Revisiting Gandhi

Truth through Non-violence

Report of the NIAS Wednesday Discussion held on 10 August 2016

The speaker, Mr. Posina Venkata Rayudu did extensive research in both experimental and theoretical neurosciences at Harvard Medical School, National Brain Research Centre, and the Salk Institute. He is currently a NIAS Consciousness Studies Programme Research Fellow.

Truth and nonviolence are, in the words of Gandhi, “as old as hills”. They are also light-years apart, rarely making contact in ordinary or scientific conceptual space. This state-of-affairs changed for good, thanks to Gandhi’s reflective life of experimentation. In an intellectual tour de force, Mahatma Gandhi brought to figural salience, for all to see, the propinquity between truth and nonviolence: “Ahimsa is the means; Truth is the end”. The simple terms with which Gandhi expressed the conceptual kinship between TRUTH and NONVIOLENCE helped one and all to see the quintessence of his thinking; but the surface simplicity, not unlike that of Einstein’s E = mc2, is not that revealing of the metaphysical depths of the Mahatma’s meditations. Simply put, what does it mean to say, as Gandhi often said, “the way to Truth lies through Ahimsa”?

Gandhi’s Nonviolence

There are two conceptualizations of nonviolence: (1) nonviolence before Gandhi and (2) nonviolence after Gandhi. The Ahimsa of ancient India, as it was preached and practiced, was that of individual virtue valued and promoted on moral grounds. It is the nonviolence of ‘do not kill’, of ‘go vegan’, and of love and peace. Gandhi transformed this moral principle into a mode of action that both individuals and institutions can use as a means to achieve just ends. Gandhi’s practical applications of
nonviolence, which have been instrumental in bringing about India’s independence, have been duly recognized as a work of genius. No less a work of genius is his prophetic interpretation of Ahimsa as an ideal means of knowing.

Gandhi found Ahimsa in searching for Truth (in the sense of SATYA or reality): “I do claim to be a passionate seeker of Truth. In the course of that search, the discovery of non-violence came to me”. First, Gandhi recognized the nonviolent nature of reality, which he articulated by pointing out that the violence of history is not an invariant attribute of reality for the simple reason that history is but a record of changes and not that of invariance: “History, as we know it, is a record of the wars of the world. History, then, is a record of an interruption of the course of nature”.

Changes can be readily seen, but perceiving invariance calls for added reflection. If violence were the law of nature, Gandhi argued, we would not be: “Why can we not see that if the sum-total of the world’s activities was destructive it would have come to an end long ago? Ahimsa sustains this planet of ours”. Having thus appreciated the nonviolence of reality, Gandhi realized that the way to reality is through nonviolence.

Nonviolent Reality

Reality can be approached by contrasting it with fiction. Anything and everything can happen in fiction, which makes it inconsistent. Reality is not fiction i.e. not-inconsistent. It is not a place where anything happens; reality is a space of consistent-happenings: solids stay put, while liquids flow down, and gases, unlike both solids and liquids, diffuse out. Violence, naively speaking, is where anything can happen (which is why violence is not the default setting for solving problems). From this viewpoint, violence, not unlike fiction, is inconsistent. The inconsistency of violence, which is ‘anything can happen in violent situations’, can
sustain nothing. Negating violence gives nonviolence: nonviolence understood as consistent-becoming or becoming consistent with being. Nonviolence understood as consistent-becoming is thus the defining attribute of reality, or as Gandhi understood: “Ahimsa is the supreme law or Dharma”.

Turning our attention to biology, we do find violence—violence implicit in survival of the fittest—treated as a trait of nature. But if one were to focus away from the change of speciation and focus on the invariance of reproduction within a species, then one finds biological processes such as translation and transcription, which embody nonviolence in their commitment to ‘do not mutate’. Summing up, physics (with its lawful motions and transformations of bodies) and biology (in preserving the meaning of genetic code during reproduction) are in accord with Gandhi’s conception of reality as nonviolent.

Nonviolence of Knowing

The nonviolence of reality is nonviolence defined as not-inconsistent. What about the nonviolence of knowing? The nonviolence of knowing is a positive
reading of nonviolence: nonviolence defined as respecting or preserving.

There are few books, some papers, and some more notebooks on my desk. How did I know? I looked and the act of looking brought about the knowledge of things that are on the desk. My looks, when I look to see what is out-there, do not change the way things are. So is the case with reasoning, which is another means of knowing at the level of individual. In drawing conclusions, the acts of reason do not change the given premises. In addition to looking and reasoning that we, the individuals, routinely deploy to know, there is the collective knowing of science. At the level of science, measurements and calculations constitute the acts of knowing. The disciplined nature of knowing i.e. the ‘do not change’ of looking and reasoning that is obvious at the level of individual knowing is taken as the defining condition on knowing. So we try to make sure measurements ‘do not disturb’ that which is measured. Moving from physics to mathematics, we find that mathematical calculations—making unknown known—are also respectful of the given. More explicitly, mathematical objects are thought of as structures and the way we get to know about mathematical objects is by way of probing with morphisms, which, in geometric terminology, ‘do not tear’ apart the structure of objects. This instrument of preserving-meaning, with violence as ‘distortion of meaning’, exemplifies Gandhi’s assertion that nonviolence is the only means of knowing. The extensive mathematical reach of the nonviolence of knowing springs from an elemental equation: “falsehood is violence” that Gandhi insisted on. Putting it all together, we find the Mahatma’s truth-through-nonviolence, notwithstanding its spiritual genesis, is an abstraction of both individual knowing (looking, reasoning) and the collective knowing of science (measurements, calculations).