

## Gandhi and the Resolution of Intra-Personal Conflicts

DURING THE LAST forty years, particularly more recently, the study of conflict has become a multi-disciplinary concern. Biological concomitants of aggression have been explored. Psychology has turned towards discovering the roots of conflict in personality and the influence of motivation on conflict and its resolution. Sociological study has helped to investigate the social structures as they relate to conflict. For example, researches by biologists have shed considerable light on the phenomenon of aggression on the assumption that it will

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help us to identify the roots of human conflicts. Psychologists have been singularly interested in discovering the roots of conflict in psychopathology. Sociologists also have demonstrated the role of societal structures in engendering conflict.

Conflict is generally viewed as a tendency to perform two or more incompatible responses at the same time, resulting in emotional, mental, and/or physical stress requiring modification. The incompatible actions may originate in one person (intra-personal), one group (intra-group), two or more persons (inter-personal), or two or more groups (inter-group). In this paper we restrict ourselves to exploring the resolution of intra-personal conflicts in the Gandhian framework.

An intra-psycho conflict is the conflict which an individual experiences within the self. It arises from our drives, instincts, and values pulling against one another. Classical psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud posits the fundamental conflict as one between the "id" (pleasure principle) and the "super ego" (moral principle). Psychoanalytical and neopsychoanalytical theories since Freud have stressed the centrality of intrapsychic conflict as the essential dynamic of neurotic behaviour. Intra-psycho conflict is one of the precursors of interpersonal conflict. Ideally the ego is strong enough to be the arbiter between the "id" and the "super ego." The ego takes account of the reality of the core self of the person and the degree of strength and maturity of the ego determines the degree of control the super ego is allowed to exercise over the instinctual libidinous drives. Viktor Frankl has pointed out that there is another kind of conflict besides the conflict of drives and instincts. Frankl calls this noogenic neurosis, which arises from conflicts between various values; from moral conflicts and from spiritual problems.

An internal conflict can focus on anything that encounters resistance when attempts are made to incorporate it or make it acceptable to the self. Since facing conflict creates unpleasant feelings of tension and anxiety, individuals develop conscious or unconscious methods of handling conflicts. One method is to suppress it—that is, to consciously put it in the back of one's mind and deliberately decide not to deal with it. Repression, on the other hand, is an unconscious process of blocking out the conflict so that it does not come out into the open, into consciousness. However, material repressed in the unconscious still exerts a powerful influence on us, for repression can cause conflict to be disguised in the form of compulsions, obsessions, anxiety, and depression.

Conflict avoidance, conflict management, and conflict resolution are the strategies humans normally take in confronting conflicts. Management refers to the reduction of tension in the conflict in order to enable the person to pursue his or her goal. Resolution means that the conflict is removed and the individual is satisfied. Not all conflicts can be resolved, but with training, they can all be managed more

effectively. Conflict avoidance will lead to neurosis and resolution or management will promote psychological health.

Now let us try to explore some salient influences on Gandhi's psyche which might help us to understand his unique techniques of resolving intra-personal conflicts. Irrespective of their orientation, psychologists will trace the beginnings of human conflict to childhood. There is a Mohandas before the Mahatma. He was not a good student, he tells us, but somehow he was doing quite well. He was obedient and most careful about his own character and especially of truth. He was very shy and withdrawn. He could not criticise or think ill of elders.

There are some significant events in young Gandhi's life which need to be mentioned. As a schoolboy, he refused the prompting of a teacher to copy down from the companion's slate. P. had been very much attracted by the legendary figure Harishchandra. To follow truth as the supreme good was early implanted in him and later this became the unifying philosophy of his life.

The most influential figure in Gandhi's life was his mother. The deeply religious life of his mother left a lasting impression on his character. As he says in his Autobiography: "The outstanding impression my mother has left on my memory is that of saintliness. She was deeply religious. She would not think of taking her meals without her daily prayers. Going to Haveli—the Vaishnava temple—was one of her daily duties . . . she would take the hardest vows and keep them without flinching. Illness was no excuse for relaxing them." Putali Bai, the mother, provided an ideal style of living for the adult Gandhi. From the mother, he gathered inner resources and sure-footedness to resolve his inner conflicts of daily life.

We must also try to reflect on the relation of Mohan to his father, because the Mahatma places service to the father and the crushing guilt of failing in such service in the center of his adolescent turbulence. Gandhi refers to his father not only as short-tempered but also as possibly given to "carnal pleasures." The father's marriage to his mother had been the fourth and he had married the eighteen-year old girl when he was already forty. Gandhi further accuses his father for insisting on the son's early marriage. An important encounter with his father was Gandhi's confession about the stealing of a bit of gold from his brother's armlet. The father was immensely moved by this act, could not contain himself, and shed some tears. Gandhi later wrote: "This was, for me, an object lesson in Ahimsa. Then I could read (see) in it nothing more than a father's love, but today I know that it was pure Ahimsa. When such Ahimsa becomes all-embracing, it transforms everything it touches." It was a lesson in nonviolence for Gandhi—an experience of inner transformation and inner harmony.

Gandhi pictures nursing his father as something nobler than all other endeavours. He writes to his son Manilal: "When I was less than your age, my greatest joy was to nurse my father". We find a certain

kind of ambivalence in Gandhi's relationship with the father. The final and fatal encounter with the father is vividly described in his *Autobiography*. One night, when the sick father was thinking, Gandhi left the room to join his pregnant wife in their bedroom, leaving the nursing care of the father to an uncle. After a while, somebody rushed in to fetch him because the father's illness took a very serious turn. Running to the father's room, he found his father dead. "A blot," Gandhi writes, "which I have never been able to efface or to forget." Erikson calls this incident a "curse" which will strongly influence one's life. This episode and its aftermath on Gandhi's psyche points to a condensation and projection of pervasive childhood conflicts on a dramatized scene.

The reader of Gandhi's *Autobiography* will get a picture of his childhood and youth totally obsessed with matters of guilt and purity and experiments with untruths. At the same time, he was endowed with superior powers of observation as well as an indomitable determination. It is also interesting to note that the theme of nursing a stricken (and ambivalently loved) superior adversary reappears in Gandhi's later life, both literally and symbolically. We see Gandhi recruiting people for ambulance corps to help British Government in the war. And we shall find it in the conviction of a satyagrahi that in fighting nonviolently, he is really taking care of his adversary's soul and its latent "truth."

After a brief exploration of Gandhi's life events, which are of psychological relevance, we turn to his unique technique of resolving intra-personal conflicts. A psychic conflict can be solved only by gaining self-possession and self-determination through the use of will, reason, and enlightened choice. A person is thus able to master himself, to direct himself to the desired end. In the case of Mahatma Gandhi, he gained self-mastery through taking vows and adhering scrupulously to them. For him, vows became symbols or media of a real, free, and authentic transcendence. Vows presuppose knowledge, judgement, and deliberate choice and a free act of will. Vows are not stripping of one's being but an ordering of it in truth, in love.

### *From Vow to Vocation*

Before leaving for England, Mohandas had gone through a typical pathological phase of acute identity confusion. He finally and interestingly resolved the conflict by letting his mother take him to a Jain monk, and there he took a vow to abstain from meat, women, and wine. This alone could safeguard his stay in England and make of it a true apprenticeship between the childhood that was over and a future leadership of unforeseeable dimensions. Later, this vow became a vocation. In life he realized that making a vow opened up real freedom rather than closing it up. They helped him to make strong

commitments. The Mahatma's central chapter on British vegetarianism is appropriately called "My Choice," a title which points to the essence of adulthood.

Vow, according to Gandhi, is to do at any cost something that one ought to do. In his opinion, vows are essentially necessary for self-realization, because without them one will not be able to overcome the manifold temptations of daily life. Indeed, he became a political leader par excellence because of the depth of his firmness in what he believed. According to him, refusal to take vows indicates moral weakness. In South Africa, he took the vow of *brahmacharya* for life in order to dedicate himself fully to the service of people.

On 11 September 1906, at the Empire Theatre in Johannesburg, he made the assembly of Indian delegates take an oath against the Black Act. Before this act, he reminded the people: "Each individual takes it, facing not his neighbour but his God. Nor should it be taken in order to gain power over anybody but oneself, for the power of an oath is defined by what one man can promise to do, and what he is willing to suffer: insult, incarceration, hard labour, flogging, fine, deportation and even death. But I can boldly declare, and with certainty, that so long as there are even a handful of men true to their pledge, there can only be one end to the struggle and that is victory." As E.H. Erikson rightly points out, the oath was Gandhi's business because of his own experience about its motivating force.

When one takes an oath, he gains self-mastery and gets courage and power to solve his conflicts. Gandhi gained his vigour and agility from his victories over himself. There is spiritual (inner) power in him which he later applied to political reality. When he listened to his inner voice, he heard the clamour of the people. It may be just this alliance of inner voice and voice of mankind that led him to struggle for India's independence. When an individual makes an important choice for himself/herself, he/she is making a choice for the whole of humanity. In Gandhi's case, it was very true.

Taking a vow does not mean that we are able to observe it completely. But it does mean "constant and honest effort in thought, word, and deed, with a view to its fulfilment."

For Gandhi, all the vows are interrelated. Violation of any one would affect the other vows. Techniques have to vary to suit the circumstances of their use and may, therefore, be temporary; the underlying motivations, however, hold good for ever.

Vows are a kind of self-imposed personal laws. Gandhi was a prophet of self-mastery, who attained national control through control of self. Gandhi's strength lies in the richness of his personality. His goal was to be, not to have. He transcended the limitations of human psyche through the strength he gained by the scrupulous adherence to the vows he took. Before structural purification, self-purification has to take place. Gandhi's approach to conflict resolution is to gain

mastery, transcendence, over one's own self. The essence of his life was the persistent struggle to be well integrated and to participate actively in life with that inner harmony. And vows give dynamism to its realization.

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