

“AHIMSA” PRINCIPLE IN THE RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL PRACTICES OF ANCIENT AND CONTEMPORARY INDIA

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Abstract

Purpose: The paper is focused on the development of the ahimsa principle and its specifics in the ideology of ancient and contemporary India, in its religious and cultural practices.

Methodology: An in-depth analysis of the sacred texts of Brahmanism, Jainism, and Hinduism allows to provide a philosophical and anthropological definition of the concepts of violence and non-violence in Indian ideology and its religious and cultural practices. A review of the concepts of violence and non-violence in the religions of contemporary and ancient India is made.

Result: The author concludes that issues of violence and non-violence in religious traditions are primarily based on prerequisites connected with religion and world views resulting from concepts concerning the beginnings of life. Hinduism emerged from concepts of Universal sacrifice as the origin of being, that is why its interpretation of violence and non-violence is different from that in monotheistic religious traditions.

Applications: This research can be used for universities, teachers, and students.

Novelty/Originality: In this research, the model of “AHIMSA” Principle in the Religious and Cultural Practices of Ancient and Contemporary India is presented in a comprehensive and complete manner.

Keywords: *Violence and Non-Violence, Jainism, Hinduism, Ahimsa, Upanishads, The Bhagavad Gita, Yoga Sutras, Vyasa Bhashya.*

INTRODUCTION

The basic theoretical aspects of the non-violence concept represented in Indian religions have already been developed quite thoroughly. Among the substantial research in the field are the works by the following scholars: [Torkel Brekke \(2015\)](#), who studied western historiography of violence in contemporary India; [Michael Jerryson \(2016\)](#), who dealt with the analysis of ethical doctrines in early Buddhism, and Iselin [Frydenlund \(2017\)](#) whose work focused on the righteous war concept in contemporary Buddhism. [Juli Gittinger \(2017\)](#) researched the issue of religious purity and its connection with contemporary nationalistic ideologies of Hinduism. The problem of violence in Asian religions was addressed by [Jimmy Yu \(2018\)](#), while the paper by [Frank Korom \(2018\)](#) dealt with issues of political violence in ancient India. The rhetoric of violence in Buddhist Tantras was described by [David Gray \(2018\)](#). Various aspects of violence and non-violence were also covered in works [by Aleksandr Artukh and Konstantin Mulgaup \(2013\)](#), [Sergei Borisov and Sergei Shemraev \(2012\)](#).

At the same time, it is not only the multi-aspectual approach that allows researching the development of the non-violence concept but a historical and philosophical analysis of Indian traditions as well. Such analysis will be attempted in this paper.

METHODS

An in-depth analysis of the sacred texts of Brahmanism, Jainism, and Hinduism allows providing a philosophical and anthropological definition of the concepts of violence and non-violence in Indian ideology and its religious and cultural practices. A review of the concepts of violence and non-violence in the religions of contemporary and ancient India is made.

RESULTS AND ITS DISCUSSION

The Vedic age of India's history actually had no concept of non-violence. The culture of that time was based on the values of the warriors' community (the Kshatriyas). It resulted in a widespread consumption of animal meat, along with animal sacrifices. Vedic narrations of Gods contain abundant scenes of violence, rage, and battles. In the great epic poems, Mahabharata and Ramayana, Gods are described in a similar way.

It is clear that issues of violence and non-violence in religious traditions are first of all based on religion and world views, and these are usually formed out of concepts of life beginnings. While in Christianity and Islam this beginning is represented by God, the Maker, the religion of Hinduism emerged from notions of Universal sacrifice considered to be the beginning of life. That is why the interpretation of issues connected with the Good and the Evil, violence, and non-violence is somewhat different from that in monotheistic religious traditions. [Torkel Brekke \(2015\)](#)

The essence of Hinduism as the religion of a caste-based society is reflected in the famous religious and philosophical poem, The Bhagavad Gita (“Song of the Spirit”), which is quite a small part of The Mahabharata, an epic poem describing

the battle of Bharatas. The Bhagavad Gita reflects the philosophical views of “Epic Sankhya”, or “Sankhya Yoga”. The system of categories in The Bhagavad Gita describes a specific development stage of this school of thought. According to G.W.F. Hegel, [Torkel Brekke \(2015\)](#)

As an episode it has a distinct doctrinal tendency and is thus freer of the wild, enormous fantastic compositions, dominant in Indian narrative poetry, depicting events and deeds of heroes and gods, of the origin of the world, etc. Yet even in this poem, it is necessary to cope with many things and to abstract much in order to emphasize what is interesting ([Hegel 1986](#) [1827], p. 134). [Michael Jerryson \(2016\)](#)

The attitude of Hinduism towards violence and non-violence is shown in the episode where the talk between Arjuna and Krishna is described. Arjuna, the Kshatriya, who commands the army of Pandavas, is dull of doubt, the very thought that he will have to fight with his relatives frightens him. Arjuna seeks the advice of his chariot driver, who is actually Sri Krishna. After a long talk Sri Krishna dispels Arjuna’s doubts and convinces him that the fight is necessary: “Arjuna, how has such illusion overcome you at this crucial moment? This is not appropriate for an honorable man, nor does it lead to higher planets. It is the cause of infamy. O Partha, give up this unmanliness. It does not befit you. O chastiser of enemies, get up and do not yield to this petty weakness of heart. [Michael Jerryson \(2016\)](#)

The Bhagavad Gita contains the doctrine of regulated actions expressed as follows: “Regulated actions performed without attachment or aversion and with no desire for results are said to be in the mode of goodness”. In response to Sri Krishna’s attempts to persuade him to fight, Arjuna asks Sri Krishna: [Michael Jerryson \(2016\)](#)

O Janardana, O Kesava, if it is Your opinion that wisdom is better than action, then why do You wish to engage me in such violent activities? Your words seem to be contradictory and my mind is now confused. Therefore, kindly tell me which particular path is most beneficial for me. [Michael Jerryson \(2016\)](#)

Krishna teaches Arjuna to act without attachment, unaffected by loss or gain, which is in the mode of goodness: “A person who has rejected the desire to enjoy the results of his actions, who do not depend upon others and who is always content, even while engaged in action, does nothing at all. Having no desires, controlling the mind and body, having no sense of possessiveness, such a person does not incur any wrongdoing although they may perform actions in order to maintain the body. One who is content with those things that come of their own accord, and is beyond duality, devoid of enviousness, and equal in success and failure – such a person is not bound by karma, although he may perform actions. All karma is completely dissolved for one who is detached, liberated, situated in knowledge and performs actions only in sacrifice”. Thus, The Bhagavad Gita addresses the freedom of will issue through a choice of the right path: a path of action, which is noble, of a path of inaction, which leads to sin.

The Bhagavad Gita appears to be an integral doctrine containing major problems of ethics and religion, namely: what is the ultimate goal, what is the essence of eth Good and the Evil, vice and virtue, freedom of will and regulated action. The morals in The Bhagavad Gita is a means to achieve the ultimate goal of religion – that is, the God. The significance of ethical learning is intensified in the notion of the Highest Good, which surpasses common perceptions of the Good and the Evil. Dharma concept in The Bhagavad Gita encompasses both religious, legal and ethical meanings. Dharma is a fundamental value of human beings, and it is basic to virtue. The doctrine and the principle of regulated action are both prescribed as a significant rule of life.

Yoga is described in The Bhagavad Gita as the main way to the highest blessing. It includes three major paths: Jnana Yoga – the path of knowledge leading conscience and reason towards balance and tranquility; Bhakti Yoga – the path of loving devotion to a personal god and concentration on the Higher Self; Karma Yoga – the path of action devoid of attachment to its fruits, where the results of actions are devoted to God. It is Karma Yoga that is the main path to liberation. It contains the ethics of The Bhagavad Gita. A major aspect of karma-yoga is the regulated action doctrine and treating inaction as a sin.

The essence of the ethical problem that The Bhagavad Gita touches upon is as follows: Kshatriya Arjuna refuses to perform his duty as he doubts whether the forthcoming battle would be righteous. The dharma of the kshatriya obliges him to participate in the battle as war means sacrifice to a warrior, and kshatriya means “one who protects from danger”. This interpretation of war allows violence with the only purpose to protect the innocent (Brahmans, women, children, elderly people, cows). Among the major ethical requirements of The Bhagavad Gita is the appeal to perform one’s duty, that is, to follow the dharma of the kshatriya. Sri Krishna actually talks Arjuna into sin, as his pacifism dooms everybody to sin and death. The Bhagavad Gita ethics is based on the idea that false ego should not overshadow the transcendent duty.

Mahatma Gandhi considered The Bhagavad Gita as a source containing answers to major social questions. He read it in moments of distress. There is a common perception in India that it was due to the inspiration received from The Bhagavad Gita that Mahatma Gandhi and his principle of non-violent resistance contributed to India’s sovereignty in 1947 when it gained independence from Britain.

The first mentioning of non-violence as a moral virtue was contained in Khandogya Upanisad: “Penance, liberality, righteousness, kindness, truthfulness, these from his Dakshinas (gifts bestowed on priests)”. The word “ahimsa” means self-sacrifice and ascesis. Later, Yoga Sutras prescribed ahimsa as a compulsory requirement for everyone allowed to

practice yoga. Patanjali Yoga Sutras 29-34 gives a detailed description of complementary means for Yoga Practice, including self-control, religious observances, asanas, etc.

Vyasa Bhashya provides a classification of violence into 27 types divided into three classes, namely: violence committed one's own; violence committed at someone's order; socially approved violence. Neither Patanjali nor Vyasa Bhashya justifies any of the above classes of violence. For instance, Sutra 34, among others, condemns violence committed by virtue of circumstances and violence resulting from belonging in the Varnas when the person who commits sit only serves as a tool. [Torkel Brekke \(2015\)](#)

Patanjali Sutra 23 mentions a yogin's perfect abilities called "the strength of friendliness" which result from practicing the Samyama:

Samyama's practice is based on feelings of friendliness, sympathy and happiness developed towards three objects, including those who are happy; those who are suffering; those prone to virtue. Developing these feelings results in the strength of friendliness, strength of sympathy and strength of happiness, which is possible due to concentration. [...] A yogin should be indifferent and neutral to those who are prone to sin. Neutrality is naturally not a feeling. Thus, there can be no samyama based on indifference, by default. It means no strength of indifference can emerge. What is meant is probably the non-participation in sin on the energetic level.

In its further development, the idea of non-violence becomes connected with another important Upanishad concept, that is, the belief in karma suggesting that all actions and behavioral attitudes of an individual will decide his fate in the future existence. Actions and attitudes aimed at depriving somebody of their lives will have extremely negative consequences. In the VI century BC, this interpretation of the ahimsa concept became a significant part of teachings by Buddha, as well as by Mahavira, the founder of Jainism. These two spiritual teachers were opposed to official Brahmanism. [Michael Jerryson \(2016\)](#)

Dr. Vilas Sangave, a famous sociologist and Jainologist, author to a number of papers on Ahimsa principle and its practice, gives the following description of Jainism in the introduction to his monograph *The Jaina Path of Ahimsa* [Michael Jerryson \(2016\)](#)

Of all religions of the world, Jainism is the only religion which has the principle of Ahimsa as its central doctrine. [...] In the history of world religions, Jainism alone has given a unique position to the doctrine of Ahimsa and has based its ethical code entirely on the complete observance of the tenet of Ahimsa in all its aspects. Jainism is the only religion in the world which has given maximum attention to the important practical aspects of the theory of Ahimsa so that Ahimsa, in its minutest details, can be actually observed both by the lay followers and ascetics in their day to day life. [...] The Jaina religion has earned special prestige in the world by giving equal emphasis on the negative and positive aspects of Ahimsa. On this basis Jainism has shown to the world in a perfect and convincing way the worth of the doctrine of Ahimsa by stating the basic principle, viz., "Ahimsa Paramo Dharmah" i.e. Ahimsa is the greatest religion. That is why Jaina Religion is considered as Ahimsa Religion and Jaina Culture as Ahimsa Culture ([Sangave 1991](#)).

Jainism considers the world to be an interaction of two categories: Jiva (a living soul) and Ajiva (non-living, or matter). The latter is a pre-requisite for the generation of energies that control all life events, including birth and death. The goal of life is to stop the generation of energies and to destroy those already created. To achieve this goal, one needs to pursue practices leading to liberation (Moksha). [Torkel Brekke \(2015\)](#)

Life's ultimate goal can be achieved through practice which allows freeing the soul from karmic energies. A specific feature of Jainism is the idea of human ability to take effort and break free from karma. Happiness consists in breaking the Samsara cycle and achieving Moksha, that is, the state of a liberated soul. As well as other Indian religions, Jainism sees the world as a place of suffering. The path to Moksha leads to liberation and includes right belief, right knowledge, and right conduct. They represent "the three jewels" of Jainism (Ratnatraya) and serve as a basis for Jaina ethical code which is compulsory both for monks and laypeople. [Michael Jerryson \(2016\)](#)

Jainism attaches priority to the practice of right conduct, as it plays a major role in achieving liberation. The so-called twelve gates, or vows, are of especial significance. The twelve vows contain the code of ethics for laypeople which is important from the religious and social perspectives. Ahimsa (non-violence) is among the main vows.

Jainism prescribes its followers to develop a friendly attitude towards all living beings, happiness when meeting brothers in faith and those who are like-minded, compassion to all living beings, kindness towards evil people. Lay Jains should also strictly follow some other principles. Thus, in order to minimize harm to all living beings, they do not consume meat, wine and honey [Michael Jerryson \(2016\)](#).

Priority is given to the vow of non-violence (Ahimsa-vrata). It implies refusal from doing harm, that is, from violence (Himsa) toward all living beings. Jain texts describe "Sthula Himsa" and "Sukshma Himsa" as two forms of violence. As the first one implies the destruction of all forms of life, it is forbidden both for monks and laypeople. As for "Sukshma Himsa", it implies killing any living being and it is prohibited for Jain monks only.

Tattvartha Sutra, the classical Jain text, says that “the vow will be broken merely by the absence of compassion shown where a man allows himself to be carried away with anger” and notes that “Himsa is caused even when passions to hurt others arise in mind” ([Sangave 1991](#)). It reveals the external aspect of violence.

In her study of Jainism, Lana E. Sims stresses that “Jains have adopted a very strict way of living that strives to eliminate as much violence, ill-will, and selfishness as possible” ([Sims, 2016](#)). Thus, non-violence implies being free of desires and passions, while their emergence may be interpreted as violence.

The importance that Jains attach to ahimsa results from their specific attitude to karma. Depriving a living being of life (even if it happens by chance) is considered a grave crime that prevents good karma. That is why ardent followers of Jainism wear masks to cover their mouths in order to avoid swallowing some insects which would mean killing it. They also use a special broom to clear the way in front of them when they walk, with the same purpose. Besides, all Jains follow a strict vegetarian diet. No doubt, plants are also considered to be live beings, but consumption of some kinds entails negative karmic consequences, therefore Jains abstain from eating them. Jain monks keep more vows than lay Jains and thus achieve the ideal of Ahimsa: at the end of their lives they achieve a state of complete abstinence from food.

Upon the emergence of Buddhism and largely due to its influence, the concept of non-violence has become rather popular among Indian population. At the same time it displays a close connection with two major practices including vegetarianism and cow cult. Some scholars hold it that cow cult is a relic of the ancient Indian religion worshipping the nature goddess. However, in a later interpretation, which is actually in terms of Hinduism, cow cult symbolizes a solicitous attitude to all living beings, that is, non-violence. On the other hand, despite the widespread of this concept, the political history of India contains abundant examples of rulers who belonged to the warrior’s caste (Kshatriya), whose main virtue (Dharma) consisted of battle valor ([Michael Jerryson \(2016\)](#)).

Persisting attitudes of violence in the social life of India become effective evidence of the fact that Gandhi’s methods were not approved by everyone even in his native country. His struggle for Indian independence in some way permitted acts of violence. It concerns the actions by Bengalese nationalists inspired by the image of Durga, the warrior goddess having great destructive power. After India had gained independence, militant Hinduists conducted armed assaults toward their Moslems. Such assault cost Mahatma Gandhi his life.

The assassination of Indira Gandhi, Indian Prime Minister, in 1984 also had a religious background. Indira Gandhi was killed by a Sikh after she had approved the introduction of troops on the territory of The Harmandir Sahib (The Golden Temple, a sacred place for Sikhs). Still, Sikh doctrines do not appeal to violence. Biographies of Sikh spiritual leaders of XVI-XVII centuries who are considered to be the founders of this religion, describe characters so gentle that they even inspired Mahatma Gandhi, as he once confessed. However, after some time Sikhism became popular among a militant ethnic group of Jats. Later Sikhs were involved in brutal conflicts with Moguls, British and other rulers of India. The so-called “army of the Faithful” is the nucleus of the Sikh community whose symbol is a two-edge sword ([Michael Jerryson \(2016\)](#)).

CONCLUSION

Events of late XX and early XXI centuries show that religion is still very significant in individual and social life. On the one hand, it is a way to preserve national history and culture, on the other; it is a social institute and a political subject. Interreligious relations today are among the global strategic problems. India is a multifaith nation, all major world religions are represented here including Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. Zoroastrianism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Judaism are also to be found here. In view of the above, the issue of peaceful coexistence between religions and tolerance toward followers of other faiths is very important. Despite specific rights and privileges for religious minorities included in Indian Constitution, the problem goes beyond legislative aspects. The religious situation in contemporary India is a cluster of problems connected with the discourse of violence and non-violence, fundamentalism and tolerance.

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