do so.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.VAW.1549.ZS>.

### **Environment**

Thirdly, the environment is being exploited by both the wealthy and the poor, which makes it difficult to achieve sustainability. According to Nixon, "*Climate change, ... and a host of other slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes present formidable representational obstacles that can hinder our efforts to mobilize and act decisively.*"(Nixon, 2011:2). In contrast to what violence means in general parlance, Nixon (2011) describes this kind of violence as *slow violence* in his book *Slow violence and Environmentalism of the Poor*, which he defines as "*a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all*". Fundamentally, slow violence is an assault on nature. The recent Joshimath tragedy in India's Uttarakhand state is a prime illustration of how nature may be abused with ruthlessness and carelessness.

In 1973, Schumacher echoed Gandhi's assertion that the future lies in nonviolence, minimalism, and peaceful interactions, "*... the direction of research ... should be towards non-violence rather than violence; towards a harmonious co-operation with nature rather than a warfare against nature; towards the noiseless, low energy, elegant and economical solutions normally applied in nature rather than the noisy, high-energy, brutal, wasteful and clumsy solutions of your present day services.*" (Schumacher, 2011:117).

### **Physical**

Last but not least, using the word literally, violence is the act of using physical or verbal force against another person. Violence is mostly defined as acts like murder, injury, torture, sexual assault, bullying, or other such bodily harm. It has been on the rise over time. There are several ways to verbally incite violence, such as through causing emotional harm or upholding a hostile environment. One example is hate speech, which is a growing global concern. Other acts such as terrorism (like the attacks of 9/11 in the United States or the Taj Hotel attack in Mumbai on 26/11 ) cause violence on a considerably greater geographic scale and has a profoundly long-lasting impact on many people's lives. In more recent times, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine has served as a large-scale and protracted example of violence.

### **Seeking Gandhian Solution**

Gandhian methods provide sustainable solutions to the present-day problems. Here, it is important to note two essential ideas from Gandhian literature: *Bread Labor* and *Trusteeship*. The idea of Bread labour, that Gandhi found appealing in Tolstoy's writing, suggests that in order to lead a happy life, each man must make a sacrifice by performing labour (such as spinning or agricultural work). Additionally, this will promote inclusivity and equality; "*Such labour will be the highest form of sacrifice ... There will then be no rich and no poor, none high and none low, no touchable and no untouchable.*" (CWMG 61:212).

<sup>2</sup> Gandhi was minimalist in his attire too and for this reason Winston Churchill addressed Gandhi in 1931; as a 'half naked fakir'.

The second is the Trusteeship principle. “*Trusteeship does not recognize any right of private ownership of property except so far as it may be permitted by society for its own welfare.*” (Allen, 2019:192). It is essentially a philosophy that presupposes a harmonious relationship between two persons, a strong (often the exploiter) and a weak (the exploited). The basic notion is that for the relationship to function, non-possessiveness, altruism, morality, honesty, and complete confidence of the weaker party towards the stronger party must all be adhered to. It is fundamentally a voluntary, non-violent relation with the added advantage of attaining a just, equitable, harmonious and efficient social order. “*Unless the capitalists of India help to avert this tragedy by becoming trustees of the welfare of the masses and by devoting their talents not to amassing wealth for themselves but to the service of the masses in an altruistic spirit, they will end either by destroying the masses or being destroyed by them*” (CWMG 38:243-4).

Regrettably, the idea did not materialize and succeed since it did not see the light of day. However, not everything is lost, as it has sparked an increase in charitable activities and improved corporate social responsibility (CSR), particularly in light of India's CSR mandate from 2014 onward.

## **Conclusion**

Understandably, acts of violence in society simply squander limited economic resources and is an obverse advance on many goals related to sustainable development, namely, ‘*Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions*’, ‘*Reduced Inequalities*’, ‘*No Poverty*’, ‘*Zero Hunger*’, ‘*Adoption of Affordable and Clean Energy*’, and ‘*Climate Action*’. Real development cannot take place in the presence of violence. There is evidence that violence, particularly domestic, has increased since COVID-19. Additionally, there is a serious risk that artificial intelligence will be used maliciously in the near future.

There is an almost ubiquitous invocation of Gandhi particularly in these periods. Gandhi firmly believed, “*... physical force is nothing compared to the moral force, and that moral force never fails.*” (CWMG 15:142). Raising society's moral standards must therefore be a consideration in efforts to reduce violence. Additionally, it is essential to act quickly and decisively to reverse the moral deficit, protect the international perception of India's credibility, and raise the nation's standing in the Reputation Index.

The Machiavellian behaviour and corruption in the private corporate sector, mismanagement (like the recent Adani Stock manipulation), and the misuse of public expenditure need to be curbed if India is to be able to position itself as the *Vishwa Guru* and have wider recognition in the world. This will benefit the nation's economic growth in a number of ways, including greater exports of goods and services and foreign investment. A stronger economy guarantees better living conditions and reduced exploitation, creating a virtuous cycle.

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