

To Hal with kindest regards

Karel Hujer

GANDHI'S NON-VIOLENCE —A WAY OF LIFE

by Karel Hujer

In recent times frequent civil rights marches and protests in our American overgrown cities have been described as practising non-violence. Such demonstrations supposedly were to follow the Gandhian method, which seems an acceptable or convenient strategy in a democracy. Of late, however, an increasing clamour for rights and power is heard and we may wonder: Was this non-violence only an expedient technique? According to Gandhi, non-violence, *Ahimsa*, is only genuine when inseparably accompanied by the power of truth, *Satyagraha*. Gandhi's non-violence was an austere path of constant self-discipline, a supreme practice of renunciation.

In 1935 I stayed with Gandhi in his Ashram at Wardha and saw first-hand the daily life of this man most closely associated with the discipline of non-violence. The *Ashram* group at that time consisted of some fifty members, followers of Gandhi, who came for training in order to serve in Indian villages which, even today, represent 90% of India's population. Daily I observed and listened. There were no demands for rights but a preparation for service, which consisted in renunciation. Gandhi taught by example, strictly applied to his personal daily life. He commanded no one. Walk! He walked himself, cheerfully and spontaneously, even if it meant many miles on the dusty roads of India. He insisted:

“Theft is anything in my having that someone else needs more than I do.”

So he reduced his possessions to a loincloth and renounced his *Vaishya* caste in order to identify himself with the outcasts, Untouchables, to whom he gave the endearing name *Harijans*, “Children of God”. There I first found him, in Bhangi Colony, near Delhi, among his *Harijans*, which would correspond to a southern white gentleman settling in a negro slum. Mahatma would say:

“If I have to be reborn, I should be reborn an Untouchable so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings, and affronts levelled against them in order that I may endeavour to free myself and them from their miserable conditions.”

Gandhi was utterly convinced that non-violence practised purely and absolutely is the only solution to the world's problems. He already stated in 1920:

“The ancient Rishis of India were greater scientists than Newton; greater warriors than Wellington, because knowing the use of weapons, they did not resort to the use of force, but taught the war-weary world that its salvation rests in non-violence.”

Although Gandhi's friends were countless, he did have enemies, but these were from the traditional fighting caste, *Kshatriya*, in Bengal, and in the land of *Marathas*. Gandhi, however, never acknowledged enemies. He called them all brothers and would not count the miles to walk amongst them. When, during his *Ahimsa-Satyagraha*

(non-violent) action, brutalities occurred in Chauri Chaura, Gandhi cancelled all defiance against the government anywhere in India. Taking all responsibility upon himself, he stated:

“ I must undergo personal cleansing,”

and he fasted five days. Once he said to the Viceroy, Lord Reading:

“ Ours is a religious movement designed to purge Indian political life of corruption, deceit and terrorism.”

Gandhi renounced in order to serve. He neither asked for nor expected privileges. When jailed, he called himself “ happy jailbird.”

“ We must enter the prison as a bridegroom enters the bride’s chamber.”

How strange that this man who once walked twenty-four days from Sabarmati to Dandi, to pick up a pinch of salt on the seashore for the sake of India’s freedom, was absent from the capital on its first Independence day.

“ Freedom is not a thing I can give, people have to grow up to it.”

This is perhaps why on the first Independence day, 15th August, 1947, with India exulting in festivities, Gandhi was in Calcutta, desperately trying to subdue riots. He fasted and prayed all that day. The entire jubilant nation awaited his message yet none came. Invited to the capital, New Delhi, to participate at the formal inauguration of India’s sovereignty, he refused to attend. This was not the freedom he had worked for. Instead, upon his wish, he was taken into a Muslim home in the riot-torn area of Calcutta. From there he wrote his devoted disciple, Amrit Kaur:

“ For the moment I am no enemy.”

He was more than pleased with the small personal victory of brotherhood under the roof of Mohammedan friends rather than rejoicing in the political independence of his country.

Non-violence for Gandhi was strictly his way of life. It was his daily prayer and I do recall gratefully those regular evening prayers. At one occasion during our evening prayer one member of the *Ashram* asked: “ Bapuji, what would be your first act if at this moment you would have power to shape the destinies of mankind? ” After the suspense of silence, with all eyes pinned on Gandhi’s lips, he replied: “ I would pray for the courage instantly to renounce that power.” This, to me, seems most descriptive of Gandhi’s philosophy. It was indeed an overwhelming experience.

If violence and bloodshed accompanied the climax of India’s liberation, fanatic feuds between Hindus and Muslims, it was not the failure of *Ahimsa*, non-violence, but the pitiful lack of it. Gandhi’s supreme faith in non-violence, in the love of any human being, never failed, stating in his last letter to me, written not too long before he passed away:

“ My faith burns, if possible, brighter than before.”

Gandhi’s life was a testimony to pure living and his non-violence in our age of nuclear violence was not a technique but a pure response.