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‘Ahimsa’ in a Violent Society

“Ahimsa, Vegetarian Nutrition and Kindness for Global Peace”

Dear Friends,

As one walks over a snowy terrain one finds white snow everywhere. Snow, snow, and more snow everywhere! Suddenly a sudden splash of red colour over the white snow and one begins to notice the contrast. Violence and bloodshed on the living beings give the picture of this abhorrent contrast. For violence is a disastrous disruption of the major project of LIFE. Building up tissues upon tissues is the project of life. Violence and bloodshed are a major disruption which dishonours the Creator whose gift is life.

A major contribution of India to the common heritage of humanity is *ahimsa*. Highlighting *ahimsa's* nature and role these days when violence has become once again a global phenomenon can be compared with red splash on snow-white terrain being deleted.

Ahimsa humanises whereas *himsa* debases humanity. Violence that leads to shedding of blood and untimely death of those born to live their life to its full round, creates revulsion in us. Bitter still remains the memory of India's partition that was accompanied by fratricidal blood shedding and loss of homes and belongings. The sudden appearance of a line of demarcation in the life of villagers that for millennia lived as one village community was a sort of mutilation of centuries-long fraternity and sisterhood. On one side became another country, Pakistan, and this side India. It was another form violence that was inflicted on community's warm sentiments. The sudden appearance of two 'distant' countries that were once one well-knit village communities was shocking to everyone.

Blooding bodies burning houses are unsightly. The blood, sanctuary of life, should remain in the body and preserve the life within it, as is enjoined by the Creator of all. It is destined not to be forced out. To all who came to reflect on 'Ahimsa' (*non-violence*) the theme of the seminar, *himsa* (violence) appeared indeed an

abominable phenomenon.

It is for deep and serious reflection on such precious theme as *ahimsa* that the participants to the convention in such large number have assembled. We should take special note of the fact that it is a value most befitting to every form of life. We should be proud of the fact that already from ancient times, through the contribution of Jain- Buddhist traditions, profound respect for life was insisted upon as a most grave responsibility. The theme is set in the context of the search for peace in the mind/heart, *at home*, in the village, in our country, *in the world*, *in brief*, at the global level.

The theme *ahimsa* both challenges and *disturbs*. It disturbs hard-hearted tyrants, disarms violent aggressors, all authoritarian regimes prone to aggression and violence. It disturbs aggressors who trifle with LIFE. It encourages those who struggle for a peaceful life. The combined moral force involved in renouncing and abjuring violence can enforce law even in a disorderly crowd. It has high ethical-moral value potential for civilising present-day culture beset with frequent violence and blood-shed. I thank especially Dr. D. C. Jain, General Secretary of this National Seminar for this great venture. I am much beholden to the organizations that have taken the laudable initiative.

Callousness in Inflicting Pain on Living Beings

The flowing picture is for the rulers of nations that engage in war. Promoters of violence and blood normally escape the direct consequences of the violence of the disastrous step of war. A boy took a kerosene bottle and poured quite a bit of kerosene into the small container in which a crab was kept. Then he took the kerosene-smeared crab out, lit the match box and set fire to the crab. One could see a ball of fire moving fast, then slowing down, and then stopping. It was pain that gave momentum to the rush for

escape by the crab. The boy did not know. When the flames were over only smoke and finally only a small heap of ashes were left! The burning crab was in agony but the two boys are seen clapping and jumping up and down and enjoying the scene! The experiment was successful!! An experiment in callousness!

The irony is the pain of a living being and the thrill of the hilarious boys in contrast. It is virtually the theme of the seminar, so to speak. Because reality of violence and pain everywhere is undeniable. But it needs universal recognition.

The Vital Question: Can we minimise the existing scheme of things that leads to frequent irruption of violence?

The human person, endowed with freedom, rights and dignity can be compared to a well-developed and protected walled city. The constituents of the citizen are enshrined in the Preamble of the Indian Constitution: justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity. A person therefore is a full identity, almost like a walled city enjoying its unique security protection and autonomy. None is expected encroach into its autonomous existence. For, according to the Biblical tradition, a human person is created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:27). Sacredness is writ into the very make up of created realities primarily because the Creator is holy.

Any encroachment on the sanctity of the human person will be tantamount to aggression on a sovereign country. It is violence. It is *himsa* on a free citizen. It is unjust and unmerited. Our millennium, unfortunately, will be known in history as the most stained because the earth globally is smeared with blood. Lamentations rise up in the sky like fumes rise up from the furnace of a factory. Mass killing to avenge a defeat or gain victory for the land is the reality of the times. Adolph Hitler was a corporal in the imperial German army in the First World War. Germany lost. Hitler wanted to avenge the defeat. History knows the result. It almost destroyed Europe.

The Mother Earth is unique among the planetary systems because it alone is endowed with the rare treasure: Life. No other planet is, as far as we know, credited with life. The French philosopher Henry Bergson has dealt *with élan*

vital extensively.

Himsa (violence) is counter to *ahimsa*, like night and day. It is opposed to the phenomenon of life. It is another major force almost co-existing with vigour. *Himsa* is ever ready to strike at life. Violence in any form degrades the perpetrator. It is irrational and in need of control and disciplining. This beautiful message we have to deal with today and disseminate far and wide. Vociferously and hilariously, we have to share the message with other nations. This, I understand, is the message to humanity the convention sends. The beautiful theme is an honour to the human species, and can become the distinguishing mark of an advanced phase of civilization

The core principle behind is: a human being is a member, a most significant constituent, of the living beings. We should honour every living being, especially the humans. Common to all living beings is the unique and precious gift of God to this planet: LIFE. Every living being should accept, respect and promote the other living beings, from the tiniest to the most developed.

Jesus Christ and Ahimsa

The most precious stone on the planet earth is known as KOHINOOR, It adorns now the crown of a monarch. More precious than Kohinoor is another treasure, the treasure possessed only by planet earth, that is LIFE. To treasure that treasure befitting its unique value in promoting peace, is the concern of this gathering. Jesus emphatically proclaimed: "I came that they may have life and have and have it abundantly" (Jn. 10:10).

The Context of our Times

Auschwitz-Birkenau is one of the Concentration Camps in Poland where 6 million European Jews were killed by Nazi Germany. The very sight of the dark campus with smoke-smeared high walls with barbed-wires atop creates tremor in the body. It benumbs the senses and frightens you. Remember Adolph Hitler was a human being! He contrived to have it done!

We know that 20 million army personnel and 40 million civilians were killed at the World War II. Nazi Germany killed 6 million Jews in the notorious extermination chambers. These recent examples could help us to imagine what could

be the aggregate of every form of violence and cruelty inflicted on living beings, especially on the human persons. Therefore, the question should be put to ourselves: how does mankind treasure life! That means lined up against life is violence that destroys life.

Proneness to Violence in the Humans

We take note of the almost innate nature of the conflict in human nature that imperils life. It implies the human person seems to contain seeds of conflict and violence. To gain insight into this mystery was the desire of that physically blind but mentally alert elderly statesman Dhritarashtra as we have in Bhagavad Gita' (Gita 1:1). Kurukshetra was the scene of the battle between two forces, of Pandava and of Kaurava. *Himsa* the opposite of *ahimsa*, was at work in that epic battle.

The theme points to the dual-forces within every human being that seems engaged in perpetual conflict. This conflict unfolds itself in various forms. Apparently negative in form is the term *ahimsa*. The term *ahimsa* connotes abstaining from *himsa* (violence, injury). Positive and forward-looking is the content: pricing it, treasuring it and promoting it are the privilege and responsibilities of our generation. For that task we have to go to the roots of the problem of *himsa* (violence) to tame it and to promote *ahimsa*. Proneness to violence seems endemic to our species right from its origin. At the dawn of humankind Cain lays hands on his own brother Abel and smashes him. The first blood-shed reported in salvation history! The evil continues to co-exist with our history.

The anthropologist Charles Darwin touched upon *survival of the fittest* as central to the dynamics of the theory of evolution. Survival implies that there is a struggle going on. An inherent struggle to preserve life is going on. Lion feeds on small animals which have to struggle to survive. Big fish live on small fishes. This irony is part of the life system. It is a form of violence in nature. Although nature in itself is promoter of life, there are species like carnivorous plants! Its leaf slowly envelopes any small fly or worm or butterfly by emitting some kind of vapour that is benumbing, encircles and smothers it gradually in order to feed upon it!

Human beings can kill and destroy other human beings and achieve what they want to gain.

Similarly, the humans can cause damage to other living beings. From tiny creatures like ants and to the biggest like elephants, every living being is subject to the onslaught of human beings. That is why the ancient adage '*homo homini lupus*' (refers to the 'wolfish' tendency) in man. Humans can exploit other humans. Humans can commit violence upon another human being for its ends.

The psychologist Sigmund Freud had advanced the sexist origin of violence (cfr). (*Civilization and its Discontent*): all human conflicts originate from unfulfilled sexual needs. It is an alternate category to explain violence.

Kinds of Violence

Varied forms of violence had been operative from ancient times.

I. Racial Violence

Race is one of the subdivisions of the human species each having specific physical features. The distinct features give certain identity to each race. The effort to preserve each race's identity can lead to tensions and conflicts other units. Racial violence had been regular from early times as a global phenomenon. Native-Aryan- Dravidian conflicts often led to armed encounters. In India there live at least six or more anthropological races from early times. Of course, one race, to preserve its identity, colliding with other races, had been quite a normal phenomenon everywhere in the world, even so in India. Here we have the source of racial violence. The 'foreign-culture' 'native-culture' tag is still operative in India once a colonial sub-continent.

II. Caste violence

India's majority population belongs to Hinduism. Hindu society is hierarchically structured. This hierarchical structure and culture had been influencing other societies too. The tribal societies or more community oriented. The hierarchical structure was subject to caste violence from quite early times in India. Such structures generate in members of the society various forms submissive-dominant cultural values, leading to subtle forms of structural violence. The main architect of India's Constitution, B. R. Ambedkar, has in his autobiography, described the appalling practice of caste violence. It is reported periodically of

bridegrooms of Dalit stock riding on horse-back after the wedding being attacked by the upper caste people! The so-called *Dalits* may not ride on horses, which is the privilege of the upper caste! Although 'untouchability' has been legally abolished the practice still prevails in various forms.

III. Cultural Violence

Cultural violence is almost a universal phenomenon. There had been cultural violence when native and foreign cultures or dominant and dominated cultures got embattled for supremacy. Every culture deems it superior to other cultures. Apartheid in South Africa, black-white conflict in the United States etc. is well known. Gandhi reports how he with a first-class ticket was thrown out of the first-class compartment by a so-called white passenger at Maritzburg railway station in South Africa!

Cultural violence erupts whenever conflicts between the dominant and dominated cultures experience tension leading to violence. Native cultures were held in disdain in India when the British ruled the country. The white-the dark-the brown-yellow complexions very often provided basis for these superficial categorizations. But these had their way.

IV. Gender Violence

It is ironical that the male, born of the female womb, considers itself superior to the female! This almost universal and perennial gender violence is another bane of human society. The male domination over female section of the society often led to tensions and conflicts. Gender violence disturbed social equality in many ways. Volumes have been written about this issue. The current feminist movement in response to this social phenomenon is gaining in strength.

V. Religious Violence

One God every religion believes in but religion born of this belief has been a source of endless violence. Unfortunately, religious violence had always been there. History can give us horrific accounts of violence among religions in the world. Catholic-Protestant conflicts during the reign of the Tudors, Catholic-Huguenots and Catholic-Calvinists struggle in Geneva region are recorded in European history.

Communal violence, quite a regular phenomenon, is a form of religious violence. For supreme example we have the series of

Crusades in early Middle Ages. The superiority-claim of each belief system negates and vitiates, and dishonours the same God. Newton's third law of dynamics may be recalled in conclusion: '*for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction*'. Violence begets more violence, and communal violence is the worst form of religious violence.

Ahimsa is Love

The positive content of *ahimsa* means love. Gandhi has stated that in its positive form ahimsa means the largest love, the greatest charity. 'If I am a follower of *ahimsa* I must love.'

Contradictions inbuilt into Life and Organization of Governance!

- A. Some countries have compulsory military training for every citizen. But there seems to be no compulsory training on ahimsa! The implication is that already seeds of violence are sown in the minds of the child by compulsory military training. One can say it is for defence of the country. That is the ground reality today. We have to create an alternate culture.
- B. Every country has a defence budget that is to sustain the three *ARMED* forces: the army, the navy and the air force. These forces need deadliest weapons, good training, and skilful strategy, for the defence of the country. That means these forces are there not to play games with marbles but fight with weapons meant to kill the enemy and win the war. But the so-called 'enemy' is another human being!
- C. The word 'enemy' has to be probed. When in military uniform a soldier is 'enemy' to the opposing forces, but in reality, he is 'dear father, dear brother, dear friend, benign neighbour, nurse/doctor and struggling to maintain his family by the salary he gets from the State's exchequer. It is important we stress and highlight the contradiction in the organisation of human society.
- D. Next, we take note of the items in the armouries of the world. We make a list of the arms, personal and State-owned. We assess the varieties of the arms: nuclear, thermo-

nuclear, rocket-mounted bombs, fighter planes, bombers, tanks, armoured vehicles, etc. We should know their target: the 'enemies'. We look at their hands that will detonate them. We consider the target of each weapon: men/women that constitute the armed forces, military installations, selected industrial complexes that support the army, bridges, rail tracks and such that maintain the 'enemy country'.

- E. Next, we must be aware of the list of soldiers killed in the Second World War alone. We visit the families from which these men and women came from. We survey the homes damaged, bridges, schools and hospitals destroyed.
- F. We contemplate the total quantity of blood that fell on the earth, bodies burned, homes made desolate, money spent. We listen to the unceasing wail of the bereaved homes, the wounded in the hospitals, and the buried in the cemeteries. We visit a cemetery and read the names on the sepulchre. We try to imagine the total number of men, women and children that died in wars from the earliest history.
- G. Having done a cursory survey of the armed men/women and the war machine we recall the definition of man/woman: *rational animal, jivatma* created by *paramatma*. Next, we ask ourselves: do the actions of killing/destroying other living beings, especially humans, befit the rationality that we the humans are endowed with? Any religion will say NO. My religion will say NO. All religions will declare: violence on life is illegal, irrational and immoral. In the language of Mark Antony in Julius Caesar it is the *unkindest cut of all* (Shakespeare, Julius Caesar, III, ii).
- H. Further questions are appropriate. If we humans are learners, we ask ourselves: Do we sufficiently learn from the past? What has humans gained from the enterprise of WAR? Has anyone gained anything worth gaining from the use of weapons? Is oppression, torture, deception, betrayal, violence worthy of humans? Has retaliation or revenge brought any benefit to the avenger? It is worth listening to the doleful reflections of

Bhishma after the disastrous fratricidal war at Kurukshetra. Some of these epistemological exercises can bring us benefit when we deal with a theme like *Ahimsa*.

Instinct prevails over reason in most disputes that precede wars. Consequently, unchecked ambition aggression and violence disturb individual and social amity, necessary for development of the society. The questions need to be raised: Is not war an anachronistic institution?

The task requires a correct scientific knowledge of the human person and of the society constituted of such humans: its origin, structures and the meaning system that helped it sustain in the midst of changes. There are different models of society like tribal, agricultural, feudal and capitalist societies. Society has its economic, social and political dimensions.

Depending upon the economic and political processes the dynamics also will be active. These two vital processes do constantly impact upon the society, and even relationship with the wider world. And consequently, society is always in change. Conflicts and tensions in the society are caused primarily by the economic forces which affect in their turn neighbouring countries.

The social system and economic activities are all maintained by human freedom based on the ethical-moral principles and values emanating from the human nature enjoined upon it by the Creator.

We notice the face of the earth. It is blood-stained, forced out of the body by violence. So are the hands of the humans. Disarming the human family of all life-destroying weapons is needed for that. That force has to come from the human spirit. The soul-force or moral force proper of the human spirit needs to be detonated, to borrow a military jargon, and its civilizing power released, in order to counter brute force, we humans are capable of. Arms will drop from the hands when the mind of man/woman is emptied of violence and re-filled with humanising values, especially fraternal love for the humankind. These values are generated by the most precious treasure humans can generate: love. Love for everyone and love for every living being. All the religions of the world have to come together for that task of restoration. And a global ethics has to emerge to

join forces with the religions. Alignment of the best in religions and sound ethics has to take place, could take place. Reasonableness of Ahimsa does not rely on arguments but is evident.

Such a task has to be guided and propelled by a new vision for rejuvenating the deeply disturbed and confused and confusing world order. Just as the stars from the east attracted the Magi to set on an adventurous undertaking of pursuing it (Mt 2:1-2), so restoration of the world order needs to be motivated and propelled by a new vision, of a new guiding star.

Role of a proper Vision for the Society

There has been many a vision at work. Of course, Marx had the vision of a classless society. In Christian literature there has been the vision of the Kingdom of God. There is much in common to all these perspectives. These have sprung up in three distinct *world views*: Indie, Semitic and Hellenist. Before all these there was the tribal world view as well which is communitarian in general. Though distinct are these visions or dreams one can detect a convergence and that needs to be sustained and developed further. There is also the tribal world-view. The tribes have a system of self-preservation by strong community consciousness.

The *Utopia* of St Thomas More and the order and character of the *Just City* by Plato in his *The Republic* are further dreams. There was the *Ram Raj* of Ramayana.

It is to be hoped that keeping this exigency in view contributing to the convention on *ahimsa* can enhance the quality of human endeavours for universal peace and harmony. Genuine appreciation and integration of these visions can be beneficial to a war-ravaged human civilization. And observance of *ahimsa* can facilitate the realization of the above vision. Many a national leader led by men and women like Jothirao and Savitri Phule have in our times revived this vision and solicited collaboration from every citizen of the world. It has shed light on the way towards realization of the vision of a better concrete human historical situation.

The times and reign of Maveli (Kerala tradition) or Bali Raja of Jothirao Phule are described as the golden age when ideal rulers reigned over the people. It is envisaged as a time of all-round

welfare and an era of peace. Weapons were not in need, conflict did not arise and peace reigned supreme.

The first line of a childhood rhyme ran like this:

‘If all the trees of the world were one tree what a great tree that would be’!! This image could be taken further for applying to the human society from the first man/woman in history onwards, like:

‘If all the human blood shed from Abel - Cane onwards to this day were put together what a huge red horrific river that would d be’!

‘If all the killed bodies from Abel onwards to that last lynched in India were put together what a horrible sight that would be!

Again, ‘If the total cost of making the weapons of destruction, including nuclear bombs, were added together what a colossal sum that would be’!

Again, ‘If all the hatred generated and entertained in the human hearts were put together what a colossal dark gas/cloud that would be’!

Yet again, ‘If all the enslaved and abused humans as beasts of burden were brought together in one large field what an unsightly scene that would be’!

And if all the roars (*akrosh*) shrieks and laments of the oppressed, the tortured in torture chambers were bought together what an eruption of the roars and yelling of the oppressed that would be!

And, finally, if all the Nazi gas chambers, torture chambers in police stations, with torture tools used were put together what a horrific ghastly sight that would be!

We do not see the other side of the moon on full moon nights. Similarly, we do not deeply perceive the other side of human actions: cruelties, exploitation, enslavements, acts of injustice being recalled make us tremble and humble. Questions like these are due when themes like *ahimsa*, *karuna* (kindness) are treated.

Some Contrasting and Comforting Insights imparted by Jesus Christ

In contrast, we focus now on the words of the prophet Isaiah Jesus referred to. A time when neither violence nor blood-shed will stain the soil, nor injustice disfigure the society and disrupt the plans of the State. It is a depiction of a nation or situation of peace in the land. People then will live in peace. Harmony will prevail all over. It is from prophet Isaiah the ascetic and prophetic sage in Israel:

*Wolves and sheep will live together in peace,
Calves and leopards will lie down with young goats.
Calves and lion cubs will feed together,
And little children will take care of them
Cows and bears will eat together
And their calves and cubs will lie down together in peace
Lions will eat straw as cattle do” (Isaiah 29:18).*

Beautiful soothing and enlivening contrast!

Jesus Christ claimed that he came to cast fire on earth. That fire was the fire of love (*ahimsa*). It was destined to burn away every form of hatred, injustice, violence, deprivation in the world. I have placed some aspects of the new situation. Let me point out the vision of Jesus, prefigured by his predecessors and his interpreters and disciples after him.

The Mind and the Heart of Jesus Christ

We recall a local call: ‘Swaraj is my birth right’ roared the fearless Bal Gangadhar Tilak. That was the categorical declaration of non-violent war on the British administration and demand of freedom for the country. Justice, equality, liberty, fraternity, guaranteed in the Preamble of Indian Constitution, are non-negotiable. These are further dimensions of that freedom. Any incursion into or suppression or deprivation or subordination of these golden values is assault on the citizen of the country. It is violence (*himsa*) inflicted on the citizen. It is against *ahimsa*, love for others.

Declaration of Freedom in Christ

Two millennia ago, there echoed on earth the joyful *declaration of freedom in Christ*. It was made by a disciple of Christ who had deep

knowledge and close experience of Jesus Christ. It resounded universally and continues to echo even today:

“For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” (Gal 5:1).

That is the assertion of Paul, the great interpreter of Christ his person and his mission. Further on:

“For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment:

“You shall love your neighbour as yourself”. (Gal.5:13-14).

If this injunction is followed, there will be no violence (*himsa*) on others in the society.

The great interpreter of Jesus Christ St Paul has sublime views on love (*ahimsa*). For St Paul:

“Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, endures all things. Love never ends...And now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of all is love.” (1 Cor. 13:4-13).

The teaching of the great Teacher of teachers has reached far and wide. The western world had been largely shaped by it. The humanising potential of this ethical formula continues to inspire generations of adherents.

Why *Himsa* in Human Society?

Then why *Himsa* (violence) is rampant and universal in the Society? It is almost a case of *globalization of violence*. There is violence in the individual, in the family, in the neighbourhood. There is violence and conflict between members of the society: inter-racial, inter-religious, inter-caste, inter gender.

To deal with that question one has to take oneself to the origin of humanity to trace the origin of evil.

The human family was ‘created in the image and likeness of God’. That means the human person was perfect in structure and function.

But the great fall (Gen 3:1-19) and consequent loss of Grace were responsible for the negative in the humankind, according to the Semitic version of evils.

Besides, 'rational animal' is man/woman according to the philosopher, Aristotle. The rational in woman/man is the key factor responsible for the birth of cultures and civilizations, philosophies, sciences, religions. The rational in her/him produced art, architecture, music, painting, sculpture - all of which are the product of the creative human mind. No wonder, the Kashmiri literary critic, Mammata in his *Kavyaprakash*, attempts to rate *kavisristi* (literary creation) almost equal to *Brahma sristi* (*God's creative power*). According to Bible, the man/woman was created in the image and likeness of God. And, God is absolute spirit. Further, according to St John, God is love. It is to the spiritual and the rational in the human person that all creative thinking and articulation are traced. It is to it are traced the demands that the dignity, the nature, the rights and the freedoms are honoured.

But the 'rational' human person is also 'animal' in structure and constitution. It is agreed that this other dimension of the human, namely *animality*, has ambiguity as well as potentiality, to be worthy of the human or to descend to the oddities of the animal: wolf, lion, jackal, and serpent. Rapaciousness and cruelty are part of the world of animals. In short, the beastly in the human comes from the animal instinct in the human. Just think of the killers of history: Cain, Attila, Chenghis Khan, Timur, Hitler, and Stalin. Putin seems a stronger contender! Just think of the system of human slavery when the humans were seized, sold, bought and used as animals! Just recall to mind the horrors of Hitler's concentration camps, gas chambers, and the World War II.

The evolutionists' view of life proposes the hypothesis that survival of the fittest is contributing to the dynamics of change in the living species. The strong will try to dominate the weak. The big fish lives on the small fish. Accordingly, a sort of violence is inherent to the evolutionary process of life system. In the hands of Nazis and Marxists the theory will create havoc and disturbances continually. Social turbulence will continue along with the urge to live.

But there had been the great teachers of history. The Teacher of teachers, Jesus Christ, dealing with a most civilising and peace- generating theme, *ahimsa*, is my humble privilege to deal with. *Ahimsa* should be the hallmark of a culture to merit the title 'human'. For this my task I draw insights from both the Semitic and Indie sources.

Nature of Ahimsa: Respect, Protection and Promotion of Life

The following considerations are due here:

1) There is consensus among scientists, philosophers, social activists, administrators, doctors and nurses, founders of religions, peasants and traders that the most esteemed treasure on earth is LIFE. The value of life cannot in any way be compared with gold or even with precious pearls like Kohinoor. The French philosopher Henri Bergson called it *elan vital* -vital impulse. This precious treasure on earth, Life, should be protected, preserved and promoted by everyone, everywhere at any cost. That is the existing and operative demand of LIFE. It is an exigency all should accept.

2) It is significant to note that the major economic security organisation, the Life Insurance Corporation of India, has the emblem of two palms protecting Life!

3) Life has alert bodyguards that always stand on vigil. To protect this precious pearl the Creator of *life* has placed an ever-accompanying angel. It is called INSTINCT. This bodyguard always acts promptly, infallibly when any threat to *life* is sensed. Take for instance the example how the finger reacts when boiling water is to be handled. Also recall the reaction of the hand when burning candle is being handled and when one drop of warm wax falls on the hand that holds the candle!

4) Life is a most precious treasure. The entire world of medicines along with millions of doctors and nurses and the auxiliary staff is testifying day and night to the truth that *life* is precious. Life has to be preserved, protected and promoted as a treasure of inestimable value.

5) God, the Creator and Father of the world, has blessed nature with an endless variety of food items: rice, wheat, pulses, several kinds of

fruits and roots. These life promoting items can be completed by the list of life healing and restoring herbs endowed with medicinal potentialities.

It is taking into account such rating and esteem for life that strict injunctions are instilled into the mind of the people. Yahweh instructed the people with strict orders, like:

“Do not kill” (Ex 20: 13).

To enforce this law Jesus demanded withdrawal of life-destroying weapons from the armoury of humanity and make it rich with 'the milk of human kindness' (Macbeth):

“Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Mt 26:52).

Jesus placed before the world the foundation for the supreme care he enjoins upon his disciples: to practice *love* for everyone, including those who are opposed to you:

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you” (Mt 5: 44).

Of course, the Sermon on the Mount stands out even today as a major contribution to the ethics of humanity. Its humanising and civilising potential is beyond estimation. It is as part of the Sermon that we have the above pearls of redeeming wisdom. Violence inflicted on you should on no count be repaid with counter-violence. Overcome evil by good, not evil by evil. The Christian community has to honour the great heritage Jesus has bequeathed to it. So, the 'heritage contains, among other treasures, teaching like: You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you “Do not resist an evil doer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also” (Mt 5: 38).

Ahimsa, apparently a negative concept, positively connotes love, as has been stated above. Still to emphasise the truth, Jesus placed before the crowd a most difficult part of his teaching:

“You have heard that it was said, you shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...” (Mt 5:43- 44).

The comforting blessing Jesus Christ bestowed on his disciples after his resurrection from the dead was: “Peace be with you” (Lk 24:36). The best testimony of *ahimsa* is a community that lives in *peace*, has created an atmosphere favourable for enduring *peace*. And *peace* will inhere if every grievance is attended to.

The person, way of life, especially teaching of Jesus Christ had terrific impact on the people who flocked to wherever he came.

Sometimes the crowd that hanged on to his lips swelled and followed him irrespective of the needs of the stomach.

On one such day Jesus Christ noticed this and proposed to the disciples to serve them some food because they may collapse on their way back. They were with Jesus for hours. And such a large crowd! And the place was far removed from a street where some vendors might be engaged in sale of food on a small scale. Jesus' goodwill negotiation with the helpless disciples did not work. So, he himself took the initiative. That is what we have in Chapter 14 (13-21) of Mathew: multiplication of the few loaves to feed a crowd of over five thousand.

Ahimsa and Non-aligned Movement

During the Second World War what was then known as 'British India', decided to join the Allied forces and fight against Japan. Freedom struggle was going on. The British India declared war against Japan. Japanese forces, having taken over countries like 'Burma', were on the border of India in Nagaland. When questioned by some journalists about collaborating with the British to fight against Japan, Gandhi stood his ground. To those who questioned Gandhi about the relevance of non-violence when the marching enemy had reached the border, Gandhi said that if the Japanese forces actually entered and established their regime in India, Gandhi said that by our non-cooperation with them we will show them that they are not wanted in India. How will a conqueror rule if the conquered showed complete non-co-operation?

In and through these and other texts we have the fundamentals of the biblical approach to the right of every nation to one's life as sovereign and non- negotiable. One may be born

handicapped physically or mentally (blind, deaf, deformed, penniless, landless...) but one's right to life is a God-given natural endowment. It is non-negotiable. No power on earth can deprive one of her/his life. Closely linked with the right to life are one's natural right to the freedom, dignity and rights which are equally non-negotiable.

Forces and Ideologies opposed to ahimsa

The German philosopher Hegel introduced the thesis-antithesis-synthesis category to explain his philosophy of being. The dynamics operative here also can help us grasp the significance of ahimsa. One could understand the strange phenomenon of *himsa* militating against *ahimsa* in action. Howsoever much ahimsa is practiced there happens to be forces opposed to ahimsa. This counter trend has been running even through nature from the very beginning of creation. *Himsa* is operating as counter force to ahimsa.

The anthropologist Charles Darwin has been studying the phenomenon of life at various levels and has formulated a law governing the species: *survival of the fittest*. The big fish lives at the expense of the small fish. Lion lives on other animals.

This trait can be verified even in the world of plants! We recall the behaviour of certain plants like carnivorous plants, a species of plants that consumes other plants or even small living creatures.

This and other historical data might have prompted the French sociologist Hobbes to make his pinching observation on humans where one exploits the other, one lives on another: *homo homini lupus*: 'Just as wolves' prey upon animals so do humans use other humans as prey'.

Karl Marx drew his own conclusion and evolved his interpretation of human history. He noticed the plight of the workers being exploited by the factory owners and the landlords. Hours of hard labour in the factory or land and wages that are minimum, because the owner is supposed to have invested his money and so the profit goes to the owner.

Callous and cruel appear often human behaviour. 75 million was the total men and women that were killed during World War II. Of this total 20 million were army personnel and 40 million civil populations. Six million

Jews were killed by Nazi forces. Nanking massacre had 300 thousand civilian population perished. Nazi German concentration camps and the slow death through starvation had been well documented. Bhishma was a part of the Mahabharata war. His laments and reflections after the war are full of pathos.

Law of the Forest, the anti-dote?

On the contrary there is the law of the forest as alternative: allow everyone to grow but each according to its inherent biological traits. Both the huge trees and the smallest trees do have their inherent potentials. Eucalyptus tree grows tall almost sky-high, as do coconut and areca nut trees. But bushes do not grow tall. But every tree has its right to life. And they maintain their life system.

How to Promote Ahimsa?

Aerial spray of water to control flaming forest fire is quite an exciting and effective sight! When global peace is the desirable objective, global dissemination of the role and value of peace as befitting a civilisation could be considered. Ahimsa could be that value for global dissemination and practice.

Nuclear warheads, missiles with transcontinental range, ultramodern battle tanks, millions of citizens in the army, inter-state belligerency, army hospitals for the wounded soldiers, war cemetery for those who laid down their lives for the cause, widows with their small children, pension for the retired and the deceased and the retired - is a world that calls for serious reflection. Can it be changed? If all that is good and ethical in all the religions in India are brought together, can it become a force capable of bringing about a change in the scene drawn above?

Yes, it can. Light overcomes darkness, none needs to be pessimistic. Goodness can and does overcome evil. "If winter comes can spring be far behind" (P. B. Shelley).

In a social situation where aggression, violence, injustice and exploitation of the weak keep disturbing life and pursuit of the necessities of life, restoring peace and maintaining a healthy living situation is the responsibility of all.

Mosaic Re-ordering of Life

That was one of the mandatory codes of conduct Moses the prophet had enjoined upon the

Jewish community. The community of Israel is just out of the royal claws of the monarchy in Egypt and is on its way to settle down in a free land. The Commandment is one among the many concrete steps taken for organising the disgruntled group just free from slavery. Since the gulf between theory and practice, as well as law and compliance, is always part of the human struggle, here too fighting and killing of the people of the neighbouring countries, regarded as threat to their existence, had been part of Israel's history'. It is in this context that the Ten Commandments, directive principles of organising the lives of individuals and community, were given to the Jewish community.

The Indian scientist J. C. Bose won laurels for his research on life system. He disclosed the findings of his research that plants have not only life but also sensation like pain and joy. This discovery is of supreme significance since violence on nature is rampant. If so, how much more for the world of animals and especially humans!

Kiths and Kins, Pandavas and Kauravas, were engaged in the bitterly fought Mahabharata wars. Destruction and bloodshed were everywhere.

Most advocates of a share in the wealth of the family lay dead in Kurukshetra. Some were left, Bhishma was one among them. He sank into a mood of doleful introspection. The war was fought vigorously for days but none gained anything; the great grandsire had one lesson drawn out of it for the posterity, at last: *ahimsa* paramo *dharma* (non-violence is the highest *dharma* (duty, ethics, and religiosity)).

The precept had been inspiring teachers and instructors, as well as heads of families with a new generation at their hands through the centuries. It was revived in our times by the great grandsire of our times, Gandhiji. The phrase began to gain currency. He led the enslaved Indian nation to freedom from the hands of the colonisers by hoisting the flag of non-violent campaign known as *satyagraha*. Both *ahimsa* and *satyagraha* remained as the flagship for the march of the freedom movement. These twin forces of a new irruption of ethical-moral synergising campaign in our times, produced a new culture. It was known as the non-violent freedom *non-alignment* movement.

India from say, from 1920 to 1947, can be considered as a land where *ahimsa* was experimented on a colossal level. Hence India can even be regarded rightly and proudly as an *ahimsa-workshop-in-action*, or just a laboratory where most of the resources for the origin, development or experiment with *ahimsa* are found in some of the ancient as well a medieval Indian tradition.

What *ahimsa* safeguards and honours is the reality of Life.

Life seems to have appeared over the surface of the earth at least 3.5 billion years ago according to scientists. Only earth as far as we have knowledge of it, is crowned with life.

But A Contradiction! *Ahimsa* is appreciated as Value and Proneness to *Himsa* Prevails!

One of the yet unsolved puzzles in human history is that along with life came forces antagonistic to the *vital* force. Along with the origin of Life came forces antagonistic and destructive of Life. Yet Life has mostly prevailed over forces inimical to life. Even when a tree is cut new shoots in large numbers sprout. That phenomenon continues even now. History of humanity is almost a history of this warfare. *Deva-asura* conflict, Rome-Carthage conflict, the Trojan wars, Athens-Sparta conflict, Jews-Philistines conflicts - are at the historical level. In India we have the *Pandava - Kaurava* conflict and war at *Kurukshetra*.

Increase and growth are indicators of the phenomenon of life. These are the natural traits of living beings. Affirmation and collaboration facilitate growth and development. These are elicited by hearts and minds that are benign and well-disposed to those wishing the maximum good or wellness of all. These are expressed by gestures of collaboration, service and such life-promoting schemes.

Mother earth is blood-soaked. Bloodshed of World Wars I and II, the bone melting Atom Bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, continuation of the wild flame through the Korean War, Vietnam War and communal irruptions in our own country, the record is quite puzzling. When exhausted let us invoke the agonising request of the Queen in Hamlet:

“...upon the heat and flame of thy distemper
sprinkle cool patience” (Hamlet the Prince of Denmark by William Shakespeare, Act III

Sc.4).

Similarly, to our bruised wounded and lacerated society in which we live and struggle let us disseminate the spirit of healing, elevating, soothing message through values contained in *AHIMSA* (non-violence).

How to go about

If I am an admirer of *ahimsa* I must accept and love my enemy and deal with him/her as a citizen. This love does not restrict itself to the love of humans only, but includes the whole of creation. *Bhutadaya* is a reflection of this all-comprehensive understanding of the depth and dimensions of love. It implies feelings of affinity with everyone and everything, not antagonism and alienation but alliance with all, the feeling of oneness and solidarity with all. These sentiments will diminish feelings of suspicion and hostility to others; especially towards those who oppose you, fight against you, ignore you threaten your very existence. 'Love never claims, but it ever gives. Love suffers, never resents, and never avenges itself'. Hence Gandhiji would not hesitate to call *ahimsa* as 'the law of love' or 'the supreme law' of being, and the highest *dharma*. Love, the very essence of *ahimsa* in Gandhian ethics, is an ontological thrust.

Recommended: Clinical Approach

A clinical approach can be the most appropriate method to be adhered to in order to derive practical benefit for oneself, especially for social peace and harmony. We cannot treat a disease without the clinical approach. Accordingly, getting the details of the ailment through analysis, searching for the cause, finding proper remedy, application of the remedy, and walking with the affected etc. are the desired steps in dealing with the theme of *ahimsa*-love in action.

Ahimsa (non-violence) can be promoted by several steps.

First is grasping the range of violence.

We should be familiar with areas affected by violence. *Himsa* (violence) is the opposite: there is economic violence, genetic violence, sociological violence, religious or communal violence, cultural violence, racial violence, psychological violence, sexual violence.

Secondly the causes of violence must be studied. A doctor first applies the method of diagnosing the nature and spread of the disease. Then he finds out the causes of the disease before proceeding to prescription. Similarly, one has to search for the causes of violence in these areas.

Thirdly, one has to apply appropriate remedial steps for preventing violence, and close observation of the entire process.

One of the disciples of Jesus Christ, who observed him closely, listened to his words attentively and remained as a witness to the life and teaching of Jesus Christ till the very end, has concluded at the end as follows:

"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, FOR GOD IS LOVE" (1 John 4:7-8).

There had been heated arguments sometimes among disciples about some of the radical assertions of Jesus like forgiving the enemies etc. On one occasion Jesus carefully observed one such scene. One of the listeners, a scribe, came near and put the following question to Jesus". 'Which commandment is the first of all? And Jesus appreciating this quite relevant question gave the following answer:

"The first is, Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: You shall love you; neighbour as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these' (Mk 12:30). All regulatory laws, customs, injunctions, safeguards art contained in this supreme value: love for others, love for oneself.

The foundation for this supreme treasure is God. All religions do affirm this basic principle.

God is our Father and we all are brothers and sisters, children of the one Father. All creation has been sharing in that gift of love. We recall here that St Francis of Assisi could address the birds and animals, sun and moon and stars, trees plants, as 'brothers and sisters'. If so then none should inflict upon 'the other' any kind of

injury.

St Francis was only re-echoing what Jesus Christ was found doing. For Jesus said that His Father, God, cares for the ravens, and the sparrows of the sky. He spoke appreciatively of the delicate lilies of the field; He brings down rains on the just as well as on the unjust alike, without any discrimination. He makes the sun rise over the just and the unjust, equally, without caring for differences. He cared diligently, truthfully for the infant and the weak, the abandoned and the rejected.

Jesus Christ healed and restored to health those afflicted with leprosy. He gave sight to the blind and health to the lame, the deaf and the dumb.

He restored to life by raising up the dead and restoring them to the mother because she was a widow and in need of daily support. He could benignly accept and deal with women who were in disgrace in society, and forgave them. All these are acts of love, expressions of ahimsa in daily action.

He told them:

“Treat others as you would like them to treat you” (Mt 7: 12). He said, “Happy the merciful for they shall have mercy shown to them” (Mt 5:7). Jesus admonished His disciples who tried to react violently when the foes tried to arrest him; “put your sword back, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword” (Mt. 26:52). That is the law of violence.

He exhorted them: “I say this to you; Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; in this way you will be sons of the father in heaven” (Mt 5:44).

His disciple Paul suggested that the genuine fruits of the Spirit of God are: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness, self- control” (Gal. 5:22).

Social relationship should actually be operating on the valuable principle of *ahimsa*, as far as we can. Communities of humans should be organised and structured befitting humans. Equality of all is recognised as a consequence. However, we should remember hierarchically organising a society is structural violence; it is a kind of *himsa* (violence); but Indian society is based on the same.

Why? Because Life is precious

Our task is promotion of Life. For that elimination of life-destroying forces, practices, projects, thinking, and mind-sets need to be removed. For a moment we turn to Japan; Let us for a moment turn our attention eastwards, towards Japan.

Moved by the bluish-yellow flash followed by the thunder of the explosion caused by the detonation of the Atom Bomb the late Fr. Pedro Arrupe, former Superior General of the Society of Jesus looked out of his clinic in Hiroshima on August 6, 1944. What he saw to the bodies of the living and the dead was horrendous. A living and vibrant city was devastated. Children, young boys and girls, workers, doctors, teachers, peasants, were busy as usual when the fire from the blast roasted and even melted them alive! Do we want it happen anywhere in the world again in more cruel ways?

In this situation how do we understand atom bombs, missiles of the most destructive kind, factories that manufacture them, the State and society that are committed and sold to weapon-culture, brains that are committed to research in these mortal devices? Are all these worthy of the name perspired and civilization?

Arjuna at Kurukshetra became speechless when he reflected upon the contradiction of a human person having to kill another human person who is a blood relation. What gain in such folly, he asked. The question should haunt every defence ministry in every nation.

“I do not want to kill them...” (Gita 1:35).

We need a spiritual vision of the human person prevailing over weapon-force and belligerency. Asiatic vision of Ahimsa was able to raise question before a world engaged in armed confrontation. Armed confrontation is, according to Arnold Joseph Toynbee, historian and philosopher of history, a sign of a disintegrating or moribund culture. “Skill, capital and labour which should have been devoted to extending control over the physical environment in the interests of the whole society were misdirected into this idolatrous channel” (P 322, A Study of History, Ed D. C. Somerville).

Jesus said if one strikes you on your cheek, don't strike back but show the other cheek too. It is disarming the assailant.

In a world that is becoming increasingly prone to violence and destruction the role of ahimsa is supremely important and highly relevant. Our honoured Father of the Nation showed to the world that it is possible to solve even the most contentious issue by applying the power of *ahimsa* (non-violence).

“Generations to come, it may well be, will scarce believe, that such a man as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this Earth”, lamented Albert Einstein at Gandhi's forced demise by an Indian assailant!

The above statement by the scientist Einstein about Gandhi on the occasion of his martyrdom was based primarily on his unique contribution to humanisation through ethical moral force of a culture that had got deviated and wounded from what is authentic human living. World peace became an achievable goal because of the reviving and animating force in *ahimsa*. Gandhi reintroduced *ahimsa* on the world scene as a new teaching and a pedagogy that announces that our actions have to be always human and humane. He also demonstrated to the world the mode of practicing *ahimsa* (non-violence). It is love for the other that compels us to deal with man/woman in spite estranged relationship.

Look at the history of human species: from the murder of Abel by Cain till the shooting down of pro-democracy crowd in Myanmar recently, no one has any record of the total number of humans killed by other humans! This certainly is the dark side of human history.

Another scholar, Karl Marx, economist and sociologist, has introduced his interpretation. He has put all humans in two blocks: the working class and capitalists. He has proposed that that *class struggle* is the key to an understanding of the human social processes. Economic activity of the society is marked by exploitation of the working class by the capitalist farmers and industrialists.

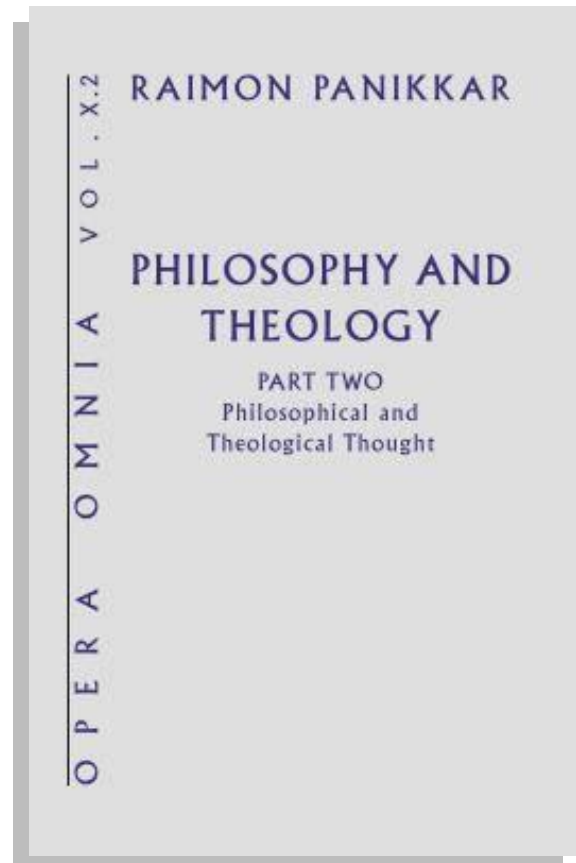
Both the survival of the fittest by Charles Darwin and the Marxian category of class struggle contain subtle forms of violence. The seminar theme is: *ahimsa*.

The whole of the human family collectively has to turn its attention to this unacceptable situation and endeavour to diminish and eliminate violence from the human from the

face of the earth. It is a collective responsibility and a noble and worthwhile service.

(Guest lecture delivered by the author at Vigyan Bhavan, Delhi, at the National Seminar organized by Ahimsa Foundation and Digambar Jain Mahasabha on 18th April 1984.)

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