The present research paper focuses the light on Gandhian ideology from Satyagraha to Non Violence. In modern societies confronting an increasing level of violence, Gandhi’s image as an apostle of non-violence is undoubtedly the major source. When Gandhi launched his first South African campaign in 1907, he was not perceived as a radical innovator. His struggle appeared to fit within well established political tradition in Anglo-American history, which went back to the foundation in Boston by William Lloyd Garrison and his friends of the ‘Non-Resistance Society’ to fight slavery by non-violent means.

The society’s declaration of principals’, in spite of its use of an evangelical language, was certainly not a plea for passivity.1 A few years later, in a well known text of 1849, Thoreau put forward a theory of civil disobedience which made its mark on political philosophy and practice.2 During the second half of the nineteenth century, there were examples of non-violent struggle waged by English and American Quakers. Perusal of a recent bibliography of studies on non violence3 shows that the field was broader than is often realized and that Gandhi’s place in it was not as central as is generally assumed. He certainly did not have a foundational role.

It is sometimes underlined that Gandhi was the first to have launched non-violent struggles on a massive scale. But even this point is open to debate.4 Gandhi’s genius lay rather in his ability to achieve a pragmatic synthesis between diverse forms of struggle, such as individual or collective fasting, boycott and civil disobedience, which had been preached and practiced by different groups at different moments in time. He gathered them all under the rather mysterious term of Satyagraha and linked this technique of struggle with the aspirations of Indians to be free of British domination. It is largely this ability to enlarge a form of struggle which had been used mostly by small groups to the context of a mass nationalist struggle that makes Gandhi the architect of a whole new kind of non-violent resistance.

This point appears more important than the question of the originality of Gandhi’s philosophical position, which has attracted a lot of attention but over which no clear consensus has emerged. It is however, debatable whether the success gained by the Congress under Gandhi’s leadership in the struggle for Indian Independence without the use of armed violence is to be explained primarily by the form of struggle chosen, or by the context and content of the movement.

The simple fact that success was never replicated on a similar scale elsewhere tends to point to the latter hypothesis, unless one chooses to put forward an essentialist thesis on the fundamentally non-violent nature of Indian Civilization, but that view is defended by no serious author.5 As a recent scholarly work suggests, it was the loss of the social meaning of violence induced by the disarming of the warrior castes effected by British power which created the space within which Gandhian non-violence could deploy itself.6 The emergence of Gandhi as a non-violent leader must be replaced within a given historical context, it is not the function of a particular religious and cultural predisposition of Indian society towards the use of such methods.

Gandhi’s justification of non-violent resistance is not based on the notion of ahimsa. Religion is not invoked in this discussion, in which Gandhi first expressed his views on the question. In his presentation of his ethics of non-violence, Gandhi was careful to address three specific questions: that of unintended violence linked to everyday life, about which he acknowledged that there was no way of completely avoiding it, that of intentionality on which he claimed that the limited use of violence could be justified by the need to prevent a greater harm: that of self-defense, which for Gandhi was within certain limits, compatible with non-violence. His view of non-violence was not therefore predicated on metaphysical and religious considerations, but expressed in the language of pragmatic ethics.

The discussion on non-violence in Hind Swaraj apparently did not capture the attention of readers of the book, since five years later, in an article in Indian Opinion, Gandhi himself deplored that the book had been seen in India as an incitement to anti-British violence. Such misunderstanding can be partly explained by the mode of exposition chosen by
Gandhi. The exact circumstances in which Gandhi invented Satyagraha have been frequently narrated, first by Gandhi himself in Satyagraha in South Africa, a narration often plagiarized by later biographers but rarely analyzed by them. If we refer to Gandhi’s text, the invention of Satyagraha took place within a whole set of revelations which were to change the course of his life. During a one month period of service as an ambulance worker in a small military campaign waged by the British against a Zulu uprising in 1906, Gandhi experienced a double revelation: that a man who aspires to a life of service must make vows of celibacy and must accept poverty for the whole of his life. When he came back to Johannesburg after the end of the campaign, he was informed of the promulgation of the ‘Black Act’, which appeared to him to pose a deadly threat to Indians in South Africa. He wrote:

I clearly saw that this was a question of life and death for them. I further saw that even in the case of memorials and representations proving fruitless, the community must not sit with folded hands. Better die than submit to such a law. But how were we to die? What should we dare and do so that there would be nothing before us except a choice of victory or death? An impenetrable wall was before me, as it were and I could not see my way through it .....7.

In his meeting with some of the leaders of the Transvaal Indians, he explained the measure in detail. They were as indignant as Gandhi himself. He told them that on their response hung the fate of Indians not only in the Transvaal but in the whole of South Africa:

If we fully understand all the implications of this legislation, we shall find that India’s honour is in our keeping. For the Ordinance seeks to humiliate not only yourselves but also the motherland. The humiliation consists in the degradation of innocent men. No one will take it upon himself to say that we have done anything to deserve such legislation. We are innocent and insult offered to a single member of a nation is tantamount to insulting the nation as a whole. It will not therefore do to be hasty, impatient or angry. That cannot save us from this onslaught. But God will come to our help, if we calmly think out and carry out in time measures of resistance, presenting a united front and bearing the hardship, which such resistance brings in its train....8

The Next stage was to hold a meeting in a Johannesburg theatre.

A Muslim merchant, Seth haji Habib addressed the crowd and proposed that each participant swear by God that he would refuse to be subject to such a law. Gandhi acknowledges that he was, at first, surprised by Seth Haji Habib’s suggestion, but that he then supported it enthusiastically. He drew the attention of the audience to the gravity of such a solemn commitment and did not hide from them the dangers they would face. But he declared he had confidence in the final victory, even if only a handful of men remained faithful to their oath to the end.

The campaign started and Gandhi forged the term ‘Satyagraha’ as a substitute for ‘passive resistance’ which had been used by commentators. As even cursory analysis of this narration shows that the context in which Satyagraha was born had nothing to do with the one in which non-violence was discussed in Hind Swaraj. There did not exist, among South African Indians, a party of violence advocating a different path, which in turn Gandhi opposed.

For the Indians of South Africa, a small disarmed minority, violence was not an option. The importance of Gandhi’s intervention lay in his ability to transform a discourse founded on a realization of weakness into an ethical one. Instead of presenting the form of struggle chosen as a weapon of the weak and of trying to derive from it a moral advantage by playing on the existence of a degree of bad conscience among the Whites of South Africa, Gandhi chose to occupy the moral high ground by reaffirming the adequacy between the means and the ends of the struggle. Satyagraha was not born primarily from a refusal of violence, but rather from a positive statement of moral strength. Only at a later stage, when confronted with terrorist circles upholding armed struggle against the British, did Gandhi oppose the moral strength of Satyagraha to the brute force of terrorism.

It could be argued that Gandhi weakened his own position by putting on the same plane, as two opposed paths, violence and non-violence. From 1909 onwards, Gandhi’s discourse on Satyagraha had been of dual nature, which resulted in certain amount of confusion. On the one hand, he held a positive discourse which hailed Satyagraha as the translation of moral force into action. On the other hand, he had a negative or reactive discourse which presented Satyagraha as an alternative to violence. When he wrote in the mid 1920s about his beginnings in South Africa, Gandhi was however able to rediscover the original inspiration of Satyagraha, without being influenced too much by the discourse on non-violence that he had developed in numerous later texts.

The invention of Satyagraha originated from the logic of a situation that of Indians in Transvaal in the aftermath of the Boer War. These men, who had supported the British in their war because, they hoped to be able to enjoy certain basic rights, were confronted with evidence of a deterioration in their political condition under the British regime.
This profoundly offended both their moral sense and their notion of the implicit contract between subjects and rulers. Struggle became for them the only way to restore their wounded dignity. It acted as a kind of catharsis in which the participants directed their violence against themselves. But the question of political violence was not at the heart of original problematic of Satyagraha. The problem was to find a form of struggle which without provoking massive and violent repression, would be sufficient to prevent the authorities overlooking it, and which would at the same time unite participants and prevent attempts at division. At this early stage, the invention of Satyagraha was more a lexical innovation than the discovery of a radically new form of struggle.

The relative success obtained by the Satyagrahi in South Africa was partly due to surprise; the South African authorities were at first caught completely unaware by the capacity for action displayed by Indians, whom they thought of as simple coolies devoid of any spirit of resistance. It took them a few years to grasp what was happening and in the meantime, in the face of pressure from the British and Indian governments, they thought it wise to make a few concessions. In South Africa, Satyagraha benefited from a favourable window of opportunity, which perhaps gave Gandhi an exaggerated idea of its potential. One should underline that, at this stage, there was no proper Gandhian theory of non-violence, but merely a word Satyagraha which has rather mistakenly been equated with non-violence in general. At a larger stage in his life Gandhi evolved a more philosophical kind of argument around the nation of ahimsa, borrowed from Jainism, which was very influential in Gujrat, even among Hindus and which stressed the essential oneness of ahimsa with truth.

Gandhi’s idea of an isomorphism between the two nations had its source in Tolstoi as acknowledged by Gandhi himself. Although ahimsa undoubtedly occupies a very central place in Gandhian thought, Gandhi often stressed that there were limits to its applicability and criticized those who tended to make it a fetish: I would prefer India to use arms to defend its honour rather than see it become cowardly or remain an impotent witness to its own dishonor.

He always argued that violence was preferable to cowardliness and deplored the emasculation of India, which seemed to him as to many nationalists, one of the most nefarious consequences of colonization. He always held the profession of arms to be an honourable occupation for those whose calling it was designed for those who were not meant to bear arms, who would then be able to defend their honour without recourse to unsuited and immoral means. But he saw it as a form of struggle. In his ability to combine various forms of individual and collective action, Gandhi was astonishingly creative and innovative. But his capacity to adapt his methods of struggle to changes in the situation seems to reflect pragmatism more than a continuous theoretical deepening. Actually to him the theoretical aspect was always second to the pragmatic. His rationalizations were mostly meant for himself and it would be inappropriate to focus too much on his role as a theoretician of non-violent action as Joan Bondurant does for instance.

Gandhi’s influence certainly helped in limiting the role of violence in India’s independence struggle, but it did not altogether prevent violent episodes from occurring. The Moplah rising 1921, at the time of non-cooperation, was marked by widespread violence against Hindu landlords and forced conversions to Islam, while 1930 saw a rising in Peshawar, the Sholapur riots, the Chittagong armory raid and Bhagat Singh’s attack on the assembly. In 1942 the Quit India movement gave rise to widespread violence in north India for several months. Communal riots took place on a regular basis from 1926 onwards.

In all these episodes, thousands of lives were lost, not to mention the widespread massacres of 1946-48 at the time of Partition, when hundreds of thousands perished. To claim that the period of Gandhian leadership of the nationalist movement was a period without violence is to succumb to a myth and ignore historical reality. Gandhi himself, it should be noted, was not all the time busy preaching ahimsa and condemning violence. He condemned some violent episodes, like Chauri-Chaura in 1922, but kept silent about others. He joined in the protests against Bhagat Singh’s execution although he did not support his actions, nor did he formally condemn them.

The victory gained by a non-violent nationalist movement is largely due to the specific balance of scial and political forces as it existed in India in the 1920s and 1930s, in which a broad coalition was needed to trigger a clear evolution towards independence. Big industrialists as well as middle peasants, shopkeepers and landlords, all had something to gain from the Gandhian programe, which mixed radicalism and conservatism in a unique blend and satisfied the many without antagonizing the few. The success of non-violent methods of mass agitation was possible only because of the existence of this broad consensus which allowed isolating the partisans of armed struggle as well as the collaborators of imperialism.
Gandhi did not create such a consensus all on his own, but he helped in its emergence and kept it alive in the long term. Given the fact that the British left India voluntarily in 1947, Gandhi is often credited with having, as it were, converted the British rulers to his point of view. One of Satyagraha’s main objectives is, after all conversion of the opponent, who is not treated as an enemy. It can even be said to be the Satyagrahi’s main ambition not to annihilate, as in war, but to convert through love. Is it then possible to argue that India the British were destabilized by the Gandhian method of non-violent struggle and that the confrontation with Gandhi transformed them morally?

There is no doubt that it created great difficulties for them, to the point that Viceroy Lord Irwin who, as previously mentioned, was not inimical to Gandhi could not help confessing in a letter to the Secretary of State for India.9 that the death of the Mahatma would be a great relief to him. But it is not obvious that non violence, more than other factors was particularly decisive in sapping the British will to stay. Gandhi’s objective of disarming the adversary through love and eventual conversion was never really achieved.

Perusal of the correspondence between the viceroy’s and the secretaries of state for India shows that Gandhi’s action never really impinged upon the good conscience of the British rulers, nor dented their conviction of their own moral superiority. Even those viceroy’s who recognized the moral greatness of Gandhi’s personality never seriously questioned the legitimacy of the British position. The decision by the British to quit India taken only at the beginning of 1946 was due to a convergence of factors, mostly of strategic and economic nature, among which Gandhi’s action did not figure as prominently as romantic nationalist views would have us believe.

From 1930s onwards on the basis of the successes he had obtained in India, Gandhi put forward the view that his method of non-violent resistance was universally valid. The limits of this pretension to universality were however cruelly exposed when he faced the problem of fascism and Nazism. His position on these doctrines created a veil of mutual recrimination between him and some Western intellectuals who were, a priori, rather well disposed towards him.

This comes out most clearly from his correspondence with German Jewish intellectuals regarding the fight against Hitler’s persecution of the Jews. Probably not very well informed about the realities of the German situation under the Nazi regime, Gandhi thought he could advise German Jews to use non-violent resistance methods. Martin Buber’s perplexity was conveyed in a letter to the Mahatma,10 to which the latter had no very convincing answer. In 1940 Gandhi also wrote a letter to Hitler, asking him to abandon the path of violence; this appears rather quixotic today.

A major problem was that Gandhi, as well as others, saw Fascism and Nazism as sui generis. They seemed confrontable with ‘normal’ methods. Fifty years after Gandhi’s death, an assessment of non-violence as a method of struggle remains a hazardous enterprise. Few major political changes have occurred on the sole basis of non-violence methods. In South Africa, after the early 1960s the African National Congress combined armed struggle with mass demonstrations to eventually achieve a self-dissolution of the apartheid regime.

African- American also combined non-violence resistance with armed struggle to obtain civil rights denied them for a century after the abolition of slavery. Other examples of non-violence struggle often mentioned are the overthrow of the Marcos dictatorship by people’s power in the Philippines in 1986, and the fall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe. To credit all these movements with Gandhian inspiration appears to be the outcome of a fairly superficial analysis. That some movements claimed a Gandhian inspiration to appear more legitimate should not hide the problems posed by such instrumentalization of Gandhi.

Thus non-violent resistance ideology would not by itself have resulted in the independence of India had it not been combined with other factors. This is not meant to diminish the historical role of Gandhi, but it must lead to a more balanced appraisal of the contribution of non-violence to India’s independence. Outside India, Gandhi’s impact was limited by the difficult relationship he had with the international pacifist movement.

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