

Mahatma Gandhi's Ideas on Non-Violence and Secularism

A Symposium organized by Mahatma Gandhi Peace Centre & NSS Unit no. B-60

University of Mumbai

Summary of the Symposium



On 30.01.2020, the occasion of 72nd Martyr's Day, the Mahatma Gandhi Peace Centre (MGPC), Department of Applied Psychology & Counselling Centre collaborated with the National Service Scheme, Unit No. B-60, University of Mumbai to organize a symposium to reflect on the philosophies of Mahatma Gandhi, and how his beliefs are relevant in the present era.



The symposium was opened by Ms. Ayesha Baig, who introduced the speakers, the chairperson, the organizers and the coordinator of MGPC. This was followed by a welcome address by the Head of the Dept. and coordinator of MGPC, Dr. Satishchandra Kumar. The chairperson, Dr. Wilbur Gonsalves initiated the discussion with a 2-minute silence as a mark of respect for the father of the nation.



The first speaker, Mr. Vinay Kumar, is a Gandhian fellow, UNESCO awardee and a young theatre activist. He started his talk with two activities. The first activity was done to bring into focus the phenomenon of blind-following. It always begins with following what a leader asks, but often, the assumptions of followers make them act beyond the leaders'

instructions. The second activity reflected the importance of listening, understanding and giving each other space.

Mr. Kumar then shared his thoughts on the cycle of violence. People who faced bullying, injustice and displaced anger during their childhood are later expected by society to become non-violent citizen when they become adults. It is therefore, necessary to address and break the chain of violence right from an individual's childhood. Mr. Kumar emphasized that violence may not always be visible. quite often it is hidden in the form of teasing, suppression, belittling and silencing. He spoke about the relevance of social identities and the freedom of choice.

He concluded his discussion by highlighting Gandhi's presence in today's scenario. Even though, to some extent, Gandhi's beliefs have not been as prominent as they were in the past, his beliefs still find expression amongst the youths of today.

The second speaker, Mr. Sitaram Shelar, is the director of the Centre for Promoting Democracy, and the convener of the PaniHaq Samiti. He began his talk by reflecting and engaging the audience on the meaning of the term "*Zindabad*". Although, literally it translates to "live long", he questioned whether a long life filled with suffering would truly be something that anyone wants. He touched upon the phenomenon of untouchability and its consequences in the modern day through access to basic necessities of life, like water.



He specified new terminologies which further boost discrimination against specific communities like ‘encroachers’ and ‘free-loaders’. He pointed out that these communities are more mature, even after experiencing such discrimination. They always try to resolve issues and difficulties through dialogue in order to maintain peace and communal harmony. For them, it is not about caste or religion, it is about injustice, and speaking and taking action against it. He also discussed the examples of behavior of people during the floods in Mumbai in the year 2005, that reflects humanity in its purest form. He concluded with the question of whether forced conformity is preferable to expressed and accepted differences in diversity.



He used the analogy of a bouquet to bring out the beauty of diversity.

The final speaker, Dr. Kanchana Mahadevan, is a Professor at the Department of Philosophy University of Mumbai. She expressed her thoughts on Gandhi and secularism. She spoke of two of Gandhi’s beliefs: 1) Gandhi’s willingness for dialogue; and 2) the inherent openness of religions. His belief

about openness of religions led to his opposition to conversion, which he believed to be a western concept and that undermined the essence of equality embedded in all religions.

According to Gandhi, religion is each individual’s way of seeking the truth. It is a personal journey towards integration, solidarity and tolerance. Religion, therefore, plays a major role in politics, as the motivation to join political life comes from this journey of truth, patience and coexistence. However, at the same time, Gandhi also believed that the state should not interfere with religion because of its personal nature.

Dr. Mahadevan also spoke about “Indian Secularism”, which is the mutual coexistence of all religions, since religion is a part and parcel of public life in India. She agreed with this idea, but questioned the sufficiency of it. This comes from the thought that the belief of “every religion being equally open” is subject to debate. This is substantiated by Ambedkar’s views on the absence of social solidarity in many religions practiced in India. Despite reforms, Hinduism stuck to strict dogmatism of a hierarchical society, which led Ambedkar to claim that conversion the freedom of choice that allows people to be open to different religions. Dr. Mahadevan concluded by linking these thoughts to the first speaker’s ideas of social identity.

After the final speaker finished sharing her thoughts, the chairperson, Dr. Wilbur Gonsalves concluded the symposium by summarizing the ideas of the three speakers into three questions: is it possible to change the prevalence of violence by addressing the development of social identities amongst children in our society? In an age when hidden violence is omnipresent, how can Gandhi’s teachings be used to encourage harmony? What can be done to control the growing disparities between the privileged and the persecuted?The session closed after Dr. Aparna Phadke thanked the speakers for sharing their thoughts and ideas with the captive audience.



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