

## The Violence of Non-violence: Reading Nirad C Chaudhuri Rereading Gandhi

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The paper tries to explore the conceptuality of Gandhi's non-violence through its binary opposite violence. The conceptuality of the opposition to their opposites in Gandhi is undertaken in the paper through a reading of Nirad C Chaudhuri's critique of Gandhi and Gandhism, and taking cue from Jacques Derrida, John Milton and Rabindranath Tagore's conceptuality of binary opposites. However, this introspection is not at the cost of idiosyncrasy and negation of Gandhi's core ideology but to make the concept of non-violence express its meaning through its binary opposite.

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### Introduction: Reading the conceptuality of binary opposites

*Gandhi's non-violence was conceived in London from Tolstoy's interpretation of the New Testament. Of course, he already had Vaishnava non-violence in him, but that was transformed into a new attitude during his three years' stay in England.*  
(Nirad C Chaudhuri *Autobiography*)

It may appear idiosyncratic, or even idiotic, to entitle a paper on Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi who is famous for his dedication to the ideas and ideals of truth and non-violence in such a way that it seems to negate his core ideology itself. But a deeper insight would reveal, it is argued here, that this is not so. This is primarily because of the fact that words are not meaningful in themselves so much as they are in opposition to their opposites – especially binary opposites. This idea has been famously made available in the second half of the twentieth century by Jacques Derrida, although the concept dates back to the *sat* and *asat* of the Vedic

imaginary and *apoha* of the Buddhist tradition—to limit the instances within India as of now. In fact, Derrida has argued that the attempt to give any definitive meaning to a sign, especially a contemporary one, is an act of violence in itself. To quote Derrida: “To dream of reducing it to a sign of the times is to dream of violence”.<sup>1</sup>

I am further going to refer to two significant authors from literature in this connection which would further validate the strategy of attempting to know non-violence through violence. One is John Milton, the writer of arguably the only English epic worth that name. In his equally well-known advocacy of the writer’s freedom titled *Areopagitica*, Milton categorically states that there is no other way to know “good” or God without knowledge of the evil. The other is Rabindranath Tagore who aphoristically put it thus: If you close your doors to stop falsehood at the gate, truth too is unable to enter (“Dvar bandha kore diye bhrantare rukhi/Satya bole ami tobe kotha diye dhuki”). All these visibly justify the proposition that a more comprehensive analysis of non-violence must entail an analysis of the violence that it silences, and also the violent way it is done. This paper seeks to explore the violent faces of the Gandhian non-violence with special focus on the critique of Gandhi and Gandhism offered by the famous unknown Indian Nirad C Chauduri. This will also occasionally refer to relevant critiques of Gandhism by his prominent contemporaries. The paper is expected to inundate further discussion in this light bringing in the critiques of Gandhi his other prominent contemporaries. By critiques, however, I don’t refer to the detractors of Gandhi as such, but only those who have been involved in complex socio-political and cultural dialogues with him in spite of their differences. I have the deepest regards for Gandhi and Gandhism, but as a democratic thinker, I believe other views too should be engaged with and contemplated upon. That is the non-violence or *ahimsa* at the level of ideas.

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*. 1967. Trans. Alan Bass, (London: Routledge, 2001), 2.

## Nirad C's introspection of Gandhi

There hasn't been much engaged research on Nirad C Chaudhuri's assessment of Gandhi which spreads across the length and breadth of Chaudhuri's works. This could be primarily due to the fact that Nirad C's credentials suffered a lot in India due to his being labelled as an imperialist, which of course is not in sync with the letter and spirit of his complete oeuvre. Interestingly, Nirad C, it may be noted, was one of the few scholars who was alive up to the last year of the twentieth century who also has had close connection with Gandhi and Nehru in person and in his capacity as the Private Secretary of Sarat Chandra Bose. (Details of this period have been minutely recorded in the pages of Chaudhuri's *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!*, republished later as *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, Part II.) Sarat Chandra Bose, the elder brother of Subhash Chandra Bose, was, for a long period of time, the undisputed leader of Bengal Congress, to whose residence cum office Gandhi, Nehru and other senior national leaders of Congress were frequent visitors. Lest one jumps into the conclusion that Nirad C's criticism of Gandhi results from his love of Subhash Bose with whom he would identify more readily as a Bengali, I want to make it very clear that Nirad C was equally, or even more dismissive of Subhash as the ideal political leader whom he found lacking not in love for and dedication to India, but in political and strategic understanding.

An associated misconception popularised by partial reading and hasty conclusion is that Nirad C stated Gandhi to be a thorough hypocrite. This is far from being true. In actuality, Nirad C has frequently forged a distinction between Gandhi's personal commitments and political strategies. So far as the pursuit of truth, God and *ahimsa* is his personal life is concerned, Nirad C finds Gandhi as great as any Saint of the highest order. However, in his political strategies, Nirad C finds Gandhi to be a highly manipulative man of strategy who left no stone unturned to achieve what he wanted to achieve, and the way he wanted it; albeit he may have turned the stones in a "non violent, Vaishnavite" way (Nirad C, *Shatavarshiki*). A glaring instance of what Nirad C wants to suggest by

killing in the “non violent, Vaishnavite” way is the removal of Subhash Bose from the INC. Nirad C argues:

So far as Gandhi’s political equations are concerned, he was nothing more than a typical Gujarati *bania* (businessman). He could correctly calculate prospective gains and losses of any given situation, personal or political, way ahead of others. Gandhi took no political decision emotionally. Even his intolerance of the British was always profit based. If he could foresee that any British would be of help or use to him in future, Gandhi used to befriend him in no time. He showed this talent of befriending the profitable person in preferring Jawaharlal over Subhash. The preference given to Jawaharlal benefitted him, Subhash would have only brought about losses for him.<sup>2</sup>

The fiery speeches, zealous organisation and unstinted patriotism of Subhash Bose made him the undisputed leader and spokesperson of the Indian National Congress at one point of time. Unfortunately, as is well known, in spite of his love and respect for Gandhi (Subhash was the first one to address Gandhi as *Rashtrapita* or Father of the Nation); Subhash had no faith in Gandhi’s ideas and ideals of passive-resistance based on *ahimsa*. With the second world war looming large in the background, Subhash thought it would be the opportune moment to threaten the British government to leave India within six months, failing which they should face dire consequences. However, this idea didn’t find favour with Gandhi. Consequently, in the Congress Presidential Election of 1939 held at Tripuri, Gandhi posited Pattabhi Sitaramaiya as his chosen candidate against Subhash Chandra Bose. Subhash defeated Sitaramaiya in the election, which Gandhi took as a personal defeat: his words on this occasion “Pattabhi Sitaramaiya’s defeat is my defeat”<sup>3</sup> have become proverbial. This came as a heavy blow to Subhash which finally led him to leave Congress and form a political group of his own. Some commentators have read this as the direct expression of Gandhi as indicative of his personal

<sup>2</sup> Nirad C Chaudhuri, *Niradchandra Chaudhuri Shatavarshiki Sankalan: An omnibus of Bengali writings of Nirad C Chaudhuri on account of the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of the author*, (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 2012), 559.

<sup>3</sup> Poddar, Arabinda, *The Bewildered Leader: M K Gandhi*, (Trans. Sujata Ghosh. Xlibris Publishing, 2013), 28.

insecurities about the Congress leadership, while others have attempted to interpret it as symptomatic of Gandhi's dedication to the causes of *ahimsa*. Irrespective of the difference of interpretations, this is a case in point which amply illustrates the "violence of non-violence," which is not accommodative of other views and opinions. This, in other wor(l)ds, is an instance that signals at the basic problematic of the Gandhian formulation of *ahimsa* or non-violence: is it an absolute non-violence, which is an end in itself; or a strategy to counter imperialism and the like?

A further and more deeply problematic issue is Chaudhuri's argument regarding the irreconcilability of the Gandhian non-violence and the philosophy of the *Bhagavad-Gita* – also known as the *Gita* – which has been the most representative and most widely accepted Hindu Scripture since the 8th century. Gandhi himself has documented his unstinted dedication to this book on a number of occasions. In fact, there are two commentaries on the *Gita* by Gandhi himself. The larger and the more well known one is called "Gandhi Bhashya" (Bhashya means commentary in Sanskrit and its descendant languages) and is generally published in English under the title *The Bhagavad-Gita according to Gandhi*. Earlier it was called *The Gospel of Selfless Action*. There is a shorter commentary named *Discourses on the Gita*, which recasts the essentials of the larger version without going into the analogical and analytical details. In both the versions, Gandhi's basic contention is that the *Gita* is a, or the, gospel of *ahimsa* or non-violence. This is diametrically opposite to the popular and scholarly views which identify the *Gita* as an exhortation for just war or *dharmayuddha*. As the *Gita* forms part of the Epic *Mahabharata*, the course of action in the epic after the discourse seems not to be supporting the view of Gandhi. Considering all these arguments and evidences, Nirad C reads the spirit of the *Gita* to have nothing much to do with the Gandhian non-violence:

There was a misconception among the educated Indians that Mahatma Gandhi's Philosophy of non-violence has its origins in the *Gita*. No misconception and fallacious idea greater than this...Mahatmaji used the *Gita* to establish his ideology because he knew that the Hindus do not accept anything unless they are convinced that it is sanctified by or is at least mentioned in their *sastras* or scriptures. However, I don't want to comment

on whether it was a pure political strategy on the part of Gandhi or he himself genuinely believed that the *Gita* was a scripture of non-violence. I will just introduce the reader to what is there in the *Gita* regarding non-violence, and then they can judge for themselves.<sup>4</sup> (Author's translation)

Chaudhuri goes on to stake that out of the 700 *slokas* or verses that are there in the *Gita*, only 4 *slokas* mention: 10/5, 13/7, 16/2, 17/14. In that too, there is no explanation or definition of the term, which signifies that it was too well known to the target readers and audiences of the epic. To quote a little more from Nirad C in this regard:

The *ahimsa* that the *Gita* speaks of is purely a matter of a very personal ethical conduct: it mandates not to harm others being driven by desire, lust and anger; or motivated by purely selfish interests. *This does not at all imply non-killing* (emphasis added). Unlike the Buddhist and the Jain scriptures which clearly and unambiguously mandate their votaries to abstain from killing, there are no such guidelines or commands in the Hindu Shastras. Hindus Sastras sanctify animal sacrifice, which include human sacrifice too. (The *Shatapath Brahmana* says: Sa etan pancha pashun apashyan—purusham, Ashvam, Gam, Abhim, Ajam—Purusham prathamam alabhate, purushohi prathamah pashunam.) Consequently, the prohibition of killing and war cannot be part of Hinduism. Rather, fighting and killing for the rights of the individual and his state, which may eventually include the killing of friends and relatives, is sanctified by all Hindu scriptures, including the *Gita*.<sup>5</sup> (Author's translation)

In his highly controversial *Autobiography of An Unknown Indian*, Part-II (originally published as *thy Hand, Great Anarch!*), Nirad C has further traced Gandhi's allegedly fallacious interpretation of the *Gita* and other Hindu scriptures to Gandhi's unfamiliarity with what may be provisionally called the "Higher Hinduism." This comprises the serene poetry and intricate philosophy of the Vedas, Upanishads, the Six Darshanas, the

<sup>4</sup> Nirad C Chaudhuri, *Niradchandra Chaudhuri Shatavarshiki Sankalan: An omnibus of Bengali writings of Nirad C Chaudhuri on account of the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of the author*, (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 2012), 546.

<sup>5</sup> Nirad C Chaudhuri, *Niradchandra Chaudhuri Shatavarshiki Sankalan: An omnibus of Bengali writings of Nirad C Chaudhuri on account of the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of the author*, (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 2012), 546.

Ramayana and the Mahabharata (the original Sanskrit epics.) As is well known, a familiarity with all these is a must for anyone who would like to be known as an advocate or even practitioner of *sashtic* or classical, canonical Hinduism. This tradition was of course distributed among the three upper castes of Hindus – *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas* and *Vaishyas*; though by the time of Gandhi's advent these texts were made available to each and all, at least in principle, by the reformers like Swami Dayananda and Swami Vivekananda on the one hand, and the Orientalist scholars William Jones and Friedrich Max Müller. Also, hailing from the *Vaishya* community, Gandhi had traditionally bestowed rights on these scriptures. However, he was more drawn to the popular Hinduism that was mainly based on the *Puranas* and was primarily devotional in nature. This form of Hinduism was primarily a product of the medieval Bhakti Movement which can be traced back to Sri Ramanujan (1017-1137). During the medieval times, it had become almost a pan-Indian movement having Saints and poets like Nanak, Kabir, Chaitanya, Tukaram, Shankardev and Meera Bai across the length and breadth of India. In Gujarat, the leading representative of the Bhakti movement was Narsi Mehta who had composed the very famous and popular song which was close to Gandhi's heart, namely "Vaishnava jana to teni kahiye je." However, this kind of popular Hinduism or Neo-Vaishnavite Hinduism espoused by Gandhi does not find favour from Nirad C Chaudhuri. It is not only interesting but even imperative to read what Nirad C. has to say in this regard:

Like the career envisaged for Gandhi, his moral and religious development was also very traditional. The Hinduism in which he was brought up, and quite naturally brought up as a member of the Bania or trading caste, was the popular Hinduism created and preached by the popular prophets of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, especially by those of the Vaishnava persuasion, without any affiliation to the higher forms of Hinduism. The religious life of those who belonged to these sects was very simple - it was quietist and, above all, passive in its attitudes. There was nothing in it of the sophistication, complexity, and power of the higher Brahmanic Hinduism. In spite of all that has been said about Gandhi's reverence for the *Upanishads* or the *Gita*, there was nothing in his religious sentiment

which could be traced to those ancient texts. If he had known much of them he could not have made the crude *Ram-Dhun*, the intoning of a hymn to Rama, his prayer. The particular form of Hinduism which was Gandhi's could have made him a Puran Bhagat at the end of his life if it had run the course intended for him. But that could never have made him what he became - a Hindu holy man concerned with political and moral evils of a colossal magnitude.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, what Nirad C Chaudhuri has staked here is well known to all Hindus who are aware of their cultural and religious heritage. The kind of non-violence that Gandhi wanted to instil among the Indians, the majority of whom were Hindus, was not as per the indigenous and authentic Hindu traditions. Hinduism basically thrives on the principle of plurality – no one shoe fits all feet. Hence, duties and vows have been distributed among especially among four *varnas* and four *ashramas* or stages of life. Further, so far as dharma means ways of worship, it has three primary sects—that is *Shaiva*, *Shakta* and *Vaishnava*—and many others. It should be made clear at this point that I am writing neither in support of *Varnashram Dharma* (Gandhi though he was a defender of it), nor opposing non-violence as a significant approach to life. What I am trying to foreground is the difficulty in reconciling the Gandhian non-violence with the overall scheme of things in Hinduism. Having said this, one may justly observe that the kind of *ahimsa* Gandhi was preaching as a *sanatan* value would only be applicable to Brahmins on the one hand, and *Vaishnavas* and some *Shaivaites* on the other, within the received tradition. (Even the rise of vegetarianism among Brahmins and some *Vaishnavas* in the medieval period has been attributed to the appropriation of Jain and Buddhist values within Hinduism, whereby the spread of the latter two religions in India was kept in check. Persons as diverse as Swami Vivekananda and Dr B R Ambedkar have testified to this). For the other castes, non-violence is not only non-mandatory, but it is essential for the *Kshatriya* caste or *varna*, whose prime identity was linked with violent wars, albeit they were “just wars.” Ashis Nandy, the justly famous and

<sup>6</sup> Nirad C Chaudhuri, *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, Part II, (Mumbai: Jaico, 2008), 44.



erudite Indian intellectual, has elaborated on the threats to the *Kshatriya* that the Gandhian values posed:

To the extent that Gandhi rejected the Kshatriya identity by his constant emphasis on pacifism and self-control, he posed a threat to the warrior cultures of India. In addition, by constantly stressing the feminine, nurturing, non-violent aspects of men's personality, he challenged the Kshatriya identity....<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

It is quite clear that Gandhi was forcing an interpretation not only to a key text of Hinduism, but indeed to the entire gamut of Hindu cultural traditions which was not in sync with the received tradition to "forge the consciousness of his race," to use a very famous Joycean phrase. To the extent that he was never ready to compromise with or enter into a dialogue about possible and existing alternative to what he thought to be the inevitability of *ahimsa* or non-violence, he himself used what may be called at hindsight an "epistemic violence." The case of the removal of Subhash Basu and a violently non-violent misreading of the *Gita* amply illustrate what is at stake in the title of this paper. Another important point of Nirad C's critique of Gandhi is the latter's alleged rejection of what Chaudhuri calls "the regenerative side of the British Imperialism." Other scholars and researchers may take this lead for explorations and further explorations.

<sup>7</sup> Nandy, Ashis, *At the Edge of Psychology: Essays in Politics and Culture*, (New Delhi: Oxford, 1980), 78.