Nonviolence and Democratic Governance

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The past half-century has witnessed an unprecedented flowering of nonviolent experiences around the globe. In many areas of the world, such as Latin America and Asia, where armed struggle was once seen as the only path to freedom, nonviolent campaigns are now considered as institutionalized methods of struggle for democratic invention and democratic governance. One of the important tasks that the nonviolent movements have set for themselves is the successful provision of “good governance”. For them the real test of democracy is not only in the peaceful process of transition but in nonviolent consolidation of democratic institutions. For the advocates of nonviolence around the world, democracy is not just an “institutional arrangement for organizing the political society” but also a new attitude and approach towards the problem of power. Following examples of Buddha, Jesus, Ashoka, Tolstoy, Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., the challenges and difficulties of democratic governance need to be confronted through self-rule,
self-control and the soul force. For all these thinkers of nonviolence, the twin practices of self-discipline and empathetic service are necessary to control an unjust and inappropriate power. Gandhi considered “democracy disciplined and enlightened as the finest thing in the world”. What he meant was that democratic governance is not a power-over the society, but a power- within it. In other words, if democracy equals self-rule and self-control of the society, empowerment of the civil society and collective ability to rule democratically are the essential constituents of democratic governance. Democracy and nonviolence, therefore, are inseparable. Where democracy is practiced, people are honored for what they are. This requires transformation of human relations until none are violated because all participate in the democratic power. To have power in a democracy means to take part in the decision-making that affects each one’s fate. It means self-institution and self-rule.

For many thinkers and practitioners of nonviolence the significance of nonviolence lies principally in a commitment that involves self-rule and self-discipline. Such a commitment must include a profound concern for the Truth and welfare of all in the society. Centuries before Mahatma Gandhi spoke about “Swaraj” as self-rule and “Satyagraha” as struggle for Truth, Jainism, Buddhism and Hinduism had adopted the doctrine of non-harm in South Asia. The term “nonviolence” is itself a modern translation of the Sanskrit word “ahimsa”, that Gandhi drew from the ancient texts of Hinduism. It comes from the root “hims”, a desiderative for the verb “han”, to harm or injure. Prefixed with a privative “a”, it is translated literally as the “absence of the desire to injure”. In the Upanishads, in the Yoga Sutra and in the Baghavad Gita, ahimsa is considered as “the highest duty” adhered to anyone seeking perfection. A careful reading of the Baghavad Gita, which is the middle section of a great epic, Mahabharata, reveals that ahimsa is acknowledged as created by Krishna and attributed as a characteristic of those who are born “to the divine lot”. The teachings of Krishna in the Baghavad Gita explicitly renounce harm and injury.
In this way they became the inspiration for a life committed to nonviolence and self-rule.

The centrality of *ahimsa* is also paramount in the tradition of Jaina that was founded around 800 B.C. by Parsva in South Asia and reformed two hundred years later by Mahavira. Although Jainism remained a minority movement, its philosophical influence upon the wider life in the Indian subcontinent has been beyond all proportion. When one looks at Gandhi’s life, one has to recognize that he was brought up in a religious atmosphere deeply influenced by Jainism. In Jainism, *ahimsa* is practiced as a vow in order to overcome the negative influence of *karma*. This means that acts of violence are avoided because they will result in an obstruction to a state of liberation at some future time. According to *Acaranga Sutra* one of the basic texts of Jaina philosophy, “injurious activities inspired by self-interest lead to evil and darkness”. This has led the Jain community to consider nonviolence as a foundation for all its social activities. Gandhi’s attitude toward Jainism can perhaps be treated in relation with the fact that for him as for the Jains Truth includes nonviolence and nonviolence is the necessary and indispensable means for the discovery of Truth.

The other movement of thought and religious and social practice that deeply influenced Gandhi and is considered today as a specific Asian solution to the problems of democratic governance is Buddhism. Breaking away from ritualism of the Vedic religion Gautama Buddha gave the world a great example of personal commitment to the nonviolent way of organizing the social life. Buddhist teachings place a considerable emphasis upon the precept of “non-injury” and by this they have made their own contribution to the philosophy of nonviolence. Among the ideals that Buddhist monks were expected to exemplify, “nonviolence” appears as a principal value. Buddhist philosophy begins in the self and moves from there to affect the other. For Buddhism, the other will be served if the self is transformed. To experience “nonviolence” in Buddhism is to be aware of this interconnectedness of life.
Therefore, in Buddhism the solution to violence is rather individual rather than social. When nonviolence is defended in Buddhist terms, it is strongly based on the idea of “suffering of the self”. Violence, therefore, is forbidden not only because it harms the other, but because it primarily harms the self.

Ashoka, grandson of Chandragupta—the founder of the Mauryan dynasty—who came to the throne in 268 B.C., was one of the royal patrons of Buddhism. The British historian H.G. Wells has written: “Amidst the tens of thousands of names of monarchs that crowd the columns of history...the name of Ashoka shines, and shines almost alone, a star.” The legend of this ruler is the story of a cruel and ruthless king who converted to Buddhism and thereafter established a reign of virtue. In his efforts to propagate Buddhism, Ashoka built shrines and monasteries and inscribed Buddhist teachings on rocks and pillars in many places. He also promoted tolerance towards all religions that he supported financially. He recommended that all religions desist from self-praise and condemnation of others. Ashoka comprehended that the true governance cannot be done buy using force, but can be done by using dharma. Dharma meant for Ashoka morality, active social concern, religious tolerance, ecological awareness, observance of ethical precepts and good governance. If we agree with the Indian poet Tagore who described Dharma as “civilization” and Gandhi who defined “civilization” as a “virtuous action”, we can say that Ashoka’s social and political revolution changed violent governance to a politics of humanism based upon Dharma. Ashoka started his experience of nonviolent governance with a new philosophy and a new vision. His cry of nonviolence echoed centuries in the work and action of Mahatma Gandhi.

Gandhi showed the world that the most revolutionary idea of the human history is the truth of nonviolence. As Gandhi asserted the idea is “as old as the hills”, going back to Mahavira, Buddha and Christ, developed by Leo Tolstoy and nonviolent practitioners of many lands. But it was Gandhi’s experiment with Truth in the first half of the 20th century that proved that
nonviolence could be used on a large scale to redirect towards democratic governance. For Gandhi, nonviolence entailed more than a renunciation of bombs and bullets; it was above all concerned with the idea of democracy as “Swaraj” or self-rule. Long before he emerged as leader of the nonviolent movement in India and was hailed as the Mahatma, Gandhi had embraced the idea of “Swaraj” in the later phase of his South African period. For Gandhi, the goal of “Swaraj” could not be obtained by simply replacing British domination with Indian domination; the problem was much deeper and more complex, involving a change in the very meaning and character of governance. Evidence for this can be found in many of Gandhi’s writings—including what he wrote in his journal Harijan in February 1946 where we read: “A nonviolent evolution is not a program of seizure of power. It is a program of transformation of relationships ending in a peaceful transfer of power”. In other words, for Gandhi, the liberation of India from alien rule was merely the first step towards a radical reconstruction of the social and political order in India and ultimately in all countries. As far as India was concerned, this involved a radically decentralized and non-pyramidal society in which each individual would be at the center of an “oceanic circle”. As we can see, democratic decentralization is crucial to Gandhi’s concept of nonviolent society. He portrayed his preferred political system as a Panchayat Raj or a republic of villages. Gandhi’s political philosophy is therefore one that presupposes a democratic governance. He has a theory which combines a radically individualistic view of man with a communitarian view of the society. According to Gandhi, a decentralized decision-making ensures the well-being of all those who are affected by such decisions. The rationale of Gandhi’s premise is derived from the democratic imperative that all those whose interests are affected by decisions ought to take part in the governance process. In other words, the spontaneous redistribution of power in the country naturally results in a vigorous drive towards autonomy in the villages and small political units. That is why, in his view, the freedom of the individual had to be the hallmark of an independent country. Gandhi maintained a proper balance between “Nonviolent resistance” and
“constructive work”. Gandhi’s “Constructive Program” requires a collective capacity for building and maintaining a strong civil society. Strengthening civil society is a way to attain what Gandhi called “Poorna Swaraj” or complete independence by truthful and nonviolent means. This is to say that the promotion and consolidation of democratic governance and economic freedom are for Gandhi as two sides of the same coin.

What Gandhi and other Asian theorists and practitioners of nonviolence teach us is that sustaining and consolidating democratic governance and building a pluralist civil society is always a work-in-progress requiring constant attention and responsibility. As another famous Asian practitioner of nonviolence, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, once said: “While it is true that no system of government is perfect, democracy is the closest to our essential human nature and allows us the greatest opportunity to cultivate a sense of universal responsibility.” The process of democratic transition has not yet come to an end in the global century. We also have a long way to go in facing the challenges of consolidating and sustaining democracy around the world, and especially in Muslim countries.

The terrorist attack of September 11, while directed towards the United States, was also an attack on all Muslim nations that are committed to tolerance, pluralism and democracy. Today the true challenge for the Muslim community against the religious obscurantism is to help advance the agenda of democratic change and modernization inside the Islamic world. This challenge can provide an opportunity for a broad spectrum of Muslim social activists and scholars to join together in a penetrating exploration of nonviolent alternatives to global violence in the present era. What is needed to practice nonviolence in a Muslim society? For Gandhi, “belief in nonviolence is based on the assumption that human nature in its essence is one and therefore unfailingly responds to the advances of love…The nonviolent technique does not depend for its success on the goodwill of the dictators, for a nonviolent resister depends on the unfailing assistance of God which sustains him throughout difficulties which could
otherwise be considered insurmountable”. A Muslim following Gandhi’s teaching would not feel estranged. In fact, it may be possible to trace the Islamic influence of Gandhi’s religious thought concerning the omnipotent and incomparable God. But the proximity between Islam and nonviolence can be illustrated with the figure of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan who was referred to by Gandhi as Badshah Khan. When the history of the subcontinent is being written, perhaps only a very few of those who occupy public attention will find a mention in it. But among those very few “there will be the outstanding and commanding figure of Badshah Khan” said Jawaharlal Nehru. He was a Muslim who tried to light the lamp of nonviolence in the hearts of young Pathans. He was a person who spent half of his life behind the bars and still preached the message of nonviolence to his people. He saw no conflict in his triple identities- his Pathaniat, Hindustaniat and Insaniat (humanity) was an organic whole. Abdul Ghaffar Khan’s profound belief in the truth and effectiveness of nonviolence came from the depths of personal experience of his Muslim faith. “In my inmost conviction,” Ghaffar Khan said, “Islam is amal, yaqin, muhabat” - selfless service, faith, and love. Devout Muslim and a devoted ally of Mahtma Gandhi, Ghafar Khan struggled for the rights of his people for almost eighty years without ever yielding a weapon. His example proved that the highest religious values of Islam could be deeply compatible with a nonviolence that has the power to resolve social and political conflicts even against heavy odds. He was a Muslim voice for toleration and democracy. He was revered by Gandhi, who viewed him and his Pathan followers as an illustration of the courage it takes to live a nonviolent life. In 1929 Ghaffar Khan organized the “Khudai Khidmatgar” to effect political, social and economic reforms based on Islam. Its adoption of nonviolence was more thorough than that of the Indian National Congress in as much as the members of the “Khudai Khidmatgar” pledged themselves to nonviolence not only as a policy, but as a way of life. The ideal of the “Khudai Khidmatgar” was to become true servants of God and to realize the pleasure of God through serving humanity. The “Khudai Khitmadmatgar” was able to carry a nonviolent program to the extent
of establishing a parallel government for a short period in Peshawar. “There is nothing surprising in a Muslim or a Pathan like me subscribing to the creed of nonviolence,” said Ghaffar Khan, “It is not a new creed. It was followed fourteen hundred years ago by the Prophet all the time he was in Mecca”. If Ghaffar Khan’s example has a certain relevance for the Muslim societies, it is because he shows that nonviolence in Islam is grounded in the society at the grass-roots level through the action of each individual. It is integrated into the personal activities of individuals and into the collective behavior of an Islamic society. This support for nonviolence presented by a Muslim freedom fighter shows us clearly that democracy is not an alien principle or an unattainable ideal for Islamic societies. Unfortunately, too much of the discussion of the current “wave” of democratization in Muslim countries focuses almost solely on the presumed democratizing potential of market mechanisms. Democratic transition in Muslim societies, however, requires much more than market mechanisms. To achieve a consolidated democratic governance, the necessary degree of autonomy of civil society must be embedded in the rule of law. A nonviolent civil society, with the capacity to generate and articulate ideas and values and to create associations and solidarities among the citizens, can help start a democratic transition and help consolidate and deepen democracy. Democratic governance requires that habituation to the norms and procedures of democratic conflict-regulation be developed. A high degree of nonviolent practice is a key part of such a process. The force of the claim that democracy is a universal value for all kinds of societies and cultures, lies ultimately in its constructive function in the consolidation of value and practice of nonviolence. This is where the debate of democratic governance belongs. It cannot be disposed of by assumed cultural taboos imposed upon us by our various pasts which are generators of violence and hatred in our contemporary societies.

In this context, the legacy and tradition of nonviolence in South Asia is not only an important milestone in its own history, but an important milestone in the history of democracy. What Gandhi and Abdul Ghaffar Khan achieved in
South Asia and what South Asian experience of nonviolence continues to represent is relevant and important to the rest of the Muslim and non-Muslim world in order to achieve a nonviolent democracy.

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