



Research Paper

The Idea Of Nonviolence: A Parallel Study Of The Historical Buddhist Figure Ashoka And The Mythological King Yudhishtira

Madhvi Lata,

Assistant professor, Department of English, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, 221005

ABSTRACT: The Indian idea of nonviolence originated from the debates about sacrificing/killing and eating animals, soon which had taken up the debates about warfare. In the ancient history, the greatest war during the Mauryan Dynasty was waged against 'Kalinga' by the emperor Ashoka and it marked milestone significance in his life and history. The war was famously known as 'Kalinga War'. It made such an impression upon his mind as the lines in our hands - indelible. It moved his heart and he made up his mind to walk on the path of non-violence and later he embraced Buddhism. The greatest epic of Indian history the Mahabharata too bears the similar narrative by depicting mythological figure Yudhishtira who during his last days walked alone on the path, never looking down, only a dog followed him. The Mahabharata has multiple, deeply colored narratives. There is such a narrative of treatment of animals, treatment of Pariahs symbolized by animals, and human violence as an inevitable result of the fact that humans are animals and animals are violent. The analysis of connection between historical figure of Ashoka and mythological character of Yudhishtira and their attempt to mitigate/soothe, if not to abolish, violence especially against animals and humans, is the core attempt of the present paper.

KEYWORD: Nonviolence, violence, Warfare, Kalinga, Kurukshetra etc.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Nonviolence is a far broader term to limit it into any specific definition. To narrow it down, it may be said, it is a term of expressing one's belief to accept, experience, or survive something harmful or unpleasant, or could be an effort to do so without turning to violence. What is nonviolence within diverse religion and in its different sects is increasingly a big debate. In every religion, it has specific place to express as what people believe in and so expressing about it.

Upinder Sing, a professor and Head of History Department at DU, explores the meaning and understanding of violence and nonviolence in her book titled Political Violence in Ancient India as:

"The English 'violence' is generally used to refer to actions involving physical force intended to injure, harm or kill. Definitions of 'nonviolence' on the other hand, have been strongly influenced by Gandhian nonviolence as a strategy of resistance against British colonial rule. Ancient Indian lexicons contains several words for force, violence, and injury. The most important one is the Sanskrit 'himsa', which shares the English word 'violence' the idea that force inflicted or the injury caused is excessive, unjustified or unethical. It is interesting that the antonyms-the Sanskrit 'ahimsa' and the English 'nonviolence'- both create a positive value through the negation of something negative (himsa, violence)."

Wikipedia defines it:

"Nonviolence is the personal practice of being harmless to self and others under every condition. It comes from the belief that hurting people, animals or the environment is unnecessary to achieve an outcome and refers to general philosophy of abstention from violence. This may be based on moral, religious or spiritual principles, or it may be for purely strategic or pragmatic reasons."

II. MAIN EXCREPT

The paper aims to look at non- violence in particular and the vantage ground to view it is 'warfare'; which history and myth both acknowledge and witness as paradigm shift in its notion. History and myth have an

inextricable connection, each relying upon other. There are two remarkable tools, which may be used to understand contemporaneity, especially humanity, and these tools are 'History' and 'Myth'. History and myth do not mean buried mound of ideologies and facts. The present can be viewed and evaluated in the mirror of the past.

T.S. Eliot, in his essay titled "Tradition and Individual Talent" states:

"Historical sense involves perception, not only of the Pastness of the past, but of its presence"

Similarly, myths are also a source that help us ask grounded questions about human life and its meaning. The paper foregrounds its central argument in the context of warfare. The dire consequence which impacted two kings and compelled them to have had a change of heart; one hails from history and another from myth, and the latter seemingly, seems to be influenced from the former. It is about historical king Asoka, the great; and Mythological king Yudhishtra, the eldest of Pandavs. One took sanctuary in Buddhist religion to profess his tolerance, whereas the other, downhearted, took the path to heaven. They both have largely witnessed utter catastrophe of war, which resulted into making them renounce it forever.

King Asoka: the great, was an emperor of the Mauryan Dynasty who reigned almost from 268 to 232 BCE, a conqueror who inherited much of North India but did not venture beyond southern Karnataka to win over south India. Nevertheless, in his eighth year of reign, he marched on Kalinga (present Orissa) in a cruel campaign. He won the war but was so much disgusted by horrific aftermath of war that he lost interest in war and violence. His change of heart is well documented in several of his edicts, which allows reading of the mind of a ruler who regrets what he regards as a major crime in the line of duty. As the edict explains:

"On conquering Kalinga, the Beloved of the Gods (Priyadasi) felt remorse, for when an independent country is conquered the slaughter, death, and deportation of people are extremely grievous to the beloved of Gods and weigh heavily on his mind... he very earnestly practiced dhamma, described dhamma, and taught dhammas..."

But Asoka's remorse does have to be understood differently. His repentance did not mean that he had turned to nonviolence for ever. As in the same edict, it is also inscribed:

"He warns the forest tribes of his empire that he has power even in his remorse, and he asks them to repent, lest they be killed".

He may have hung up his gun, but he still had it. According to him the code of dhamma includes "honesty, truthfulness, compassion, obedience, mercy, benevolence and considerate behavior toward all. He arranged hospitals for humans and animals; planted roadside trees, dug well, constructed rest houses etc. which shows him to have an idealistic world of Rama's reign in the Ramayan.

The above phrased inscription of his edict explains his capability to resist violence but not to be helpless to shed blood, if requires.

Romila Thapar, a professor at JNU states:

"His advocating tolerance and non-violence as official policy made him an unusual ruler. However, there is a small but significant discrepancy in what he propagated and in a couple of policy actions. These suggest that ahimsa as his official policy had limits, determined by circumstances"

In 'Kalinga' warfare, unkind slaughter was done, around 100,000 people were killed. But what is more remarkable about this war is its inscription. It is written in introspective and confessional tone, its frankness and sincerity, and the decision to carve it in rock- to make it permanent. It was about his realization that military conquest, indeed royal vain glory was impermanent; so that an individual could take pain to see it and remember him.

In a paper titled "Ashoka- A Retrospective, Romila Thapar quotes:

"Gandhi drew on Ashoka less as a historical figure and more perhaps as an inspiration for his own methods to achieve freedom from colonial rule..."

Asoka deeply cared about animals along with humans. He promoted royal pilgrimage to Buddhist shrines instead of royal touring for hunts. Hence, he provides a Buddhist virtue in the form of pilgrimage, to a Hindu vice of hunting. In a rock inscription, as translated by Wendy Doniger in her *The Hindus*, it is stated:

"Our lord, the king kills very few animals. Seeing this, the rest of the people have also ceased from killing animals. Even the activity of those catch fish has been prohibited."

But there also seems to have been a reverse idea to the above quotation. Asoka never did discontinue killing, torture or eating of animals. He had a restricted tolerance. A quote in this connection:

"He recommends restraints of violence toward living beings in the same breath that he recommends the proper treatment of slaves, but evidently it is all right to kill some of the creatures sometime..."

There is also a myth in extant about Ashoka and his renunciation of violence. A discourse, on Kalinga edict explains his confession of cruelty and his subsequent renunciation of it in favor of Buddhism. All this resulted in the fantasy that he killed his ninety-nine brothers to usurp the throne and created a hell on earth. This myth making is well displayed by director Santosh Sivan in the film 'Asoka' in 2001. It is also disparagingly said that he gave up war only after he had conquered all north India. Buddhist tradition had its own take on Ashoka. He, after Kaling war, built 84000 stupas and relics of Buddha. It underlined his sovereignty and

humanity and thus, he from wicked “Chand-Ashoka” converted to righteous “Dharma-Ashoka”. To sum up, his advocacy of tolerance and non-violence established him as an unusual ruler. Ahimsa (non-violence) as his official policy had certain limitations which were determined by circumstances.

Upinder Singh in *Political Violence in Ancient India* analyzes the relation between the kings and ideas of non-violence. She says:

“It is ironic that the arch perpetrators of violence—namely, kings—extended support and patronage to Buddhism and Jainism. Whether this reflects a special awareness of political violence, or whether the ethic of nonviolence was not an important part of the impact of Buddhism and Jainism on political culture are issues that need reflection.”

As Upinder Singh has pointed out in her book, Ashoka was way ahead of his time to understand the importance of nonviolence in life and politics. However, the nonviolence was not helpful in furthering any political ambition as can be seen in the study of Ashokan empire which lost its name and power after Ashoka. His being ahead might have been the reason that the idea of nonviolence did not get much popularity in politics until later 19th century and reached its height during early 20th century during the Indian struggle for freedom.

The story of the Mahabharata is one of the most violent and is full of blood shed which at several occasions reminds us of the War of Troy. However, the one character of the Mahabharata who can be seen having a round character is Yudhishtira. He was not much interested in war and after the war took shelter in nonviolence.

The Mahabharata is important for the fact that it depicts the casualties of not only physical violence but of verbal and mental violence. The ill/evil natured laugh of Draupadi which instigated already angry Kauravas and other instances of violent schemes which led to murders of people simplest illustration of it.

Yudhishtira, the eldest of Pandavas in the fundamental text of Hindu Mythology the Mahabharata, has been famously known for his resistance to war. He did not want to fight the war of ‘Kurukshetra’ in the beginning. As a matter of fact, Vedas and Puranas does not have any instance to testify that killing/sacrificing animals was unethical or against human belief. Ancient Vedas and scriptures do hold the idea of sacrificing animals during fire ‘yajana’ and in other ceremonial rituals. However, in present time non-violence/tolerance has taken lots of turns. We cannot allow anyone to do wrong to us in the shade of holding non-violence ideology. It has, nowadays, become more about fighting for our right than keeping ourselves calm and letting the cruel circumstances take a toll on.

However, the nonviolence was not viewed as a virtue of great king, as being able to control the kingdom. The kingdom has to be defended from the internal as well as from external forces who were not going to use nonviolence but ready to use violence whenever possible to fulfil their political ambitions. Upinder Singh has described this aspect:

“But the epic is quite emphatic in asserting that an excess of predilection for nonviolence is disastrous for a king. Bhishma warns the vacillating Yudhishtira for too much compassion—‘nothing great can be achieved through pure compassion. Further, people do not hold you in much respect for being gentle, self-controlled and excessively noble and righteous, a compassionate and righteous eunuch....The behavior you want to follow is not the behavior of kings.’”

Yudhishtira was torn into two halves during warfare. He has been throughout a benevolent Kshatriya king. He was never in favor of killing his own brothers in the war. He held different belief about life and war. He was not like Mauryan king Asoka. He has had a change of heart after Kurukshetra war was over. He felt torrent of remorse after the war and renounced it forever and embraced non-violence. Interestingly, being a Kshatriya, it was his ‘Sarvadharmā’ to go to war. Bhagwat Gita justifies it and claims where question of destruction of evil is involved, the morality of violence is justified. Yudhishtira had to establish the relationship of ‘Kingship’ and Dharma. The war was between righteousness and unrighteousness (dharma and adharma). It revealed that whenever evil on earth crosses its limit and try to eclipse the right, it must have to be put to an end. Yudhishtira, an embodiment of dharma was despondent and saddened as he had to slay his elders and cousins. When he was made conscious of his duty toward his kingdom, a new revelation and mystic knowledge cleared his guilty consciousness.

His reluctance for violence also made him aware that if he did not fight this war, it would be seen that his tolerance/ non-violence would lead sufferings to dharma and goodness. Therefore, he fought the war to defeat adharma (evil). Before the battle began, Yudhishtira did something unexpected. He suddenly dropped his weapon, took off his armor and started walking towards the Kaurava army with folded hands in prayer. The Pandavas and the Kauravas looked on in disbelief, thinking Yudhishtira was surrendering. Later, it was clear that he had gone to seek Bhishma’s blessing for success in war. Finally, he turned to his chariot and was ready to commence.

Therefore, his war was not against Kaurava but against evil. He found himself in moral obligation to fight the war and prove his righteousness. It was after the war he realized that in defense of good (dharma) he

killed all and lost everything. He felt uncontrollable torrent of contrition and in the heat of moment, he had a change of heart. He embraced the idea of non- violence and renounced everything.

On the state of violence and nonviolence in Mahabhartha Upinder Singh says:

“The Mahabharata is pervaded by relentless violence....It is ironic that one of the most violent stories in the ancient world contains a great deal of reflection of the problem of violence and much praise of nonviolence. This seems to have seeped in from the larger culture milieu in which critiques of violence had made a strong impact.”

III. CONCLUSION

After so many years, it seemed that the king Asoka, after his dynasty was over, had not been forgotten. This may be said in the light of the fact that his edicts were read after him. And Yudhisra's pronouncements against violence speak of the evils of war, possibly reflecting a debate among Post-Asokan politics. His remorse and rejection of violence is reminiscent of Asoka's major edict XIII, relating to the Kalinga war. He (Yudhisra) after war, states that no dharma is as sinful as the Kshatriya dharma because a king during a war slaughtered a multitude of people.

It is evident that the idea of nonviolence was in Indian culture since ancient times but the political universe of those times was not much suitable for the idea, however, the significance of the idea shows itself with the emergence of Buddhism and Jainism both of which are based on the same basic idea: nonviolence. To sum up, it may be said that nonviolence is a powerful and sharp tool. It is a weapon unique in history. It cuts people without injury and recognizes the one who wields it.

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